Paul Émile-Daurand Forgues was born in Paris, 20 April 1813. Like other parents influenced by Rousseau’s *Émile*, his family sent him to the provinces, where he was schooled in the classics, and he received a law degree from Toulouse in 1833. Returning to the capital, he quickly joined the Liberal Party and became a confidante of Claude Alphonse Delangle (later Minister of the Interior and of Justice). Forgues’ interest in politics was mixed, at best, and was soon outrivaled by a rising affection for *belles-lettres*. In the later years of the 1830s, he adopted the familiar pseudonym “Old Nick” and began writing essays and reviews of contemporary English literature for the *Revue de Paris*, the *Journal du Commerce*, *le Charivari*, and especially the *Revue britannique*. Impersonating an Englishman proved to be a turning point in his career, for “Old Nick” became a well-known literary figure. There was not only widespread speculation as to his true identity, but also informed appreciation of his work by no less a figure than Sainte-Beuve, who described him this way: “*Forgues, que la nature a fait distingué et que la politique a laissé esprit libre*” [“Forgues, made illustrious by nature and liberal by politics”].

A visit to England in 1843 confirmed Forgues’ Anglophile predilection and also helped him establish a network of friends who kept him abreast of new publications and books of special interest. While British literature, history, and social questions largely captivated his attention, he also found occasion to write seven major articles on American literature between 1846 and 1865, ranging from Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville to Susan B. Warner.
and Oliver Wendell Holmes. His rising popularity might also help to explain why the journal’s founder, François Buloz, invited him to join the editorial ranks of the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, where all of his criticism on American literature first appeared. Like his great contemporary Sainte-Beuve, Forgues cultivated an impersonal and biographical approach to his subjects, doing “much the same thing for English literature as the former achieved for that of France.”

Besides publishing his own critical essays and reviews, Forgues also translated many English-language texts into French, including *La lettre rouge A* (1853) and *La maison aux sept pignons* (1865). Whatever their weaknesses, both of these translations went through multiple editions during Forgues’ lifetime and certainly helped to create a French audience for Hawthorne’s work. Altogether, there is no reason to gainsay the generous conclusion of Forgues’ most serious student, who summarized his career this way:

A pioneer, not only in thought but also in his particular field; a classic in style and taste; a realist in ideas; a humanitarian in criticism; a servant of international understanding; a sincere lover of literature—Forgues was all these, and served his ideals faithfully to the best of his ability and to the end of his active life.  

Illness forced Forgues to abandon writing in 1870, though he lived for another thirteen years. That long period of silence (from a writer previously so copious) may also have contributed to his “fall into oblivion,” a fate not unlike that of the other French critics who commented on Hawthorne. In Forgues’ case “this was doubly inevitable since he had concentrated on English literature to the exclusion of that of his own country—a fact which precluded him from consideration as a French critic, whilst the fact that he wrote in French excluded him from being counted among the English critics.” The same paradox would cripple the posthumous careers of Montégut and Étienne.

At the time of Hawthorne’s death in 1864, Émile Montégut eulogized the author in strangely impassioned words:

> And somber Hawthorne, did he not endear himself to you at just the right moment? Isn’t it true that he came to you in the bosom of happiness to present his casket wreaths and his funereal perfumes? Oh! What favorable hours, those, of black melancholy and sinister dreams, to have conversations with Hawthorne’s visions, to read *The Scarlet Letter, The House of the Seven Gables, Mosses from an Old Manse!*
By this time, the critic was well acquainted with the American romancer, already having composed two extensive articles about him in 1852 and 1860. Throughout his long career at *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, he wrote many articles on American literature and culture, examining such diverse topics as the election of Franklin Pierce, Mormonism, the literary legacy of Margaret Fuller, and the poetry of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Beginning with his debut article on Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1847, Montégut’s scrutiny of the United States coincided with a critical turn in that journal’s literary and political objectives, much affected by the implications of the failed Revolution of 1848. A fluent speaker of English, an Anglophile, and a supporter of the constitutional monarchy of Louis-Philippe, Montégut was well suited to address issues and topics of timely interest to Second Empire France. Over the next three decades, he published twenty-eight articles on the United States and its literature for the journal. Despite this voluminous production (which also branched out well beyond Anglo-Saxon literary and cultural interests), and even though he was identified by a contemporary critic as “one of three or four great stockhouses of ideas of the nineteenth century,” Montégut faded into obscurity after his death in 1895.5

This middle-class native of Limoges, born 23 June 1825, was a little younger than Jules Michelet and his illustrious colleague Charles Augustin de Sainte-Beuve, part of the same generation as Hippolyte Taine, Ernest Renan, Charles Baudelaire, Gustave Flaubert, and publisher Pierre-Jules Hetzel. He began his recognized and influential position at the *Revue* in 1847 as a darling of François Buloz during the first golden age of French criticism. He was a prolific writer, penning countless articles and just under thirty books on art, literature, and what we might now consider cultural criticism—for example, his analysis of French political and moral attitudes in *Libres opinions morales et historiques* (1858). His monumental ten-volume translation of Shakespeare’s dramatic works won him the *Prix Langlois* from the Académie française in 1876. On a more personal level, friends and contemporaries anecdotally remarked upon Montégut’s photographic memory, acute intelligence, peculiar work habits, and (in light of his vast productivity) unexpected humility. Unfortunately, this cluster of idiosyncrasies alienated him from others who wielded power within the cultural establishment of late-nineteenth-century France.

