By now, we have disclosed many latent connections between Anglo-American criticism of Hawthorne and the early French responses to his work. Significantly, a vital—and quite direct—link exists between at least one of them (Montégut) and Henry James, whose remarkable contribution, *Hawthorne*, to Macmillan’s English Men of Letters Series in 1879 has been a touchstone for Hawthorne criticism ever since. “It is generally recognized as the first American literary biography of permanent artistic value,” Elsa Nettels rightly affirms, “and it remains one of the best biographical and critical studies in English.”1 Precisely because James’s biography has secured that stature, however, it seems surprising that scholars have failed to subject the author’s methods and sources to more careful scrutiny. Closer analysis will suggest that, when it came to writing literary criticism, James occasionally poached on others’ territory and opinions. Even if one admits that contemporary standards for the protection of intellectual property or academic integrity should not be applied, retroactively, with a vengeance, neither should one shrink from calling a spade a spade. In composing his critical biography, Henry James was, if not an outright plagiarist, then at the least a transparently deceptive appropriator of another distinguished critic’s work.

When British critic and editor John Morley invited Henry James to contribute a volume to his rapidly expanding English Men of Letters Series of literary biographies, the American author was both flattered and diffident. Having only recently established himself in London (and having just
published his first book of literary criticism with the prestigious House of Macmillan ([French Poets and Novelists, 1878]), James received Morley’s proposal as a welcome sign of his rapid assimilation to English literary life. Certainly he would not have wanted to jeopardize his budding relationship with such a great publishing empire; still, he did not accept the invitation at once. To broaden not only his base of subjects but also his potential audience, in early October 1878 Morley had offered James a choice of American authors—Washington Irving? Hawthorne? but for weeks the writer shuffled his feet. Given the option, he knew that Hawthorne would be more to his liking, but he questioned his desire to take on such a job. All the same, he didn’t want to be disobliging, and so he told Frederick Macmillan a few days later that he had written a letter to Morley assenting to the proposal, but had kept the envelope on his desk, “hesitating to send it.” Within a week, however, James changed his mind altogether and decided to pull out. Recounting his latest social and professional news for his family back in America, James boasted that he had received an offer from Macmillan for a biography of Hawthorne but had declined because he despaired of finding adequate material: the circumference of Hawthorne’s life was too small and its substance without incident. “One can’t write a volume about Hawthorne,” he confided, knowing that the proposal still would please the folks at home “& attest my growing fame.” Of course, one could write a volume about Hawthorne, and Henry James eventually did; but his reluctance to undertake the project invites us to revisit the biography and to interrogate James’s methods and sources, about which he expressed explicit concern.

*Hawthorne* is not in any sense a work of modern scholarship, and it might seem inappropriate to assess it according to contemporary standards of academic rigor. But even if one accepts the book as a kind of dilettante’s (not to say amateur’s) exercise, the method of its composition is still worth investigating, especially because it was written by an author whom we now regard as The Master of late-nineteenth-century narrative. Indulging, for a moment, in unjust comparison, we might observe, for example, that in the entirety of James’s text the reader will encounter but a single footnote, worth quoting in its entirety. “It is proper that before I go further,” James notes on his fifth printed page,

I should acknowledge my large obligations to the only biography of our author, of any considerable length, that has been written—the little volume entitled *A Study of Hawthorne*, by Mr. George Parsons Lathrop [1851–98], the son-in-law of the subject of the work. (Boston, 1876.) To this ingenious and sympathetic sketch, in which the author has taken great pains to collect
the more interesting facts of Hawthorne’s life, I am greatly indebted. Mr. Lathrop’s work is not pitched in the key which many another writer would have chosen, and his tone is not to my sense the truly critical one; but without the help afforded by his elaborate essay the present little volume could not have been prepared.³

At various points further on, James acknowledges Lathrop by attribution and, less frequently, through direct quotation. Apart from this earlier biography, James seems to have relied for information almost exclusively upon Hawthorne’s published works (the autobiographical prefaces, especially) and the volumes of his Notebooks brought out posthumously by the author’s widow. These and one other contemporaneous source (The Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli [1860]) make up his absent Bibliography or list of Works Not Cited.

Apart from this handful of routine biographical sources, James alludes in Hawthorne to the work of only one other literary critic, Émile Montégut, whose 1860 essay on The Marble Faun (“Un romancier pessimiste en Amérique”) provokes him to challenge what he claims are mistaken judgments about Hawthorne’s fundamental nature. Given this earlier essay’s centrality to James’s arguments, that it has lapsed into obscurity seems both undeserved and unwarranted—especially since Hawthorne has gone on to become a canonical point of reference for almost all modern scholarship touching the author. Careful scrutiny of James’s use of Montégut’s work—his selective (and sometimes misleading) quotations, his misrepresentation of the critic’s conclusions, his silent appropriation of critical ideas—invariably suggests that James’s Hawthorne is not altogether his own but rather a plagiaristic amalgam of insights.

In one of his late autobiographical volumes, James had occasion to recall a number of gloomy events traceable to the early spring of 1864. The Civil War, of course, was dragging on in its bloodstained way; and then came the hideous shock from Washington of Lincoln’s assassination. Just as significant to James, however, was the news of another’s death—the passing of Nathaniel Hawthorne—an event that he preferred to remember in the present tense:

I sit once more, half-dressed, late of a summer morning and in a bedimmed light which is somehow at once that of dear old green American shutters drawn to against openest windows and that of a moral shadow projected as with violence—I sit on my belated bed, I say, and yield to the pang that made me positively and loyally cry.
James's tears came to him so readily because, as he tells us, he had just that preceding winter taken it upon himself to read Hawthorne “for the first time and at one straight draught,” a saturation that confirmed for him “that an American could be an artist, one of the finest, without ‘going outside’ about it . . . quite in fact as if Hawthorne had become one just by being American enough.”6

On the other side of the Atlantic, another distinguished man of letters was also deeply affected by Hawthorne’s death, a critic who had some justification for feeling that he had discovered this American writer, had brought him to an audience that could only rub its eyes in wonder at his curious stories and tales. Anticipating James’s much later conclusion, the French critic Émile Montégut had already affirmed (in 1852) that Hawthorne was “the most American writer that the United States has produced since Emerson” (c’est l’écrivain le plus américain que les États-Unis aient produit après Emerson).7 Having read all of Hawthorne (though not all at once), Montégut was also privileged to tender summary judgments, assessments that have a curiously indirect—or, quite possibly, direct—bearing on later Anglophone criticism. “Somber Hawthorne,” this critic lamented,

did he not endear himself to us at just the right moment? Isn’t it true that he came to us 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! How the nascent celebrity of this lugubrious talent went hand in hand with melancholy preoccupations that were new, perhaps, for us as well! How the sentiments he expressed with so much depth—solitude, superstition, fear, despondency—lived and breathed in us!

