The French Faces of Nathaniel Hawthorne

Anesko, Michael, Brookes, N. Christine

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I know authors—the number is large—whose prefaces are odious, odious like the I, and perhaps for the same reasons. For others, on the contrary, the preface is worthy of the book, sometimes even more. A preface by Walter Scott, a preface by Charles Nodier—what literary delicacy! Henceforth one must add to these the prefaces by Nathaniel Hawthorne. They have made him known to us and loved above all others; without them we might not have read a single one of his novels or tales.

All the same, America is proud of Nathaniel Hawthorne. He is counted, and counted by many, in that literary phalanx, already numerous, for whom Brockden Brown, Washington Irving, and Fenimore Cooper cleared the path, and who have furnished the contents of a large biographical dictionary, adorned with portraits, compiled by Mr. Rufus Wilmot Griswold. In this imposing volume, where there are so many names crowded together (unknown to us but famous over there), you can look up an entry on Nathaniel Hawthorne, and you will find the elements of a biography like so many we see, where the order of the dates is observed, the catalog of works is complete, the chronology irreproachable. You will learn there that Hawthorne was born in Salem, Massachusetts; that his ancestors were seafarers from father to son for generations; that one of them, “Bold” Hawthorne, was the hero of a ballad composed during the Revolutionary War, and in which his exploits on the *Fair American*—no doubt some frigate—were celebrated.¹
You will also learn that, having graduated in 1825 from Bowdoin College (Maine), Hawthorne found himself there a school companion of the poet Longfellow; that in 1837 and 1842 his first two works came out—the two series of *Twice-told Tales*—published under a French pseudonym of the so-called Monsieur de l'Aubépine;\(^2\) that the romancer was, for a while, part of a Fourierist community, Brook Farm, in West Roxbury; that he lived for the next three years in Concord, the village famous for having been the theater of the first battle when the American Minutemen pushed back General Gage's soldiers;\(^3\) that after this time of retreat, he filled the function of a customs house officer in Boston until Taylor's presidency;\(^4\) that the Whig administration, no longer needing his services, left him to the laborious pleasures of a literary life; and, finally, born around 1807, Nathaniel Hawthorne is about forty-five years old.

This is the series of facts that the conscientious biographer has compiled in his two-columned quarto. If only a very mediocre interest is attached to it, it is not Mr. Rufus Wilmot Griswold's fault. Hawthorne's prefaces, it must be said, add not one salient fact to what we can glean from the entry in *Prose Writers of America*; on the other hand, they reveal to us a charming mind, an exclusive nature.

From these prefaces, we clearly see that Hawthorne belongs to the class of humorists, humorists like Sterne and Lamb, and his books confirm it. Overexcited by solitary habits, inclined to mysticism in forest depths and given to fireside visions, nourished with strange doses of German metaphysics, his imagination has escaped (through its frequent communion with nature) the type of domination that old literatures, like old civilizations, exercise over new civilizations and literatures. (In this he is like that original thinker, [Ralph] Waldo Emerson, whose brilliant essays have awakened both the Old and New Worlds.) It is a strange yoke, this one, from which America will have great pains to free herself. From the beginning, it has been noticeable. Just as the inhabitants of New England, perpetuating the traditions of the old country across the sea, celebrated the New Year with a ceremony that mimicked the procession of the Lord-Mayor in London, so too has Brockden Brown been condemned to copy Godwin, Washington Irving to write like Addison and Mackenzie, Cooper to walk in the steps of Walter Scott. The same is true for the poets. It would be easy to find, for example, the godfathers of Bryant and Longfellow. Students of literary influence could link Emerson to Thomas Carlyle, and Nathaniel Hawthorne to Charles Lamb, the English Nodier. But to our mind, this would be, overstepping the bounds of genealogical criticism. Emerson, with his pantheistic tendencies, his ardent admiration of originality, no more resembles Carlyle...
(imbued with German skepticism and the enthusiasm of denial), than does Hawthorne, so obviously absorbed in the concentrated study of the most ardent moral problems, resemble Lamb. Admittedly, they share certain external qualities—a fondness for analyzing old dramas, reproducing a pastiche of Shakespearean language and archaic forms. For the poor erudite poet, this was a sovereign preoccupation, but for Hawthorne it is secondary. Lamb's great originality was to remind us of the ideals and style of Jeremy Burton or Samuel Pepys—with more wit than either of them, it goes without saying—but with far less conviction.

There is one American storyteller whom we have already had the chance to appreciate and whose relation to Hawthorne seems less doubtful: we are speaking of Edgar Poe. But who would profit from this comparison? It would really be difficult for us to say. Poe's stories possess a fascination, a very special sting, that we can most likely attribute to a deep-seated mental disorder. Even a pearl, so they say, is nothing more than a morbid excrescence of the oyster. Hawthorne, by contrast, is more a master of his own mind, more strongly inspired by studies and thoughts of a higher order, swept away much less frequently by pure caprice or beguiled by vagabond fantasy. Therefore, he reaches his reader much better. He has a gift, a rare one for an egoist, for making himself loveable, and an even rarer gift, for a storyteller, for inspiring a certain respect. With Edgar Poe, we live in an unhealthy place; his work induces the feeling of vertigo. The shock he causes you, which is real, puts you defiantly on guard. His method seems illegitimate; you do not really know if his love potion is just an innocently modified form of alcohol or a poison in disguise, deceptively similar in color and taste. The alchemist, on the other hand, is not so well hidden behind his curtain that you do not see his mocking glance or hear his sardonic laugh. What does it matter that he has intoxicated himself before intoxicating you? Does that excuse suffice to justify your predicament? Do you not harbor some secret remorse—you, a thoughtful man!—for letting yourself be taken in by a taunting and pernicious folly that mocks you when you, too, have fallen into the same trap? By contrast, even in his most fantastic inventions, when he most deftly employs his mysterious power to transform before your very eyes the realities of this world into strange specters and marvelous apparitions, Hawthorne still obeys the wish to make you better by showing you, through appealing allegory, the stern truth. A fairy tale that would otherwise make you sleep standing up is all he needs to make you reflect deeply about some hidden vice in your nature, about some iniquity of human judgment, about some long-lived preconception the root of which philosophical revolutions have exposed to decay. All noble instincts are in him: Christian indulgence and
graciousness, resistance to oppression, a thirst for what is right and truthful in all things, and, to speak like his friend Emerson, “a love of love, a hatred of hate.”

To give evidence of what Hawthorne is saying to us here, we can cite him directly, by reproducing the numerous passages in which he speaks of his youth and the many active, zealous friendships for which he is grateful. From them Hawthorne has received self-knowledge, encouragement, and support. Without them, he would still be unknown: they acted as heralds of his nascent fame, assiduous propagators of a talent that was too delicate and discrete to win for itself the honors of popularity.