Even during his own lifetime, Montégut failed to receive adequate recognition. In an 1878 letter, Taine lamented that, despite thirty years of work as one of France’s most prominent literary critics, Montégut had few accolades to show and suggested that he apply for the recently vacated chair at the prestigious Collège de France: “After writing so much and so well, I find it
a shame that you have nothing. I’ve expressed this aloud this time, and I see that significant men—Renan, Gaston Paris, [Ernest] Legouvé, [Ernest] Bersot—are of the same mind.”

Elme Marie Caro, a French philosopher and Académie française member, echoed Taine’s feelings about the election: “I could not ask for better [for you] except for the Académie, but that will come in time. . . . I have already spoken with some of the most prominent professors and have made sure that your name will receive a very favorable welcome.” While Montégut turned down overtures for a chair at the Collège, he later stood twice for election to the Académie française, both times failing to win the votes needed. Though he had been the principal literary critic since 1857 at La Revue des Deux Mondes, he died in 1895 with little official recognition, even within his native France.

Overshadowed by Taine and Sainte-Beuve, he had partly himself to blame: although his productivity was by any measure enormous, he collected his critical writing in published volumes only infrequently, and even then restricted their scope to a relatively narrow range of topics. His noteworthy essays on American literature and culture have never been culled from back numbers of the Revue des Deux Mondes and other French periodicals. Instead, when he is remembered at all, literary historians have sniffed at his didacticism and dismissed him as a “moralizing critic.” Indeed he was. Montégut sought to trace the characteristics of literary genius and morality based on the individual author and the environment—national, religious, or other—in which that author’s talent was cultivated. Writers from his native France, a country he deemed too fixed on abstractions and too committed to a literature in service of ideals, had never realized literary genius and had effectively missed out on what Romanticism had to offer. On the contrary, those countries that had allowed for a certain liberty from abstraction, valued the individual, and had a solid moral framework were able to produce the likes of Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, Carlyle, and Emerson.

His criticism touched on social mores in France, but also on political trends and tendencies. During a century of revolutions—both political and literary—he rarely, if ever, fell directly within republican, monarchist, or Bonapartist camps. Politically, he despised the emphasis on a selfish, divisive, and amoral individualism based on materialism that seemed to him to permeate post-1789 politics; yet he also abhorred growing currents of republicanism and socialism that denied the importance of the individual in relation to the whole of society. His political ideal was the July Monarchy of the Citizen-King Louis-Philippe in which a (quickly eroding) politics of le juste milieu, the “happy medium,” tiptoed between some ideals of the Revolution and constitutional monarchy, and, ultimately, protection of France’s bourgeois
geoisie. He minced no words in his criticism of the universal suffrage ushered in under the Second Republic. For him, this revolution for the masses had led to the debacle of the Second Empire. Montégut never sat firmly within any political camp during a century of much political upheaval. Repeatedly, his public seemed to demand that he be “democratic and anticlerical, or clerical and antidemocratic.” As a faithful, yet questioning, Catholic committed to Revolutionary ideals (but not as they had been implemented under any of the first formulations of the French Republic), Montégut could be neither.

Frustrated by both letters and politics in his native land, Montégut looked outward to Britain and America. His choice was not arbitrary, but rather ethically and politically motivated, and reinforced by the journal to which he dedicated the majority of his work. Small wonder, then, that (just four years after his arrival at the Revue) he reveled in his discovery of Nathaniel Hawthorne, an American writer whose work grappled with historical residues from Puritan austerity and displayed caustic disenchantment with half-baked political and social panaceas. Monsieur de l’Aubépine had something to say to contemporary France.

Any literary critic who, in 1857 (the same year as Les fleurs du mal), could launch an essay with this withering salvo—

The poet who said that man is a flower whose roots reach down to hell should have been born in the United States—