[Et le sombre Hawthorne n’est-il pas venu, vous cher—cher au moment propice? n’est-il pas vrai que ce n’est pas au sein du bonheur qu’il est venu vous présenter ses bouquets de fleurs de cimetière et ses parfums funèbres? Oh! les favorables heures, celles, de la mélancolie noire et des rêveries sinistres, pour s’entretenir avec les visions d’Hawthorne, pour lire La lettre rouge, La maison aux sept pignons, Les mousses du vieux presbytère! Comme la célébrité naissante de ce talent lugubre s’associait bien avec les préoccupations, nouvelles aussi pour vous peut-être, du malheur! Comme les sentiments qu’il exprime avec tant de profondeur, la solitude, la superstition, la peur, l’accablement, vivaient alors et respiraient en vous!]
For Montégut, there could forever be only one Hawthorne: his genius was too singular, too morbid, too intense, ever to be replicated. “No other writer will arrange those funereal bouquets he excelled at making” (Aucun écrivain ne composera désormais ces bouquets funèbres qu’il excellait à former), this astute Frenchman averred. “The cypress and the willows of that abandoned cemetery that he has made his literary domain will no longer have a caretaker. That somber and profound psychology lived only once” (Les cyprès et les saules de ce cimetière abandonné dont il avait fait son domaine littéraire ne trouveront plus qui en prenne soin. Cette sombre et profonde psychologie a vécu une fois et pour toujours). 8

Already we have documented this critic’s deliberate curiosity about American life and letters. Taking his cue from Tocqueville, Montégut was particularly interested in the problematic nature of democratic individualism. Not surprisingly, then, Emerson was the first American writer to attract his attention. Besides offering his public two affirmative appraisals of the American philosopher, Montégut also translated his most central essays to afford the Sage of Concord a better foothold in France. 9 But if Emerson was an early favorite, Montégut’s discovery of Hawthorne (and the puzzling ambiguity of his work) significantly complicated his views about the promise of American life. Having made his literary acquaintance, Montegut was struck by the apparent paradox of such a lugubrious talent finding its voice in the Transcendentalist milieu of New England. Clearly fascinated by Hawthorne, Montégut wrote about him at length on three separate occasions. It cannot be coincidental that the appearance of his final “obituary” essay would be the last time he would comment on an American writer. With Hawthorne’s death, Montégut’s sustained interest in the literature of the United States came to an end.

To read Montégut (and the handful of other contemporaneous French critics of Hawthorne) is to invite, from time to time, the experience of déjà vu all over again, for many of his insights have silently permeated the Anglophone critical tradition. Montégut’s perceptions about the significance of Hawthorne’s Puritan heritage are especially suggestive, not least because in tracing its roots he found justification for the kind of historical conservatism that served as the ideological basis of his own critical perspective. One should not be fooled, Montégut wrote in 1852, by Hawthorne’s flirtation with socialism at Brook Farm. “In spite of his fondness for tolerance, progress, and democracy, the old Puritan nature lives on in him,” Montégut affirms:

Hawthorne’s talent marvelously explains the persistence of ancestral values.
that are perpetuated over time—the “music of the blood,” as Calderón says,\textsuperscript{10} that (especially in provincial society) repeats in successive generations the same melody but with different variations. Hawthorne betrays the symptoms: he rarely goes to church, but even at home can hear the hymns of the faithful and the exhortations of the minister. His ideas would have been anathema to his forebears and his profession would have been detested. He no longer believes and lives the way they did, but he does have their intellectual outlook. He may no longer have their soul, but he does have their spirit.

[En dépit de toutes ses idées de tolérance, de progrès et de démocratie, la vieille nature puritaine existe en lui. Le talent de M. Hawthorne explique merveilleusement cette persistance de la race, cette force de l’éducation première qui se perpétue à travers les temps, cette musique du sang, comme dit Calderon, qui chante les mêmes airs sur toutes sortes de variations dans les générations successives d’une même famille et d’un même pays. M. Hawthorne l’avoue quelque part: il va rarement au temple, et se contente d’écouter de sa maison les cantiques des fidèles et les exhortations du ministre; ses idées eussent été anathématisées par ses ancêtres, et sa profession détestée par eux; il n’a plus ni leurs croyances ni leur manière de vivre, mais il a encore leurs qualités intellectuelles; il n’a plus leur âme, mais il a leur esprit. . . .]

Comparing this passage with a more famous one from the *Hawthorne* biography will reveal the first of many uncanny parallels. “It is interesting to see,” James writes,

how the imagination, in this capital son of the old Puritans, reflected the hue of the more purely moral part, of the dusky, overshadowed conscience. The conscience, by no fault of its own, in every genuine offshoot of that sombre lineage, lay under the shadow of the sense of sin. This darkening cloud was no essential part of the nature of the individual; it stood fixed in the general moral heaven, under which he grew up and looked at life. . . . Nothing is more curious and interesting than this almost exclusively imported character of the sense of sin in Hawthorne’s mind; it seems to exist there merely for an artistic or literary purpose. He had ample cognizance of the Puritan conscience; it was his natural heritage; it was reproduced in him; looking into his soul, he found it there. But his relation to it was only, as one may say, intellectual; it was not moral and theological. (362–63)
Making fair allowance for the differing aims of these two critics, their perceptions about the role of history in the formation of Hawthorne’s aesthetic essentially are parallel. Montégut, after all, was trying not only to explain the American writer to his French audience but—much more heroically—to persuade that audience of Hawthorne’s immediate cultural relevance; and he was writing during Hawthorne’s lifetime. Still caught in the shadow of 1848, Montégut feels obliged to analyze the ideological attractions of socialism reflected in *The Blithedale Romance*, especially because he sees them undercut (or overmastered) by competing historical forces. Further removed from the utopian spirit of the times, James necessarily views Hawthorne’s naïve dalliance at Brook Farm differently, enveloped instead by the haze of innocent American provincialism. James, coming later, does not have to shoulder any political burden, which only makes the fundamental similarities between their viewpoints that much more striking.