If anybody is responsible for my being at this day an author, it is yourself. I know not whence your faith came; but, while we were lads together at a country college,—gathering blue-berries, in study-hours, under those tall academic pines; or watching the great logs, as they tumbled along the current of the Androscoggin; or shooting pigeons and gray squirrels in the woods; or bat-fowling in the summer twilight; or catching trout in that shadowy little stream which, I suppose, is still wandering river-ward through the forest, [—though you and I will never cast a line in it again,—] two idle lads, in short (as we need not fear to acknowledge now), doing a hundred things that the Faculty never heard of, or else it had been the worse for us,—it was your prognostic of your friend’s destiny, that he was to be a writer of fiction.

And a fiction-monger, in due season, he became. But, was there ever such a weary delay in obtaining the slightest recognition from the public, as in my case? I sat down by the wayside of life, like a man under enchantment, and a shrubbery sprung up around me, and the bushes grew to be saplings, and the saplings became trees, until no exit appeared possible, through the entangling depths of my obscurity. And there, perhaps, I should be sitting at this moment, with the moss on the imprisoning tree-trunks, and the yellow leaves of more than a score of autumns piled above me, if it had not been for you.

The discouragement that followed the failure of his literary debut can account, no doubt, for some of the intellectual sparring in which Hawthorne was engaged with his “brothers in harmony” at the Roxbury community. About his Fourierist past, regretfully he says little, and what he says betrays a certain unhappiness. He calls his stay at Brook Farm “a fellowship of toil and impracticable schemes” (SL 25). Happily, these years of trial and error, of worried and contradictory aspirations, would be followed by three more
fulfilling years, the best of his life, three long years full of dreams and the sort of engaged idleness that sits so well with poetic temperaments. Those are the years he spent in the Old Manse, situated at the end of Concord’s bridge. Waldo Emerson, who had lived in the house before him, stayed as his neighbor, and Concord became the center of many a poetic or philosophical pilgrimage of which Hawthorne speaks in his preface to *Mosses from an Old Manse*. The portrait he traces of this old dilapidated abode is worth reproducing in some of its details: they reveal to us how, under its mellow influences and as a site of profound contemplation, it developed this American storyteller’s instincts as a moralist romancer.

More frequently than even the deserted houses of little German villages, the old and sparse dwellings of the New England countryside are haunted by traditional ghosts, and their oak-paneled drawing rooms lend themselves to popular legend. We find in these stories (affectionately told and avidly received) the residue of German superstitions and the background color (if we may put it this way) of those bizarre rhymed chronicles that were the chief literary product of the German Middle Ages. So too, then, did the Old Manse of Concord have its familiar ghost. In a certain corner of the living room, from time to time, one heard a sigh. Sometimes, in the long hallway of the upper floor, the ghost seemed to be turning pieces of paper, as if he were rereading a handwritten sermon. Still, he remained invisible, even though moonbeams abundantly poured through the east window of the haunted hallway.

Not improbably, [writes the romancer], he wished me to edit and publish a selection from a chest full of manuscript discourses that stood in the garret. Once, [while Hillard and other] friends sat talking with us in the twilight, there came a rustling noise as of a minister’s silk gown, sweeping through the very midst of the company, so closely as almost to brush against the chairs. Still, there was nothing visible. A yet stranger business was that of a ghostly servant-maid, who used to be heard in the kitchen at deepest midnight, grinding coffee, cooking, ironing—performing, in short, all kinds of domestic labor—although no traces of anything accomplished could be detected the next morning. Some neglected duty of her servitude, some ill-starched ministerial band, disturbed the poor damsel in her grave and kept her at work without any wages.

(∗ MM 17–18∗)

Of course, these plainly are jokes, but with an accent of good faith that singularly augments their value. Do you want a more realistic description,
a Dutch landscape, worthy of Kuyp or Van de Velde? You will find one a couple pages further on.

We stand now on the river’s brink. It may well be called the Concord—the river of peace and quietness—for it is certainly the most unexcitable and sluggish stream that ever loitered, imperceptibly, towards its eternity, the sea. Positively, I had lived three weeks beside it, before it grew quite clear to my perception which way the current flowed. It never has a vivacious aspect, except when a north-western breeze is vexing its surface, on a sunshiny day. From the incurable indolence of its nature, the stream is happily incapable of becoming the slave of human ingenuity, as is the fate of so many a wild, free mountain-torrent. While all things else are compelled to subserve some useful purpose, it idles its sluggish life away, in lazy liberty, without turning a solitary spindle or affording even waterpower enough to grind the corn that grows upon its banks. The torpor of its movement allows it nowhere a bright pebbly shore, nor so much as a narrow strip of glistening sand, in any part of its course. It slumbers between broad prairies, kissing the long meadow-grass, and bathes the overhanging boughs of elder-bushes and willows, or the roots of elms and ash-trees, and clumps of maples. Flags and rushes grow along its plashy shore; the yellow water-lily spreads its broad, flat leaves on the margin; and the fragrant white pond-lily abounds, generally selecting a position just so far from the river’s brink, that it cannot be grasped, save at the hazard of plunging in.

It is a marvel whence this perfect flower derives its loveliness and perfume, springing, as it does, from the black mud over which the river sleeps, and where lurk the slimy eel, and speckled frog, and the mud turtle, whom continual washing cannot cleanse. It is the very same black mud out of which the yellow lily sucks its obscene life and noisome odor. Thus we see, too, in the world, that some persons assimilate only what is ugly and evil from the same moral circumstances which supply good and beautiful results—the fragrance of celestial flowers—to [the daily life of] others.

(\textit{MM} 6–7)

The Concord River had its historic day, and Hawthorne tells it this way:

\begin{quote}
Come; we have pursued a somewhat devious track, in our walk to the battlefield. Here we are, at the point where the river was crossed by the old bridge, the possession of which was the immediate object of the contest. On the hither side, grow two or three elms, throwing a wide circumference of shade, but which must have been planted at some period within the three-
score years and ten, that have passed since the battle-day. On the farther shore, overhung by a clump of elder-bushes, we discern the stone abutment of the bridge. Looking down into the river, I once discovered some heavy fragments of the timbers, all green with half-a-century’s growth of water-moss; for, during that length of time, the tramp of horses and human footsteps have ceased, along this ancient highway. The stream has here about the breadth of twenty strokes of a swimmer’s arm; a space not too wide, when the bullets were whistling across. Old people, who dwell hereabouts, will point out, the very spots, on the western bank, where our countrymen fell down and died; and, on this side of the river, an obelisk of granite has grown up from the soil that was fertilized with British blood. The monument, not more than twenty feet in height, is such as it befitted the inhabitants of a village to erect, in illustration of a matter of local interest, rather than what was suitable to commemorate an epoch of national history. Still, by the fathers of the village this famous deed was done; and their descendants might rightfully claim the privilege of building a memorial.