deserves a better fate than oblivion. Yet the man who wrote that line, Louis Étienne, has all but vanished from chronicles of literary history. In his time, however, Étienne stood among a distinguished group of French men of letters who felt a profound mission to make their countrymen better informed about the literature, politics, and culture of the English-speaking world. Étienne’s active career was remarkably long, productive—and thankless: much like that of Forgues and Montégut. From the 1840s until his death, Étienne contributed dozens of articles on wide-ranging subjects to the most distinguished French periodicals of the day. Thackeray, Wordsworth, Tennyson, the Brontës, Poe—these and many other writers attracted his serious attention. Only rarely, however, did Étienne collect his work in published volumes, and almost none of it has been translated into English. Not surprisingly, then, almost all of his criticism has slipped into undeserved obscurity. To gauge the injustice, one need only glance at his penetrating critique of another contemporary, Nathaniel Hawthorne, which first appeared in the Revue contemporaine as part of a series (“Les conteurs américains”) devoted to American authors.
Étienne’s essay on Hawthorne was not the first in French to assess that writer, and it is important to see his piece as a significant contribution to an emerging critical dialogue in Second Empire France about the cultural work of fiction in democratic society. With the demise of the Second Republic and the coup d’état of Napoleon III, many French intellectuals and critics were anxious to ensure that certain Republican values and principles not be crushed or corrupted by imperial excess. Men of this persuasion gravitated toward the Revue des Deux Mondes, whose ebullient editor, François Buloz, had made it his journal’s ambition to explore cultural, economic, and political innovations beyond France and Europe. This included a young United States, a fellow nation born of recent revolution. Even before Louis Napoléon came to power, Buloz had welcomed contributions that would expand French awareness of American literature, an impulse that happily coincided with the transatlantic publication of many of the works now recognized at the canonical center of the American Renaissance. From the late 1840s on, the Revue took notice of Emerson, Poe, Melville, and Hawthorne (and many others less luminary), and French translations of some of their works quickly appeared. In every case, the Revue des Deux Mondes represented the cultural vanguard, exposing its readers to challenging new ideas and what often seemed like paradoxical efflorescences of Romantic sensibility from the land of materialistic Yankees.

Perhaps both to complement and to challenge the work of his rivals, Étienne aligned himself with the Revue des Deux Mondes’ chief competitor, the Revue contemporaine. Founded in 1852, the Revue contemporaine was more closely aligned with the central government, which directly subsidized its publication as well as providing many subscriptions from administrative departments and ministries. Despite—or possibly because of—these ties to the established regime, the Revue contemporaine never could shake off its underdog status; but that very cultural situation may have given its contributors a certain freedom or edge, at least when they turned their attention to matters external to France. With respect to Hawthorne, that distinction registers in the remarkable opening of Étienne’s essay and is sustained to the closing line. While it is likely that some of Étienne’s judgments were shaped or influenced by the earlier assessments of Forgues and Montégut (works that also shouldered the considerable burden of translating substantial excerpts from Hawthorne’s texts to make him accessible to French readers), his analysis benefits from a presumption of familiarity and a consequent liberty to generalize. The results can be startling. “Nowhere is human nature more reviled than in this nation that believes itself called to renew humanity,” Étienne asserts. “Those people like to think of themselves
as God’s elect; but, if you believe that, you also have to acknowledge that no other nation has a more unique relationship to the Devil.” This is a critic who takes no prisoners.

Apart from the pleasure of his pointedly satiric viewpoint, Étienne provides insights about Hawthorne that have an almost prophetic quality. He didn’t need Melville (or Harry Levin, for that matter) to instruct him about the power of blackness; he found it all by himself (and in just the same place):

[W]e have not yet touched upon the principal trait of the Puritan spirit in Hawthorne. Here it is. He possesses a melancholy that comes not from life’s suffering, painful experiences, or social disapproval, but rather from deep within the soul: a religious melancholy, borne from a vision of Evil. This is Calvinist melancholy, not René’s, or Childe Harold’s—Christian melancholy, almost disproportionate, occasioned by the ineffaceable shadow of sin.

Likewise, his contrast between the “old” American ethos and the “new” prefigures Van Wyck Brooks’s classic formulation of Highbrow and Lowbrow (and possibly Richard Bushman’s analysis of the transition From Puritan to Yankee). “With Hawthorne,” Étienne carefully observes, “the marvelous always has a practical end. In the same way, the sectarians who peopled the shores of America had many visions, but they were never useless; every wonder had a moral lesson. . . . A truly American imagination, and such is that of our novelist, only admits the marvelous on the condition of proving something.” A vivid capacity for epigram serves Étienne well: “One cannot know the meaning of ruthlessness unless one knows America.” Even Jean Baudrillard could hardly have improved upon that.

Notes

5. Arvède Barine, “Un critique contemporain: Émile Montégut,” Revue bleue 37 (15 May 1886): 617. Montégut’s obscurity has been reinforced even today by the lack of primary resources available to evaluate his role at the Revue des Deux Mondes. Assuming they survive, his papers remain uncollected or dispersed. At the Bibliothèque Nationale
de France (Paris), there are various letters written by Montégut, as well as some of his correspondence with the Hetzel publishing house. A miscellaneous collection of articles and letters surrounding the events leading up to the dedication of the writer’s commemorative plaque at Limoges (collected by Henri Hugon, a member of the honorary committee) is housed at the Bibliothèque francophone multimédia de Limoges (Limoges, France). For more general information on the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, one may also consult the journal’s archive at L’Institut Mémoires de l’édition contemporaine (Abbaye d’Ardenne, France).


10. Very little is known of Étienne’s life. Educated at Paris, he taught at Saint-Louis and later became Educational Rector of Besançon, where he died.

11. An important catalyst for this phenomenon was also the absence of international copyright. American titles were briskly pirated by British publishers (such as Richard Bentley, George Routledge, and Henry Bohn) who were just discovering an available mass market through their cheap reprint “libraries.” See Clarence Gohdes, *American Literature in Nineteenth-Century England* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1944), 21–22.