Because James’s biography of Hawthorne has had such profound influence on later criticism, resonances and echoes from Montégut do not always stop there. A key transitional figure, of course, is T. S. Eliot, whose brief reflections on what he called “The Hawthorne Aspect” of James would go on—disproportionately—to inform almost all of F. O. Matthiessen’s monumental scholarship and, from there, to an even later generation of critics such as Richard Brodhead. A recently expatriated Eliot composed his observations (in 1918) with a kind of reverent sarcasm, but he clearly wanted to feel that, somewhere, there was a remnant that could be saved from the historical residue of New England culture. Thus, for Eliot,

James is positively a continuator of the New England genius . . . which has discovered itself only in a very small number of people in the middle of the nineteenth century. . . . I mean whatever we associate with certain purlieus of Boston, with Concord, Salem, and Cambridge, Mass.: notably Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, and Lowell . . . pleasantly shaded by the Harvard elms. One distinguishing mark of this distinguished world was very certainly leisure; and importantly not in all cases a leisure given by money, but insisted upon. . . . Of course leisure in a metropolis, with a civilized society (the society of Boston was and is quite uncivilized but refined beyond the point of civilization), with exchange of ideas and critical standards, would have been better; but these men could not provide the metropolis, and were right in taking the leisure under possible conditions.11

Eliot’s incisive phrasing is memorable precisely because his evocation of New England is so genial—until he plants the sting; but, again, his rhetoric takes
on an almost borrowed hue when we consider that Montégut much earlier had observed that Hawthorne’s genius could have come to fruition only in a milieu where “culture” had reached its apogee: where leisure, refinement, and (consequently) boredom were overlain upon a substrate of lingering Puritan scruples. “Hawthorne’s talent at first presents an indecipherable enigma,” he suggested (in 1860),

but on closer inspection, it can be solved rather easily. All the characteristics of this talent are found whenever culture reaches its apogee. He has the morbid love of abnormalities that distinguishes blasé minds, the intelligent taste for rarities that distinguishes connoisseurs of human nature. He has the same fancies and caprice that we find in societies consumed with boredom and eager to experience new sensations. He is a casuist, a collector of curiosities, a horticulturalist of exotic plants. He translates only the feelings of souls in ruin, the scruples of consciences that have been refined beyond the point of civilization.

Comparing the two passages, we find the mirrored reflection of a particular phrase, but it is the most pregnant one in Eliot’s critique; and, as with James, it is embedded within a context of remarkably similar critical generalization. Unlike later readers of Hawthorne, Eliot traced his way back to Montégut and (like James) made good—but camouflaged—use of him. Again and again, one hears phrases, finds opinions and judgments, in these contemporaneous French essays that have infiltrated Anglophone criticism and yet have gone unnoticed and, just as important, unacknowledged.

It is doubly ironic that we can trace at least some responsibility for Montégut’s obscurity to Henry James. In his sole review of Montégut’s work, James regretted the French critic’s “inflexible modesty,” his apparent unwillingness to assemble a more voluminous career for himself, a judg-
ment repeated by almost all subsequent Anglophone historians of literary criticism. Compared to his other great French contemporaries in the world of letters, Montégut also was less inclined to push his judgments aggressively. According to James, Montégut had “neither the weight and mass and emphasis” of Taine, “nor the bristling malice—the critical scratch, as one may call it—of Sainte-Beuve. Many readers,” he went on to say, would find Montégut “tame and dull, and his best friends must be those contemplative minds who care more for the journey than for the goal—more to look out of the window than to arrive.” From George Saintsbury to René Wellek, James’s rather sweeping formulation has worked to confine Montégut’s reputation among Anglophone critics and served to relegate him to the fringe.12

In the 1870s, however, Montégut was at the very center of the Parisian literary world. For decades, his columns had been appearing in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* (where he had succeeded Sainte-Beuve as principal critic of literature); and his monumental ten-volume translation of Shakespeare already was achieving canonical status in France. As we have seen, Henry James had become familiar with the shape of Montégut’s career as a man of letters and was generally sympathetic to his admittedly conservative critical viewpoint. “Both as connoisseur and as moralist, M. Montégut is equally ingenious and penetrating,” James observed; his “rare originality” could be traced to a combination of exquisitely developed qualities: “the sense of the artist, the joy in material forms, and the conscience of the moralist, the care for spiritual meanings.”13 Small wonder, then, that when James arrived in Paris in the early winter of 1876 as a reporter on culture and the arts for the *New York Tribune*, he looked forward to sizing up this Frenchman face to face. The American found Parisian hospitality difficult, however, and he would have to wait several months before encountering Montégut at the salon of Auguste Laugel, a French historian to whom James had been given a letter of introduction by his colleagues on the staff of *The Nation*. The meeting was not auspicious, however, and James took an immediate dislike to the man. To his sister James described Montégut as “a little black man, with an abnormally shaped head and a crooked face—a Frenchman of the intense, unhumorous type, abondant dans son propre sens and spinning out his shallow ingeniosities with a complacency to make the angels howl. He is a case of the writer in the flesh killing one’s mental image of him.”14 Eager to maintain his presence in Parisian literary circles, James nevertheless was obliged to encounter the little black man with the crooked face more than once; and, eventually, he began to soften his tone. To his father James later admitted that he liked Montégut, the man, less than his criticism, and would find it hard to forgive him “for having, à l’avenir, spoiled his writing a little for me.”15
All the same, Montégut was a formidable critical voice—and the only one, we should remember, whom James felt obliged to answer when he undertook his own analytical biography of Hawthorne later in the decade. Besides Hawthorne’s son-in-law, George Parsons Lathrop, upon whose more conventional life history (*A Study of Hawthorne*, 1876) James depended for basic facts, Montégut stands alone as the sole literary critic to whom he makes reference in that volume. Because James’s *Hawthorne* has been so enormously influential (its reach extends down to the present day), it seems all the more remarkable that the author’s methods and sources have not been rigorously investigated. More careful scrutiny of James’s work—and of others, in turn, influenced by it—will not only help us recover a more accurate genealogy of insight but also require us to rethink the relationship between French and Anglo-American criticism of a major author.