A humbler token of the fight, yet a more interesting one than the granite obelisk, may be seen close under the stone-wall which separates the battle-ground from the precincts of the parsonage. It is the grave—marked by a small, moss-grown fragment of stone at the head and another at the foot—the grave of two British soldiers, who were slain in the skirmish, and have ever since slept peacefully where Zechariah Brown and Thomas Davis buried them. Soon was their warfare ended;—a weary night-march from Boston—a rattling volley of musketry across the river;—and then these many years of rest! In the long procession of slain invaders, who passed into eternity from the battle-fields of the Revolution, these two nameless soldiers led the way.

Lowell, the poet, as we were once standing over this grave, told me a tradition in reference to one of the inhabitants below. The story has something deeply impressive, though its circumstances cannot altogether be reconciled with probability. A youth, in the service of the clergyman, happened to be chopping wood, that April morning, at the back door of the Manse; and when the noise of battle rang from side to side of the bridge, he hastened across the intervening field, to see what might be going forward. It is rather strange, by the way, that this lad should have been so diligently at work, when the whole population of town and country were startled out of their customary business, by the advance of the British troops. Be that as it might, the tradition says that the lad now left his task, and hurried to the battle-field, with the axe still in his hand. The British had by this time retreated—the Americans were in pursuit—and the late scene of strife was
thus deserted by both parties. Two soldiers lay on the ground; one was a corpse; but, as the young New-Englander drew nigh, the other Briton raised himself painfully upon his hands and knees, and gave a ghastly stare into his face. The boy—it must have been a nervous impulse, without purpose, without thought[, and betokening a sensitive and impressionable nature, rather than a hardened one]—the boy uplifted his axe, and dealt the wounded soldier a fierce and fatal blow upon the head.

I could wish that the grave might be opened; for I would fain know whether either of the skeleton soldiers have the mark of an axe in his skull. The story comes home to me like truth. Oftentimes, as an intellectual and moral exercise, I have sought to follow that poor youth through his subsequent career, and observe how his soul was tortured by the blood-stain, contracted, as it had been, before the long custom of war had robbed human life of its sanctity, and while it still seemed murderous to slay a brother man. This one circumstance has borne more fruit for me, than all that history tells us of the fight.

(\textit{MM} 8–10)

The same human feeling, philanthropic sentiment, and fraternal instinct that are revealed in these last lines we find again, and no less amiably or sympathetically, in another passage of Hawthorne’s writings where he recounts his administrative misadventures. The romancer was obliged, we know, to leave his peaceable retreat in Concord and go to Boston to perform the duties of a custom house inspector. After having spent three years in his administrative career, he was brusquely removed from office when the Whigs came to power.\textsuperscript{9} Even though he was linked to the Democratic Party by his antecedents and his affinities, Hawthorne nevertheless carefully kept out of his writings anything that might have appeared as a direct attack on an administration that did little to accommodate him. In one of his prefaces, he mentions the fact, and you shall see if it is with bitterness:

\textit{[To confess the truth,] it was my greatest apprehension,—as it would never be a measure of policy to turn out so quiet an individual as myself; and it being hardly in the nature of a public officer to resign,—it was my chief trouble, therefore, that I was likely to grow grey and decrepit in the Surveyorship, and become much such another animal as the old Inspector. Might it not, in the tedious lapse of official life that lay before me, finally be with me as it was with this venerable friend,—to make the dinner-hour the nucleus of the day, and to spend the rest of it, as an old dog spends it, asleep in the sunshine or in the shade? A dreary look-forward, this, for a man who felt}
it to be the best definition of happiness to live throughout the whole range of his faculties and sensibilities! But, all this while, I was giving myself very unnecessary alarm. Providence had meditated better things for me than I could possibly imagine for myself.

A remarkable event of the third year of my Surveyorship[—to adopt the tone of “P.P.”—] was the election of General Taylor to the Presidency. It is essential, in order to form a complete estimate of the advantages of official life, to view the incumbent at the in-coming of a hostile administration. His position is then one of the most singularly irksome, and, in every contingency, disagreeable, that a wretched mortal can possibly occupy; with seldom an alternative of good, on either hand, although what presents itself to him as the worst event may very probably be the best. But it is a strange experience, to a man of pride and sensibility, to know that his interests are within the control of individuals who neither love nor understand him, and by whom, since one or the other must needs happen, he would rather be injured than obliged. Strange, too, for one who has kept his calmness throughout the contest, to observe the bloodthirstiness that is developed in the hour of triumph, and to be conscious that he is himself among its objects! There are few uglier traits of human nature than this tendency—which I now witnessed in men no worse than their neighbours—to grow cruel, merely because they possessed the power of inflicting harm. If the guillotine, as applied to office-holders, were a literal fact, instead of one of the most apt of metaphors, it is my sincere belief, that the active members of the victorious party were sufficiently excited to have chopped off all our heads, and have thanked Heaven for the opportunity! It appears to me—who have been a calm and curious observer, as well in victory as defeat—that this fierce and bitter spirit of malice and revenge has never distinguished the many triumphs of my own party as it now did that of the Whigs. The Democrats take the offices, as a general rule, because they need them, and because the practice of many years has made it the law of political warfare, which, unless a different system be proclaimed, it were weakness and cowardice to murmur at. But the long habit of victory has made them generous. They know how to spare, when they see occasion; and when they strike, the axe may be sharp, indeed, but its edge is seldom poisoned with ill-will; nor is it their custom ignominiously to kick the head which they have just struck off.

In short, unpleasant as was my predicament, at best, I saw much reason to congratulate myself that I was on the losing side, rather than the triumphant one. If, heretofore, I had been none of the warmest of partisans, I began now, at this season of peril and adversity, to be pretty acutely sensible
with which party my predilections lay; nor was it without something like regret and shame, that, according to a reasonable calculation of chances, I saw my own prospect of retaining office to be better than those of my Democratic brethren. But who can see an inch into futurity, beyond his nose? My own head was the first that fell!

The moment when a man’s head drops off is seldom or never, I am inclined to think, precisely the most agreeable of his life. Nevertheless, like the greater part of our misfortunes, even so serious a contingency brings its remedy and consolation with it, if the sufferer will but make the best, rather than the worst, of the accident which has befallen him.

These lines, whose value lies in their ability to throw a relatively new light on one aspect of political life in the United States, at the same time give a very accurate idea of the writer who traced them, of his unshakeable good-nature, of his philosophical moderation (allied nevertheless to deep-seated conviction), of that nobility of soul that we always want to believe is a privilege of intellectual superiority. This is the man of wit and of heart whom circumstances have pushed into the sad melee of material interests and political infighting. To this arena he brought his calm, his reason, his habitual generosity. No crazed inebriation or cruel instinct made him deviate from this. In his humble sphere, vested with a certain power, he exercised it with infinite circumspection, a rare indulgence. More than once he regretted the independence of his hours and his thoughts. He feared becoming accustomed to the daily grind and succumbing to the deleterious influence of complacent security (the price of a routine job). His enemies win out and strike him, poor unknown soldier, in the obscurity that was supposed to save him. Well! With the classic grace of an immolated gladiator, he falls as a man of heart, still with a smile on his lips, lamenting these fevered aggressors more than he laments himself. How can one deny him sympathy and respect?

American newspapers raised a cry about his brutal dismissal. Hawthorne, who knew the press, and who never courted that noisy accomplice of false reputations, did not thank them very warmly for it:

Meanwhile, the press had taken up my affair, and kept me, for a week or two careering through the public prints, in my decapitated state, like Irving’s Headless Horseman; ghastly and grim, and longing to be buried, as a political dead man ought. So much for my figurative self. The real human being all this time, with his head safely on his shoulders, had brought himself to
the comfortable conclusion that everything was for the best; and, making
an investment in ink, paper, and steel pens, had opened his long-disused
writing desk, and was again a literary man.

(SL 42–43)

If we listen carefully to this little lecture, we can discover not only the
intimate details of a dreamy existence, but also, and more significantly, the
process of deliberate and untroubled thought, of serene and profound obser-
vation, that a love of solitude, innate good taste, the study and practice of a
largely speculative philosophy, and frequent commerce with metaphysicians
and poets, has gradually nurtured and matured. Hawthorne does not tell
tales to tell tales, but rather to give material form to useful ideas, to popu-
larize them, to make them sink in to distracted or rebellious minds. His
stories have all the attractive form and interest of the well-made tale. Yet dig,
and you arrive at an apologue, a figurative reality, a symbolic drama, filled
with teachings but also saturated with emotion. Hawthorne is a preacher to
suit our frivolous temperaments, our limited spans of attention, our futile
preoccupations, our aversion to serious things. He does not stand in the
pulpit with an austere exterior or stiff-necked severity: to the contrary, his
insinuating, pleasant, occasionally sarcastic chatter, his inoffensive and cau-
tious taunting, his great gift for picturesque expression, his art of awaken-
ing curiosity and keeping it out of breath—all these combine supremely to
disturb the imagination, to wrest it from its daily habits, to make it fly its
highest flight, to take it to the land of chimeras.

That Hawthorne wrote these strange tales for children might be cause
for alarm, considering the formidable power of his style, yet we know of no
allegory to equal his “Snow-Image.” One glacial afternoon, two beautiful
children, Peony and Violet, leave their mother’s hearth (bundled up with
gloves and scarves) to play in the garden—a small merchant’s garden, sepa-
rated from the street by a white fence and dotted with bare shrubs, newly
blanketed with snow. Their mother, seated at the window, has her eye on
them while she carefully sews new clothes for her dear children. Left to
themselves and eager for diversion, what do they imagine? Violet suggests
to her brother that he work with her to create a beautiful little sister made
of snow. Peony accepts. He brings the materials, and little by little Violet
marks out the contours of the statue. A formless mound at first, the snow-
image is gradually refined by the agile hands of these improvised sculptors,
and their mother—completely surprised, but delighted to no end to see their
success thus far—commends herself inwardly for having recognized in them
such remarkable artistic talents. Not able otherwise to explain the beauty
of the image crafted by their hands, she wonders if, by chance, Peony’s and Violet’s guardian angels have not come down from on high to frolic with them, invisible accomplices and collaborators. The image grows more and more complete. A fistful of snow, thrown as if by chance, gives its hair the last chiseling. Two small blocks of ice sparkle in its open eyes. Before long, the children themselves, delighted with their work, loudly call their mother, who wants to humor them by admiring their creation of a new order. To her own surprise, however (and momentarily blinded by the setting sun whose dazzling rays glance from the statue), she truly believes that she sees a blonde-haired girl, with sparkling eyes, fallen from heaven in the middle of the garden. The children’s illusion is even stronger. They have a sister, a sister who is going to live, whose eyes are alight with the fire of the West, whose slightly pale cheeks and almost purple lips will be warmed by their kisses.

The miracle is accomplished; the little image comes to life (as Galatea did once upon a time). Excellent Mistress Lindsey, Violet’s and Peony’s mother, comes to ask herself what thoughtless neighbor let such a charming child outside during an arctic chill, clad in nothing more than a simple white dress. She is surprised as well to see her children’s new friend running and jumping, but never saying a word. Just as astonishing, a flock of birds swoops down familiarly, lighting on the neck, arms, and shoulders of the new companion Violet has created for herself. While the mother does not know what to do, think, or make of all this, her husband appears at the garden gate.

Mr. Lindsey is a hardware merchant, brusque and benevolent, going straight to the facts on every occasion, knowing and valuing only one thing in the world: good sense, common sense. The presence of this little white stranger in his garden at this hour, in such light dress, greatly perplexes him. His perplexity, so natural, is only augmented when his excellent wife tries to persuade him that she saw, with her own eyes, the miraculous transformation of the snow-image into an agile and playful child. Still, she dares only tell him this as a secret and as a joke. The children affirm it more seriously, but the stolid bourgeois (why should we be surprised?) persists in his unbelief. In his opinion, the child cannot stay outside; she will get sick with so little protection against the cold. She must come inside as quickly as possible; they must go from house to house asking to whom she belongs; she must be announced to the town.

Violet and Peony, nevertheless, in their childlike wisdom, oppose this unsound charity. Their little snow sister does not like fire. One must be careful not to make her come near the stove. Bah! The man of common sense
has already grabbed the little stranger by the hand, even though she protests, even though she escapes from him, even though he is forced to run after this white sylph, who drifts like one of those swirls of crystalline flakes that the wind forms on new-fallen snow. The obstinate Lindsey catches up to her, corners her against a wall, and grabs hold of her, in spite of her protests, in spite of his wife’s charitable warnings, in spite Violet’s pleas, in spite of Peony’s anger. The snow child must be cold; she must go inside and stand next to the coal stove that gives off almost tropical heat. Alas! In front of this magnificent contraption, the industry’s work of art filled with glowing anthracite, the little white girl, far from warming up, droops, staggers, and sinks. However, as this seems to him to be contrary to the laws of nature, the man of good sense pays no heed. His work is not yet finished. He promised himself to find the family of this young stranger and to chide the mother who let her stray without a shawl or a coat. Fearing that his family will spoil his good intentions, he leaves on his errand, taking the key to the room, which is now transformed into a hothouse. When he returns after a fruitless search, we easily surmise that he finds no trace of the pallid girl he has “saved.” Yet no: all that remains of her, in front of the red, gaping mouth of the splendid coal stove (of Belgian manufacture) is a puddle of water spread out on the floor. The children cry for their little sister with frozen hands; Mistress Lindsey is saddened by their desperation, which she understands, and by this involuntary assassination to which she would never have been a willing accomplice. As for Mr. Lindsey, he is shocked, genuinely shocked; but he remains convinced that he was doing his duty not to leave a little girl out in the cold, even if she were made of snow: she would catch her death! The moral of the story is lost upon him. Let it not be so for us. It must teach all men, but in particular certain so-called friends of man, that, prior to yielding to their philanthropic impulses, they must be sure, completely sure, that they understand fully the nature of the beings whose betterment they pursue and their relationships of all kinds with the general order of humanity. For what might seem to be very good and salutary—robust heat, for example, from a Belgian stove—can, in a particular case, serve no end or even become instead something very harmful—especially if it involves, as in Hawthorne’s tale, a snow child.