In the critical biography, we find four specific allusions to Montégut, always with reference to his 1860 essay about *The Marble Faun*, “Un romancier pessimiste en Amérique,” a title—and a characterization—from which James begs to differ. “Pessimism consists in having morbid and bitter views and theories about human nature,” James insists, “not in indulging in shadowy fancies and conceits.” Having the benefit of Hawthorne’s newly published notebooks and diaries from which to conclude (materials not available to Montégut), James goes on to say, perhaps somewhat remarkably,

> These volumes contain the record of very few convictions or theories of any kind; they move with curious evenness, with a charming, graceful flow, on a level which lies above that of a man’s philosophy. They adhere with such persistence to this upper level that they prompt the reader to believe that Hawthorne had no appreciable philosophy at all—no general views that were in the least uncomfortable. (340)

While it seems easy for James to make the claim that Montégut has exaggerated Hawthorne’s morbidity, he does not take into consideration the possibility that the “curious evenness” of the writer’s diaries might have resulted from editorial punctiliousness and a calculated effort to present Hawthorne to the world as a harmless, healthy-minded American democrat. James alleges that Montégut’s assessment is clever but superficial, but his own willingness to take this supposedly documentary evidence at face value is problematically flawed. Modern scholars have long since taken note of Sophia Peabody’s bowdlerizations—the wholesale erasure of her husband’s references to alcohol, sex, and the body—in the texts of his American, English,
and French & Italian Notebooks; but James, though conceding that he cannot know “what passages of gloom and melancholy may have been suppressed,” confidently asserts that these volumes exhibit the placid record of an “unperplexed intellect” (339, 340).

Having set himself in deliberate opposition to Montégut, James must take pains to distinguish his point of view as a necessary corrective to his predecessor’s presumably hasty judgments and misreadings. To accomplish this, however, James is obliged to resort to a certain degree of subterfuge—which, by any other name, might just as well be labeled plagiarism. His principal dispute with Montégut centers on the real meaning of Hawthorne’s Puritan heritage, and this is how James sets up the discussion:

“This marked love of cases of conscience,” says M. Montégut, “this taciturn, scornful cast of mind, this habit of seeing sin everywhere and hell always gaping open, this dusky gaze bent always upon a damned world and a nature draped in mourning, these lonely conversations of the imagination with the conscience, this pitiless analysis resulting from a perpetual examination of one’s self, and from the tortures of a heart closed before men and open to God—all these elements of the Puritan character have passed into Mr. Hawthorne, or to speak more justly, have filtered into him, through a long succession of generations.” This is a very pretty and very vivid account of Hawthorne, superficially considered; and it is just such a view of the case as would commend itself most easily and most naturally to a hasty critic. It is all true indeed, with a difference; Hawthorne was all that M. Montégut says, minus the conviction. The old Puritan moral sense, the consciousness of sin and hell, of the fearful nature of our responsibilities and the savage character of our Taskmaster—these things had been lodged in the mind of a man of Fancy, whose fancy had straightway begun to take liberties and play tricks with them—to judge them (Heaven forgive him!) from the poetic and aesthetic point of view, the point of view of entertainment and irony. This absence of conviction makes the difference; but the difference is great. (364–65)

If we give the original source its due priority, however, and read Montégut first, we can see to what extent James has misrepresented his predecessor’s conclusions and, in fact, appropriated his crucial insights. James’s translation of this passage from Montégut’s essay is very fine, indeed, but he carefully terminates it to create the impression of a distinction that cannot survive comparison with the primary text. What follows immediately in Montégut’s analysis is precisely the penetrating elucidation that James then claims (with
gratuitous italic emphasis) for himself. “If we do not recognize [these elements of the Puritan character] all at once,” Montégut continues,

we should not be surprised; the soul of the Hawthorne family necessarily was modified in each avatar that it sent forth, but the substance has remained the same. With each generation, something has been lost: first, religious ardor; next, political readiness; and, then again, the fervor of hate. Everything owing to spiritual conviction has disappeared, all that was from nature has stayed. The visions that haunt Hawthorne’s mind are the same that his ancestors knew; but these phantoms have kept up with the fashion of the times and have renewed their sinister costumes. Long ago, they wore a Christian shroud, now they don philosophical togas. Hawthorne’s ancestors knew where these visions were coming from because they knew that they had been besieged by two enemy powers, Satan and Christ, who battled for their hearts like a fortress. They were skilled in distinguishing the visions that came from heaven and those that came from hell. Hawthorne’s vision comes neither from heaven nor hell; these two words have lost all meaning for him. Heaven has been replaced by the black room of the imagination, and hell by the cavern of the heart.

[Cet amour morbide des cas de conscience, cette tournure d’esprit taciturne et méprisante, cette habitude de voir le péché partout et l’enfer toujours béant, ce regard sombre promené sur un monde damné et sur une nature vêtue de deuil, ces conversations solitaires de l’imagination avec la conscience, cette analyse impitoyable résultant d’un perpétuel examen de soi-même et des tortures d’un cœur fermé devant les hommes, toujours ouvert devant Dieu, tous ces traits de la nature puritaine ont passé dans M. Hawthorne, ou, pour mieux dire, ont filtré en lui à travers une longue série de générations. Si nous ne les reconnaissions pas tout d’abord, il ne faut pas s’en étonner, l’âme de Hawthorne s’est nécessairement modifiée avec chacun des avatars qu’elle a traversés, mais la substance est restée la même. A chaque génération, elle a perdu quelque chose: une fois l’ardeur religieuse, une autre fois l’âpreté politique, une autre fois encore la ferveur de la haine. Tout ce qui était de la grâce a disparu, tout ce qui était de la nature est resté. Les visions qui hantent l’esprit d’Hawthorne sont les mêmes que ses ancêstres ont connues; seulement les fantômes ont suivi les modes du temps et renouvelé leur garde-robe sinistre. Jadis ils avaient un suaire chrétien, maintenant ils ont des toges philosophiques. Les ancêtres de Hawthorne savaient d’où sortaient ces visions, car ils savaient qu’ils étaient assiégés par deux puissances ennemies, Satan et le Christ, qui se disputaient leurs cœurs comme
une forteresse; ils étaient habiles à distinguer les visions qui venaient du ciel et celles qui venaient de l’enfer. Les visions de Hawthorne ne viennent au contraire ni du ciel ni de l’enfer; ces deux mots ont perdu pour lui toute signification: le ciel est remplacé par la chambre noire de l’imagination et l’enfer par la caverne du cœur.]