But, after all, there is no teaching anything to wise men of good Mr. Lindsey’s stamp. They know everything—oh, to be sure!—everything that has been, and everything that is, and everything that, by any future possibility, can be. And, should some phenomenon of nature or providence transcend their system, they will not recognize it, even if it comes to pass under their very noses.
“Wife,” said Mr. Lindsey, after a fit of silence, “see what a quantity of snow the children have brought in on their feet! It has made quite a puddle here before the stove. Pray tell Dora to bring some towels and sop it up!”

This lovely tale appears at the head of a collection that should not be considered merely as juvenile literature. We find here the little story of Silvia Etheredge (who falls in love with a miniature, and dies when she has to marry the original of this deceitful portrait) and that of Ethan Brand, who searches the world over for the Unpardonable Sin. This search prodigiously develops his intelligence, but it atrophies and hardens his heart. He no longer belongs to humanity; he has isolated himself from the magnetic chain that ties together the innumerable beings placed here below to live a common life. At last, having abused his overpowering influence by forcing others to submit to his psychological experiments like so many inert elements (men are perverted by him, women become his toys), Ethan finds the Unpardonable Sin, the one that God himself, in his infinite mercy, will never punish. Universal hate shadows him, and, despite the pride he feels in his rare discovery, he grows weary of himself and throws himself into a lime kiln whose fire he has promised to stoke. This prosaic suicide is very peculiarly underscored by the vividness of description, the verisimilitude of the rural setting, the energy of the details. The night when he takes his life is stormy and loud. Strange laughter troubles the sleep of the poor lime-burner whose place at the kiln Ethan Brand has coveted. But morning comes, radiant and pure. The honest Bertram and his son Joe leave their little cottage together and happily take the path to the marble-sided mountain, its peaks gilded by the rising sun. As they near the kiln, little Joe exclaims,

“Dear father,” cried he, skipping cheerily to and fro, “that strange man is gone, and the sky and the mountains all seem glad of it!”

“Yes,” growled the lime-burner, with an oath, “but he has let the fire go down, and no thanks to him if five hundred bushels of lime are not spoilt. If I catch the fellow hereabouts again, I shall feel like tossing him into the furnace!”

With his long pole in his hand, he ascended to the top of the kiln. After a moment’s pause, he called to his son.

“Come up here, Joe!” said he.

So little Joe ran up the hillock, and stood by his father’s side. The marble was all burnt into perfect, snow-white lime. But on its surface, in the midst of the circle—snow-white too, and thoroughly converted into lime—lay a
human skeleton, in the attitude of a person who, after long toil, lies down to long repose. Within the ribs—strange to say—was the shape of a human heart.

“Was the fellow’s heart made of marble?” cried Bartram, in some perplexity at this phenomenon. “At any rate, it is burnt into what looks like special good lime; and, taking all the bones together, my kiln is half a bushel the richer for him.”

So saying, the rude lime-burner lifted his pole, and, letting it fall upon the skeleton, the relics of Ethan Brand were crumbled into fragments.

Here, as before, as in twenty other tales of Hawthorne that we could choose at random, allegory is flagrant. It is better disguised in his two long-winded novels, *The House of the Seven Gables* and *The Scarlet Letter*, but it is there all the same but does not worry about being recognized. Hawthorne is not at all a convert to the doctrines of art for art’s sake (which often means art for the artists)—far from it! He moralizes without a mask. As he tells us himself, he is a democrat, an incorrigible democrat. Even destitution has not cured him. So we are not surprised to encounter in his tales a good number of local legends that relate to the revolutionary history of Massachusetts. In the annals of New England, there is a whole gallery of Rembrandt-like portraits—grave Puritans dressed in black, with high ruffled collars and pointed, wide-brimmed hats—that exercise an irresistible attraction on the novelist. In this collection of indigenous art, we see representations of elected governors, who, with the blessing of the Crown, assiduously worked to maintain and to extend the rights and privileges of the American colonists. One might think oneself among the Flemish and Dutch bürgermeisters, whose stubborn resistance blunted the Spanish executioners and irritated the omnipotence of Louis XIV. Hawthorne loves these old Puritans, and their names, unknown in France, recur on every page of his tales. He even has a whole historical series (*Legends of the Province House*) where, one by one, he evokes, so to speak, the ancestors of democracy in New England: Endicott, Winthrop, Vane, Bellingham, Bradstreet. Opposing them, he always places the agents and accomplices of English tyranny, as if to revive the popular execration to which the latter were subjected: the Androses, the Bellamonts, the dignified predecessors of the Gages and the Howes. Among these appears Edward Randolph, whose abhorred memory still lives in Massachusetts: Edward Randolph, who drank the bitter cup of unpopularity to the dregs; Edward Randolph, guilty of having secured the retraction of the first charter under which the province enjoyed more or less democratic privileges. The name,
the descendants, the tomb, even the portrait of Randolph are still chased by popular anathema. Liberated from the yoke, the following generations keep an immortal rancor for whoever wanted to subjugate them ages ago, and it flatters them in their lively hatred to repeat the traditional malediction against departed tyrants. Such a singular temperament, the American temperament! We can better understand how these uncouth citizens have remained free, though we should refrain from asking how they might cease being so. Their obtuse and rigid nature has not learned, as ours has, how to bend to circumstances and to accept what has passed.

Apart from the political, there is also a moral and philosophical dimension in Hawthorne’s tales, no less deserving our interest. Orthodox religions, their rites, their formulas, their strict rules do not at all comport with his independent nature. Instead, the democratic romancer willingly sees them as accomplices of political tyranny. This is the dominant idea of one of his tales, “Endicott and the Red Cross.” Hawthorne resists their austere dogmas, that only stifle legitimate desires and the necessary growth of our moral nature. This latter point of view is the basis for the short story “The Shaker Bridal,” a tale that seems worthy of rapid analysis.

Father Ephraim, president of the elders, the Goshen Shakers’ spiritual and temporal director, has been ill for some time and now senses death approaching. He summons the leading men of the group, who respond to him from Lebanon, Canterbury, Harvard, Alfred, and twenty other districts fertilized by the work of these rigid pioneers. They take part in the crude ceremonies dictated by this encounter, emptying many a jug of Shaker cider (that enjoys such a widespread reputation) and joining together in sacred dances, each step of which, separates their enthusiasts from worldly things and transports them towards supernal regions of purity and eternal bliss. The time has come for Father Ephraim to relinquish the most worthy symbol of his authority, the patriarchal staff that he has bravely carried for forty years, but which soon will leave his failing hands. Before him, in his sick chair, stand a man and woman, who have been called to appear. Ephraim engages the elders, his colleagues, to study their faces, to unravel (with the keen perspicacity characteristic of the sect) the good and bad sides of their nature, because it is to this man, to this woman that he wants to yield the authority invested in him. It is they whom the inner spirit has singled out. By any chance, could his choice be mistaken?

The man, Adam Colburn, is in the prime of manhood. His tan face carries the imprint of rustic work—long worries have carved ineffaceable traces. His face is cold and severe, his attitude imposing and rigid. At first glance, one is tempted to take him for a schoolmaster; and, so it is: he has
practiced that profession for a long time. The woman, Martha Pierson, has just reached her thirtieth year. She is thin and pale (as are all sisters of Shaker communities), and her white clothing, reminiscent of the folds of a shroud, contributes to her cadaverous air.

Even so, some elders, with a suspicious look, insinuate that the autumn frost has not yet whitened the heads of brother Adam and sister Martha. They fear the return of juvenile ardor that the couple felt for one another in years gone by, because they know that long ago the two had expressed their carnal desires. Indeed, raised next to one another and arriving at adolescence together, Adam and Martha were to have been united as soon as their ages permitted this union, a marriage much desired by their families. But, just when they were going to crown their long and pure loves, disasters of fortune obstructed the realization of their vows. Martha, as it happens, has already resigned herself to a poverty that the affection of her spouse would have rendered light. But Adam, more calm and prudent, even at that age when one seldom calculates, thinks he can afford to wait. He travels far, he works, he tries different trades, he learns about the world and life. Martha, for her part, is a seamstress, a nurse, a school mistress, barely earning her keep, always waiting for her fiancé to return. Months follow months, years follow years, but fortune does not soften the first hardships; still, the two young people do not forget their sworn faith. Each of them could have profited from a marriage of convenience, but they only want happiness and wealth on the condition that they share them with one another.

Adam is the first to grow weary of such a long wait. A kind of despair grabs hold of him. He comes to find Martha, and suggests that they find refuge in a community of Shakers. Unhappiness pushes as many proselytes as fanaticism into that sect, and the doors of its society open without any inquiry about the motivations of those who knock there. Martha had sworn to follow the fiancé of her youth wherever he went. She faithfully keeps her word. Over time, each of them, in that community where intelligence is rarer than zeal, comes to be noticed: Adam for his aptitude for managing the temporal affairs of the community, Martha for fulfilling the duties proper to her sex.

These are the successors Ephraim has chosen. The moribund old man wants to entrust them with the direction of the community. He wants Adam to become the Father and Martha the Mother of the Goshen Shakers.

“Son Adam, and daughter Martha,” said the venerable Father Ephraim, fixing his aged eyes piercingly upon them, “if ye can conscientiously undertake this charge, speak, that the brethren may not doubt of your fitness.”
“Father,” replied Adam, speaking with the calmness of his character, “I came to your village a disappointed man, weary of the world, worn out with continual trouble, seeking only a security against evil fortune, as I had no hope of good. Even my wishes of worldly success were almost dead within me. I came hither as a man might come to a tomb, willing to lie down in its gloom and coldness, for the sake of its peace and quiet. There was but one earthly affection in my breast, and it had grown calmer since my youth; so that I was satisfied to bring Martha to be my sister, in our new abode. We are brother and sister; nor would I have it otherwise. And in this peaceful village I have found all that I hoped for,—all that I desire. I will strive, with my best strength, for the spiritual and temporal good of our community. My conscience is not doubtful in this matter. I am ready to receive the trust.”

“Thou hast spoken well, son Adam,” said the Father. “God will bless thee in the office which I am about to resign.”

“But our sister!” observed the elder [from Harvard], “hath she not likewise a gift to declare her sentiments?”

Martha started, and moved her lips, as if she would have made a formal reply to this appeal. But, had she attempted it, perhaps the old recollections, the long-repressed feelings of childhood, youth, and womanhood, might have gushed from her heart, in words that it would have been profanation to utter there.

“Adam has spoken,” said she hurriedly; “his sentiments are likewise mine.”

But while speaking these few words, Martha grew so pale that she looked fitter to be laid in her coffin than to stand in the presence of Father Ephraim and the elders; she shuddered, also, as if there were something awful or horrible in her situation and destiny. It required, indeed, a more than feminine strength of nerve, to sustain the fixed observance of men so exalted and famous throughout the sect as these were. They had overcome their natural sympathy with human frailties and affections. One, when he joined the Society, had brought with him his wife and children, but never, from that hour, had spoken a fond word to the former, or taken his best-loved child upon his knee. Another, whose family refused to follow him, had been enabled—such was his gift of holy fortitude—to leave them to the mercy of the world. The youngest of the elders, a man of about fifty, had been bred from infancy in a Shaker village, and was said never to have clasped a woman's hand in his own, and to have no conception of a closer tie than the cold fraternal one of the sect. Old Father Ephraim was the most awful character of all. In his youth he had been a dissolute libertine, but was converted by Mother Ann herself;[11] and had partaken of the wild fanaticism
of the early Shakers. Tradition whispered, at the firesides of the village, that Mother Ann had been compelled to sear his heart of flesh with a red-hot iron before it could be purified from earthly passions.

However that might be, poor Martha had a woman's heart, and a tender one, and it quailed within her, as she looked round at those strange old men, and from them to the calm features of Adam Colburn. But perceiving that the elders eyed her doubtfully, she gasped for breath, and again spoke.

“With what strength is left me by my many troubles,” said she, “I am ready to undertake this charge, and to do my best in it.”

“My children, join your hands,” said Father Ephraim.

They did so. The elders stood up around, and the Father feebly raised himself to a more erect position, but continued sitting in his great chair.