James’s manipulation of the evidence here does justice neither to the reach of Montégut’s vivid historical imagination nor to the distinctively suggestive language in which he gives it concrete form. In effect, James continues to translate (or paraphrase) but without the acknowledging punctuation of quotation marks. “I take possession of the Old World,” he once richly intoned: “I inhale it, I appropriate it!” At least on this occasion, he did.

Calling attention to James’s academic infractions need not diminish our sense of his critical accomplishment—such practices surely were not uncommon then (if now); and, besides, he made no particular claims to scholarly rigor. Like the goals of other contributors to Macmillan’s English Men of Letters Series, James’s goal as a biographer was synthetic, not pedantic. Still, evidence gleaned from informed comparison should complicate and enrich our understanding of James’s more genuine indebtedness and thus, by implication, that of others (such as T. S. Eliot) whose profoundly influential assessments of Hawthorne use the 1879 biography as a touchstone. Even when making specific reference to a critic like Montégut, James was capable simultaneously of concealing the extent of his dependence, a tactic amply repaid by the silence of intervening decades.

We can measure the immediate success of this strategy in contemporaneous reviews, many of which register a certain patriotic pride in James’s supposed dressing down of the French critic. The Nation, for example, felt that James really had the field to himself, alleging that “no serious criticism” of Hawthorne had been written “heretofore to any purpose, unless Mr. James would have us except Poe’s.” With that presumed advantage, it is irresistible to repeat the author’s own formulations. “Hawthorne appears in this portrait a very different figure from the fiction conceived by M. Emile Montégut,” the notice continues, “who represents him, as he would perhaps be likely to appear to the Gallic imagination, as a romançier pessimiste. All that can be said in support of this Mr. James says is true ‘with a difference.’ Hawthorne was a romançier pessimiste, ‘minus the conviction.’” Voilà! The Literary World made just the same point, once again quoting James’s selective translation of Montégut (glossing the Frenchman’s assessment as “brilliant, but . . . extravagant”), and then congratulating the biographer presumably for refuting it. By emphasizing a distinction more
apparent than real, James could reinvent many of Montégut’s insights as his own.

The felicity of James’s style and the refined nature of his critical intelligence impressed even French readers. Applauding “the shrewdness of its insights and the sustained elegance of its execution,” Arvède Barine also felt obliged to square Hawthorne with the insights of Montégut, for he was a critic she greatly admired. If James’s biography was a signal accomplishment, so, too, had been her countryman’s essays: Barine commended them as the work of “a penetrating critic of refined psychology and political philosophy” that “no other living author, in France or elsewhere, would be capable of writing.” James, she contends, has had the benefit of documents denied to Montégut—his notebooks, and Lathrop’s sympathetic biography—and so arrives at more cheerful conclusions about Hawthorne’s personality. But she also suggests that, through a fault of semantics, both critics have confused an important issue by conflating Puritanism with pessimism. “If James takes great pains to persuade us that Hawthorne, far from being Puritan, was more or less lukewarm towards religion, it is in order to excuse him from the crime of pessimism. On the other hand, and with the same reasoning, Montégut intertwines Hawthorne’s Puritanism and his morose philosophy (seeing them as two inseparable traits), as if they were mutually corroborating forms of testimony.” Barine’s attempt to reconcile these differences through an appeal to Christian moralism is not very satisfactory, but she at least recognized some of the problems that James’s (mis)use of Montégut generated.23

When James first attempts to dismantle Montégut’s allegation of pessimism, he again uses the technique of deceptive quotation to make his point. “To speak of Hawthorne, as M. Emile Montégut does, as a romantier pessimiste, seems to me very much beside the mark,” James says. Rather, he insists, Hawthorne cannot be accused of having any kind of philosophy at all. “‘His bitterness,’ says M. Montégut, ‘is without abatement, and his bad opinion of man is without compensation. . . . His little tales have the air of confessions which the soul makes to itself; they are so many little slaps which the author applies to our face’” (363–64). Apart from the fact that these two statements in Montégut’s essay are separated by six pages of print, James also silently elides the context in which the French critic is careful to frame his argument. James presents Montégut’s opinion as if it were an overarching generality, a simplistic formulation, rather than a targeted insight, developed, as it is in context, from close inspection of a particular Hawthorne work (“Earth’s Holocaust”). More pointedly, since Montégut reads that tale as an allegorical repudiation of all revolutionary ideals
(significantly, he dates the event of the story as the 4th of August—the
day in 1789 when the French Constituent Assembly abolished the regime
of class privilege), we should not be surprised by his conclusion that the
“impression of cold and sadness is even more powerful because Hawthorne’s
bitterness is undiluted, because his bad opinion of mankind affords no com-
ensation” (Cette impression de froid et de tristesse est d’autant plus puis-
sante, que l’amertume d’Hawthorne est sans mélange, et que sa mauvaise
opinion de l’homme est sans compensation). Distorting Montégut’s more
complex perspective makes it much easier to dispose of, which James seems
eager to do.