“I have bidden you to join your hands,” said he, “not in earthly affection, for ye have cast off its chains forever; but as brother and sister in spiritual love, and helpers of one another in your allotted task. Teach unto others the faith which ye have received. Open wide your gates,—I deliver you the keys thereof,—open them wide to all who will give up the iniquities of the world, and come hither to lead lives of purity and peace. Receive the weary ones, who have known the vanity of earth,—receive the little children, that they may never learn that miserable lesson. And a blessing be upon your labors; so that the time may hasten on, when the mission of Mother Ann shall have wrought its full effect,—when children shall no more be born and die, and the last survivor of mortal race, some old and weary man like me, shall see the sun go down, nevermore to rise on a world of sin and sorrow!”

The aged Father sank back exhausted, and the surrounding elders deemed, with good reason, that the hour was come when the new heads of the village must enter on their patriarchal duties. In their attention to Father Ephraim, their eyes were turned from Martha Pierson, who grew paler and paler, unnoticed even by Adam Colburn. He, indeed, had withdrawn his hand from hers, and folded his arms with a sense of satisfied ambition. But paler and paler grew Martha by his side, till, like a corpse in its burial clothes, she sank down at the feet of her early lover; for, after many trials firmly borne, her heart could endure the weight of its desolate agony no longer.

(TTT 422–25)

In this simplest of scenes (the outline of which we have sought here to trace) can we not find the noble hallmarks of austere poetry, a fairly high moral ideal and a beautiful and serene structure, not to mention the philosophical idea (in no way vulgar) that these elements express? A similar idea, but even more daring, governs one of Hawthorne's most important com-
positions, the novel entitled *The Scarlet Letter*. Most fanciful in design, but utterly serious in content, this story touches the very heart of the problem of marriage, and treats this theme with a freedom seldom encountered among other Anglo-American writers. The immense popularity of this book across the Atlantic and with cousins across the Channel has made it a true literary phenomenon, a sign of the times. Anathemas recently hurled against *Lélia* by the chorus of British reviews and magazines did not prepare us in the least for understanding how a novel—a saucy one at that, much more so even than that of George Sand—miraculously could receive such a different welcome, win so much acclaim, encounter so few detractors. It is true that if anyone has the right to change its mind, it is the public. *Flat spiritus ubi vult*—“the spirit moves where it wishes.” Like the wind, its opinion is ever-shifting but all-powerful: its inconsistency is the privilege of its infallibility.

Besides *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne can count only one other full-length novel among his various works. *The House of Seven Gables* is, in our opinion, if not the best work of the American novelist, then at the very least the one in which he makes the best use of what constitutes his particular originality: the gift of acting powerfully, by the force of his own imagination, upon the imagination of his readers. The story he tells rehearses a time-worn theme: the chronicle of two warring families. There is a lost document the possession of which will guarantee an immense fortune. There is a hereditary fatality that pits four or five generations of these two clans against each other. There is a house peopled with tragic memories. There is an old portrait recessed in ancient paneling that a bizarre will has fixed there forever. This portrait happens to be involved in the plot, where it plays the role reserved for ghosts before the invention of oil painting. It hides the long-lost document. It holds in suspense and then unravels the chain of events. In short, here are all the hackneyed elements of the kind of ghost story that Walter Scott, Lewis, Radcliffe, and Washington Irving (not to mention Maturin, Hoffmann and many others) have made familiar. But if the basis of the story is outdated, Hawthorne nevertheless displays unquestionable talent in the choice of dim colors, of mysterious harmonies, of half-seen forms, of strange intuitions that have allowed him to give new vigor to this over-worked theme, to embellish it with new figures, and to give the prosaic details of contemporary life the poetic coloring of the past.

At the beginning of the book, the intelligent reader is soon made aware that he should not look for more than what can be found; he should not look for originality of plot, but rather for an irresistible charm of detail and an acute sensitivity to the relationship between the outer world and the
inner one that lives in each of us. From that moment on, he will surrender to the powerful influence of a meticulously and intelligently finished work of art. He will admire, in the gradually increasing intensity of effects, so sparingly felt at the beginning, a sustained progression. He will sense how much the contrast of the rather ironical forms of the modern novelist adds to the fantastic effects with which he is gradually surrounded. Most of all, he will recognize the mastery of an author whose characters are true discoveries, native-born and drawn with such sharply delineated individuality that they appear in the world of fiction for the first time. He will see this in the character of Hepzibah Pyncheon, the old spinster with an aristocratic lineage, whom poverty reduces to opening a cent-shop, and whose moral sufferings, in the midst of this decline, awaken, as much as the most poignant tragedy, our melancholy sympathies. He will recognize this, too, in the analysis of a strange form of madness that afflicts Hepzibah’s brother, born with all the instincts of highly refined sensibility, and whose youth, as a result of infernal scheming, has wasted away in a dungeon (where in truth he has lost his reason). He will recognize this above all in the delicacy of execution and perfection of finish that Hawthorne combines with a rare breadth of composition and an astonishing liberty in the disposition of groups, light and color. His philosophical and poetic instincts (for, incontestably, he is both a philosopher and a poet) are always sufficiently predominant to keep him at a certain height, and safeguard him from the trivial details and futile prolixity of the modern novel.

Hawthorne himself has described his tales with a modesty both overstated and rare:

They have the pale tint of flowers that blossomed in too retired a shade—the coolness of a meditative habit, which diffuses itself through the feeling and observation of every sketch. Instead of passion, there is sentiment; and, even in what purport to be pictures of actual life, we have allegory, not always so warmly dressed in its habiliments of flesh and blood, as to be taken into the reader’s mind without a shiver. Whether from lack of power, or an unconquerable reserve, the Author’s touches have often an effect of tameness; the merriest man can hardly contrive to laugh at his broadest humor; the tenderest woman, one would suppose, will hardly shed warm tears at his deepest pathos. The book, if you would see anything in it, requires to be read in the clear, brown, twilight atmosphere in which it was written; if opened in the sunshine, it is apt to look exceedingly like a volume of blank pages.

(FFF 5)
After this honest criticism of his own works, he recognizes a merit that they indeed have: a clarity which, given their origins and the solitude in which they were conceived, might have been absent. Making no pretense to profundity, Hawthorne does not risk being misunderstood: he is mysterious without being obscure; his thinking veils, but does not undress itself. Justifiably, he says his tales “are not the talk of a secluded man with his own mind and heart, (had it been so, they could hardly have failed to be more deeply and permanently valuable,) but his attempts, and very imperfectly successful ones, to open an intercourse with the world” (*TTT* 6).

We have arrived at the decisive feature of the literary physiognomy we have been trying to reproduce just as we have seen it: Hawthorne is a dreamer and an observer. His moral nature is reflective, meditative, generalizing; his physical impressions are lively, and he places great importance upon the minute particulars of incidents that befall his characters, the scenes they cross, and the individuals they meet or with whom life puts them into contact. His imagination avidly takes possession of situations that no one else perceives; it assimilates them and gives them a moral dimension; he alone can claim the honor or the responsibility for comprehending their philosophical reach. In understanding these situations, his mind transforms them, bends them to its needs. As Hawthorne has said, it furnishes them with “habiliments of flesh and blood,” without which certain abstract ideas and theorems cannot do when a solitary man wishes to impart them to the world. And from this combination (sometimes happy and sometimes sad) have come stories (more or less interesting) that replicate the duality that produced them—they are half dreamt and half real, true chimeras joining a lion’s chest and mane to a goat’s torso.