Moreover, the second part of James’s (mis)quotation derives not from
any discussion of “pessimism,” but rather from Montégut’s analysis of Haw-
thorne’s preference for allegory, another topic on which James follows his
lead. “For a long time, allegory has been labeled and classed in books on
rhetoric as suiting the needs of the lazy and pedantic,” Montégut acknowl-
dges, but “the Puritans found it where we find all the great things, in nature
or in the contemplation of the world, and recreated it for the needs of their
hearts” (Elle était étiquetée et classée depuis longtemps dans les livres de
rhétorique pour les besoins des oisifs et des pédans; ils la retrouvèrent là où
l’on trouve toutes les grandes choses, dans la nature et dans la contempla-
tion du monde, et la recréèrent pour les besoins de leur cœur). Likewise,
James dismisses the form as “one of the lighter exercises of the imagination”
and suggests that “the taste for it is responsible for a large part of the forc-
ible feeble writing that has been inflicted upon the world” (366). In mak-
ning significant exception for Hawthorne, Montégut understands the way in
which the allegorical form was perfectly suited to the writer’s psychological
obessions. True descendant of the Puritans, he has “inherited the same gift”
and knows,

as they did, how to give life to abstraction and how to creep up on the
most hidden secrets of interior life. Any psychologist is necessarily an ego-
ist. But we can say in all truth that the egoism of Hawthorne is heroic and
disinterested. Not one of the movements of the self eludes him, even in
such moments when . . . it has wanted to escape and not be observed. This
method of extreme egoism, this procedure of excessive personality, detracts
nothing, however, from the impersonality of the characters he draws and
the protagonists that he puts into his work. By expressing his individuality,
Hawthorne expresses general human nature. His short stories above all have
the air of confessions that your soul makes to itself. They are so many small
slaps that the author applies to your face. You would swear that they apply
Part 1: Historical Introduction

personally to you, so much so that you want to say to the author, “How do you know that and who told you so?”

After discussing the limitations of Hawthorne’s allegorical technique, James famously concludes by offering an analogous summary judgment. “The fine thing in Hawthorne,” he memorably says,

is that he cared for the deeper psychology, and that, in his way, he tried to become familiar with it. This natural, yet fanciful familiarity with it, this air, on the author’s part, of being a confirmed habitué of a region of mysteries and subtleties, constitutes the originality of his tales. And then they have the further merit of seeming, for what they are, to spring up so freely and lightly. The author has all the ease, indeed, of a regular dweller in the moral, psychological realm; he goes to and fro in it, as a man who knows his way. (368)

When T. S. Eliot pointed to this passage as confirmation of the fundamental link between Hawthorne and James, he suggested that their kinship was established because the two writers shared “a kind of sense, a receptive medium, which is not of sight. . . . They perceive by antennae; and the ‘deeper psychology’ is here.” Through this mechanism, Hawthorne could “grasp character through the relation of two or more persons to each other; and this is what no one else, except James, has done.”24 This is exactly what Montégut affirms when he tells us that the “characteristic element of Hawthorne’s talent is his dramatic power. He has what I will call a feeling
for impalpable things to the utmost degree: fear, solitude, terror of anni-
hilation—above all, the apprehension of those monstrous fancies that are
spontaneously and unpredictably born in even the most moral and spotless
minds” (L’élément caractéristique du talent de M. Hawthorne, c’est la puis-
sance dramatique. Il a au plus haut degré ce que j’appellerai le sentiment
des choses insaisissables, la peur, la solitude, la terreur des ruines, et surtout
le sentiment de ces imaginations monstrueuses qui naissent spontanément
et tout à coup dans l’esprit même le plus moral et le plus candide). The
tautology comes full circle (almost becomes laughable) when Eliot tried to
explain himself more clearly—in French: “L’intérêt de ce passage réside dans
sa double application: il est vrai en ce qui concerne Hawthorne, il est vrai ou
plus vrai encore en ce qui concerne James lui-même.” As Alan Holder has
suggested, with the publication of Eliot’s later assessment in this venue, “a
curious repetition of literary history seems to have taken place”: James had
tried to “correct” Montégut’s interpretation of Hawthorne, and now Eliot
was trying to remand an erroneous French interpretation of James. In my
end is my beginning.

What embroiled James in greatest controversy were, of course, the
repeated allegations of American provincialism and cultural backwardness
that he laid at Hawthorne’s feet. Although he hardly needed cues from Mon-
tégut to appreciate the differences between an older and an ever-so-much-
younger civilization, still he could have found them in the Frenchman’s work.
All the same, if anything Montégut is seemingly more tolerant than James
of Hawthorne’s cultural limitations, even when he is obliged to point them
out. Any discussion of The Marble Faun would have to address this topic, and
Montégut tackles it quite honestly. “Hawthorne’s observations and thoughts
on Italy, Italian arts, art in general, are such as we would expect from his
sharp and subtle mind,” the critic begins. “He penetrates beneath the surface
and goes to look for the hidden soul of things, but somewhat at random and
with a degree of hesitation that indicates that the author is not absolutely
sure of himself. He speaks self-consciously, proposes his opinions without
conviction, in a muffled voice, and suddenly interrupts himself as if he were
afraid that he had gone too far and dreaded the judgment of those whom
he is addressing.” But Montégut understands this fallibility as an inevitable
consequence of Hawthorne’s limited experience:

We sense in his opinions, as in those of all of his compatriots in the arts,
a certain intrinsic weakness that results from a fundamental deficiency in
education, a deficiency that the historical circumstances of America have
created, and that her best endowed minds will need much time to overcome.
Hawthorne lacks neither the depth nor the subtlety of mind to understand exactly certain great things; what he needs is practice. Neither mind nor even genius can take the place of educational familiarity in understanding the value of great works of art. Nothing can substitute for this primary schooling, not even the most exquisite sensitivity. Any European of ordinary judgment, even with a soul lacking elevation and only moderate sensibility, will surpass Hawthorne in this arena. I do not want to say that he will better comprehend than Hawthorne the essence and the aim of art; he might not comprehend them at all; but he will be less deceived as to the productions of art, and will not fall into the same errors of detail.

One can only imagine that James (already so widely traveled and long since expatriated) read this passage with a certain degree of cosmopolitan self-congratulation. At any rate, it surely would have strengthened his confidence in describing Hawthorne as “the last of the old-fashioned Americans.” James’s immediate qualification of the term looks as much to Montégut as it does in the mirror. “I do not mean by this,” he goes on to say,
that there are not still many of his fellow-countrymen (as there are many natives of every land under the sun,) who are more susceptible of being irritated than of being soothed by the influences of the Eternal City. What I mean is that an American of equal value with Hawthorne, an American of equal genius, imagination, and, as our forefathers said, sensibility, would at present inevitably accommodate himself more easily to the idiosyncrasies of foreign lands. An American as cultivated as Hawthorne, is now almost inevitably more cultivated, and, as a matter of course, more Europeanised in advance, more cosmopolitan. (441–42)

Montégut’s hypothetical European could almost be James himself: “from childhood he has been raised with a familiarity with the arts. He has spent his youth in museums, in the shadow of palaces; at every moment, he has seen, felt, and been moved by the most beautiful works of art in every possible form.” Gently, he concludes by way of apology:

Would that Hawthorne not feel wounded by our observations, because the customs that encourage conviction in matters of taste do not necessarily imply a great understanding of art, any more than an ease in manipulating the instruments of modern science implies a deep understanding of science. If Roger Bacon or Albert the Great came back to the world, they would fumble around in any modern laboratory: even beginning chemistry students would laugh at their clumsiness. Hawthorne’s sojourn in Europe was not long enough to insure him the security of taste that only familiarity creates, that is all.

James’s taste was nothing if not secure, and it was formed precisely in the
fashion that Montégut describes. Other Americans bristled at the condescension they felt in the biography (even James’s friend Howells, who was inclined to be sympathetic, waited “with the patience and security of a spectator at an *auto da fé*”); few were inclined to forgive James as Montégut had forgiven Hawthorne.

Even though the biography makes specific reference only to Montégut’s 1860 essay, it is not unreasonable to assume that James also knew that critic’s other commentary on Hawthorne. “Un romancier pessimiste en Amérique” makes its particular claims as an extension of the author’s previous encounter with the novelist, for the publication of *The Marble Faun* (or, rather, *Transformation*, as he had access to the British edition of the romance) offered Montégut “the pretext,” as he says, “to verify and test” his former impressions. “On that occasion,” he reminds us (and a footnote clearly directs us to the source), he discovered the American writer’s fiction to be a “literary bouquet” composed of strange “funereal flowers.” Contemplating them—“and inhaling their strange aroma”—produced in him “a nervous shudder or even more so a moral shudder, a presentiment.” Hawthorne’s new novel only confirmed the validity of this initial judgment. Reading *The Marble Faun*, Montégut again felt

the same curiosity of mind, the same antipathy of heart, the same shudders of the soul, in front of these bizarre flowers, not one of which does not contain a hungry worm or a poisoned perfume. It is only that in smelling these flowers a second time I find them more pungent, more acrid, more penetrating. Far from diminishing after a second go-round, my esteem for Hawthorne has grown and gotten stronger. Thanks to the interval that has passed between reading these two books, the experience has permitted me to recognize as true what up to now I only had felt, confirming exactly what I had all along suspected. I had not said too much and I must admit to the contrary that I had not said enough. Hawthorne is certainly the least lovable man of genius; however, in many ways he merits this illustrious title, and we shall give it to him without his asking.

[J’avais examiné alors avec une curiosité craintive, antipathique, mais réelle, ces fleurs de cimetière dont il aime à composer ses bouquets littéraires, et j’avais noté les impressions, assez semblables à un frisson nerveux ou mieux encore à ce frisson moral qui s’appelle pressentiment, que j’avais éprouvées en les respirant et en les contemplant. . . . J’ai ressenti la même curiosité d’esprit, la même antipathie de cœur, les mêmes frissons de l’âme, devant ces
fleurs bizarres dont il n’est aucune qui ne contienne un ver rongeur ou un parfum empoisonné. Seulement, en ressentant pour la seconde fois ces anciennes sensations, je les ai trouvées plus vives, plus âcres, plus pénétrantes. Loin de s’affaiblir après cette seconde lecture, mon estime pour Hawthorne a grandi et s’est fortifiée. Grâce à l’intervalle qui s’est écoulé entre les deux lectures, l’expérience m’a permis de reconnaître pour vrai ce que j’avais presenti, et pour exact ce que j’avais soupçonné. Je n’avais pas trop dit, et je suis contraint d’avouer au contraire que je n’avais pas dit assez. Hawthorne est certainement le moins aimable des hommes de génie; cependant il mérite à beaucoup d’égards ce titre illustre, et nous le lui accordons sans nous faire prier.]

The 1852 back numbers of the Revue were probably shelved within arm’s reach of the 1860 volume that James consulted (at the British Museum or, just as likely, in the private library of the Reform Club), and we know from other sources that he was hungry—even desperate—for material to fulfill his contract with Macmillan. If James took the trouble to track down Hawthorne’s son in the provincial town of Hastings in the winter of 1879 (obviously wanting to “pump” him for the biography of his father), he certainly would have availed himself of resources closer to hand. Montégut’s 1864 memorial essay, though less accessible in periodical form, still might have been available to James, since it was reprinted both independently and as an Introduction to an 1866 translation of Hawthorne’s short stories—volumes that surely would have attracted a cosmopolitan’s attention had he discovered them in the bookstalls along the Seine during either his first grand tour of the continent (1869–70) or his later residence in the French capital. Having procrastinated for months, James finally buckled down to a task all the more “difficult,” as he said, for “the want of material and (as I think) slenderness of the subject.” Appropriately enough, it was in Paris that he finished his manuscript in the first weeks of autumn 1879.

When we think of the impact of nineteenth-century American literature in France, naturally we think of Poe and the heroic welcome extended to him by Charles Baudelaire. Yet everywhere in Montégut’s criticism we find the same telling image: again and again he describes Hawthorne’s tales and stories as flowers of evil—blossoms that are gorgeous in appearance but also possessed of a fragrance that is fatal to inhale. By now we are quite familiar with the French face of Edgar Poe, but we are only just beginning to discern the outline of another American writer whose significance was also appreciated there: the French face of Nathaniel Hawthorne.
Notes


3. Henry James to Frederick Macmillan, 11 Oct. [1878], *The Correspondence of Henry James and the House of Macmillan,* vol. 18. Part of James’s ambivalence may have stemmed from the fact that Macmillan and Morley had first wanted James Russell Lowell to write *Hawthorne* (he declined), but it is unclear whether James was aware of his runner-up status. See John J. Kijinski, “Professionalism, Authority, and the Late-Victorian Man of Letters: A View from the Macmillan Archive,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 24 (1996): 234.


7. Because of the nature of the argument that follows, translations from Montérito will be followed by corresponding passages in his original French.

8. In *Notes of a Son and Brother* James testifies to a remarkably similar reading experience:

   The joy of recognition was to know at the time no lapse—was in fact through the years never to know one, and this by some rare action of a principle or a sentiment, I scarce know whether to call it a clinging consistency or a singular silliness, that placed the Seven Gables, the Blithedale Romance and the story of Donatello and Miriam . . . somewhere on a shelf unvisited by harsh inquiry. (478)


10. See chapter IV, note 6, for Montégut’s misattribution of this allusion.


12. James also suggested that Montégut’s “characteristic fault” was a “tendency to prolixity” (although he immediately qualified this judgment by saying that “this prolixity is so sincere, so suggestive, so charged with information and reflection, that we rarely desire to abridge it”). Henry James, rev. of Souvenirs de Bourgogne by Émile Montégut [1874], in Literary Criticism: French Writers; Other European Writers; The Prefaces to the New York Edition, edited by Leon Edel (New York: Library of America, 1984), 588–89. Most critical assessments in English run directly parallel to James’s. According to Saintsbury, “Montégut’s delicate, intricate reflection and sympathy, especially at the length at which they are given, can hardly, by the most attentive and sensitive of readers, be taken in all at once; there are always gleanings of the grapes, always second mowings of the grass to be made.” J. W. Skinner echoed this in 1923, when he wrote that Montégut’s “retiring personality, the extent of his erudition, the over-shadowing fame of Sainte-Beuve and Taine, his methods of work and publication, all that has helped to relegate him into a puzzling obscurity.” Two generations later, Richard Chadbourne arrived at the same conclusion. It comes as no surprise, then, to hear Wellek say that Montégut “is in danger of being forgotten, not only because his books have not been reprinted and are all only collections of articles that he wrote for the Revue des Deux Mondes, with their accepted prolixity and leisurely approaches, but also because he lacks the strong individuality, either as a theorist or a judge, which alone conveys a name to posterity.” See George Saintsbury, A History of Criticism and Literary Taste in Europe from the Earliest Texts to the Present Day, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: W. Blackwood and Sons, 1902–4), vol. 3, 445; J. W. Skinner, “Some Aspects of Émile Montégut,” Revue de littérature comparée 3 (1923): 283; Richard M. Chadbourne, “The Essay World of Émile Montégut,” PMLA 76.1 (Mar. 1961): 99; and René Wellek, A History of Modern Criticism, 1750–1950, 7 vols. [vol. 4] The Later Nineteenth Century (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1965), 8

13. Henry James, rev. of Souvenirs de Bourgogne [1874], 590.


17. In his earlier 1872 review of Passages from the French and Italian Note-Books, James had already concluded that these volumes (“judged with any real critical rigor”) represented their author “as superficial, uninformed, incurious, inappreciative” (Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature; American Writers; English Writers, 307–8). For descriptive analysis of Sophia Peabody Hawthorne’s editorial scruples, see “Historical Commentary,” in Centenary Edition, vol. VIII, The American Notebooks, edited by Claude M. Simpson,
Professor Randall Stewart spent most of his career promoting critical awareness of the editorial complexity surrounding Hawthorne’s published texts. Besides preparing restored editions of the American and English Notebooks (in 1932 and 1941, respectively), Stewart also investigated the fate of Hawthorne’s manuscripts in the crucial period following the novelist’s death. See, for example, “Editing Hawthorne’s Notebooks: Selections from Mrs. Hawthorne’s Letters to Mr. and Mrs. Fields, 1864–1868,” *More Books, Being the Bulletin of the Boston Public Library* 20 (1945): 299–315.

18. Henry James to the James family, 1 Nov. [1875], *Henry James Letters*, vol. 1, 484.

19. While some scholars have claimed that James also took interesting liberties with Hawthorne’s texts, particularly when he chose to “quote” from the author’s notebooks, such inferences are bibliographically naïve. Willie Tolliver, for example, makes the mistake of assuming that James had available to him the unexpurgated texts of Hawthorne’s notebooks and letters when, in fact, he was faithfully dependent upon the more limited primary sources in print at the time he composed *Hawthorne*. (See *Henry James as a Biographer*, 86–89.) Still, we do know that James did tamper with primary evidence when he compiled other biographical narratives. See, for example, Alfred Habegger, “Henry James’s Rewriting of Minny Temple’s Letters,” *American Literature* 58.2 (May 1986): 159–80.


23. Arvède Barine, “Puritain ou pessimiste,” *Revue bleue* 19 (31 Jul. 1880): 99, 104, 106. In the winter of 1881, James took pleasure in reporting to his family that M. Guillaume Guizot, professor of English literature at the Sorbonne, had greatly admired his critical study. “He had desired much to meet me,” James immodestly reported, owing to a perusal of my little book on Hawthorne, for whom, in his quality of French protestant or “puritan,” he has a great admiration. He was most effusive & fraternizing, repeated whole passages of my book to me, with the most extraordinary accent, &c. He had a phrase which I should have liked my critics to hear: he was speaking of the beauty of Hawthorne’s genius in comparison with the provinciality of his training & circumstances. “Il sortait de toute espèce de petits trous—de Boston, de—comment appelez-vous ça?—de Salem, &c!”


30. Émile Montégut, *Nathaniel Hawthorne* (Paris: J. Laisné, 1866); and *Contes étranges imités d’Hawthorne*, translated by E. A. Spoll, with an Introduction by Émile Montégut (Paris: Librairie contemporaine, 1866). These republish (with slight modifications) the obituary essay that Montégut published in four installments of the *Moniteur universel* in the summer of 1864.