While out for an evening stroll, you have seen passing by in her coach a beautiful, young woman, slightly disfigured by a birthmark—a microscopic imprint of a bloody hand, barely visible on her sweet, rosy cheek. To all appearances it would seem a trifle, and yet you become fixated by it. In a country like America, where individual liberty is practiced as widely as possible and where eccentricity is given free rein, you hear of a priest, a minister of God, who suddenly appeared in front of his congregation dressed in a black veil, and that he has vowed never to remove this veil, even after his death, even in his casket. You have heard tell about such strange things, and after the moment passes, you do not attach great importance to them. Finally, you might read in a newspaper that an upstanding married bourgeois, weary of family life, suddenly quits his home, and, under a false name, disguising his face as best he can, prefers to live on a different street in the same city after his disappearance. Meanwhile, his wife thinks herself a widow, but stays true
to him; and he, too, despite his strangely recovered liberty, never abuses her by forming other bonds. Twenty years pass in this manner, and, at the end of this interval, one beautiful evening, this peculiar man comes back home as if he were at the end of a stroll, and takes possession once more of his household. At the most, this new Belphégor would make you think of the quaint tale of La Fontaine.

With Hawthorne, nothing goes away quickly, and that is the subject of three of his most interesting tales. In the first (“The Birth-Mark”), he tries to symbolize the egoism of science in contrast to the devotion of love. The “marked” woman has as a husband a chemist, or rather an alchemist, who is used to struggling with nature’s caprices. The ecstasies of matrimony having subsided, he begins to hate the mark that disturbs the perfect harmony of his wife’s features. At first this feeling betrays itself unawares in his demeanor, but before long he no longer has scruples about expressing it aloud, which throws his unfortunate companion into a sort of desperation. In order to erase this odious mark that alienates her from her husband’s affections, she is willing to suffer all, to risk all. For his part, he believes that by pushing beyond the frontiers of known science, he will discover the means to get rid of the stigma, the sight of which obsesses him. Before this terrible combat that the chemist wages against God himself, we stand in attendance. We anticipate a resolution that will be fatal to someone. At last, the noble and courageous wife perishes in this ultimate ordeal, without lamenting life too much, willingly surrendering herself, a devoted victim, to the insatiable curiosity of the savant. Almost happy to die if she does not achieve the perfection he wishes to give her, she leaves him without reproach, regretting only the happiness she might have been able to give him, if, with more genuine wisdom, he would have been content to accept her, a veritable angel of heaven, with that indelible mark of terrestrial origin.

The story of the “Minister’s Black Veil” is yet another veritable parable. A note tells us that the tale is based on a true fact, that during the last years of the eighteenth century, a man of the cloth in New England, having accidentally killed one of his dearest friends, hid his face from all human view, and persisted in his bizarre resolution until his death. Hawthorne gives an altogether different meaning to this stubbornly-worn black veil. Mr. Hooper, the protagonist, has killed no one, and no one among his parishioners, frightened by this strange decision, can figure out his motivation. Their conjectures, their suspicions, the malaise that their minister throws upon them, the horror and the fear he ends up inspiring in them, the type of repulsion that the worthy minister himself feels over the long run for the sinister barrier he has thrown up between himself and the world; the tentative desperation that
his poor, alarmed, intended wife risks to penetrate this mystery; the terror that she feels when she sees Mr. Hooper determined to wear the fatal crepe to the tomb; the separation of the two lovers, brought on only by the reason of conjugal incompatibility; the isolation that gradually surrounds the unfortunate minister, and, at the same time, the terrible prestige he owes to his black veil; the power of conversion that this black funereal mask gives him; at last, after a long and praiseworthy existence, his agony, his death—still veiled—form a very surprising, very riveting story, whose strange fascination Hoffmann would envy. We discover the knot of the enigma in the last words of the dying minister, when one of his brethren commands him to reveal the horrendous crime for which he has mourned his entire life.

"Why do you tremble at me alone?" cried he, turning his veiled face round the circle of pale spectators. "Tremble also at each other! Have men avoided me, and women shown no pity, and children screamed and fled, only for my black veil? What, but the mystery which it obscurely typifies, has made this piece of crape so awful? When the friend shows his inmost heart to his friend; the lover to his best beloved; when man does not vainly shrink from the eye of his Creator, loathsome treasuring up the secret of his sin; then deem me a monster, for the symbol beneath which I have lived, and die! I look around me, and, lo! on every visage a Black Veil!"

(otts 52)

We now turn to the curious escapade of the honest bourgeois of whom we were speaking. First, is it really true that a man by the name of Wakefield ever left his wife? It matters little to us, and even less so to the author. He read this anecdote in some tattered old newspaper, and that is all he needed to believe it. Once it had entered into his mind, this bizarre story tormented him. He wanted to understand it, he wanted to get to the bottom of this mysterious eccentricity. Wakefield has left his wife for twenty years, and during those twenty years, he has lived just a few steps from her; at the end of twenty years, with not a single reason to justify his brusque return, no more so than when he first took leave, here he is returning to his abode. What is one to think of this? How should one interpret these two contradictory resolutions and the persistence of what, in theory, should only have been a caprice pure and simple? These are the questions that our dreamer asks himself, and it is hard to imagine how this narrow subject expanded in his restless mind. This Wakefield—what sort of man is he? How did he love his wife? From what reserve of stubbornness did he draw that such behavior could erupt? Was it routine?—false shame?—pure indolence? The answer
to these questions is the portrait of this bold man, an ideal portrait—hypothetical, but excellent. Wakefield has arrived at the mid-point of his life. His conjugal tenderness, which has never been very lively, has been tempered by habit. He has—and will—be faithful to his wife: that is how his eminently peaceable nature would want it. His disposition of mind is completely intellectual, incapable of a single action, given up to endless daydreams that rarely tire themselves out striving for some sort of expression. He has none of the hotheadedness that pushes certain people to distinguish themselves from others through remarkable determination. If we were to ask ourselves which Londoner would be the most certain to do nothing one day that we would remember the next, Wakefield would be the unanimous choice. Only his wife, knowing him better, would have been able to apprehend the peaceful egoism that characterizes him and that has rusted the surface of his truly immobile soul. She could have sounded the alarm on a certain latent vanity, the signs of which she crept up on, from a penchant for trickery that betrays itself in him as a mania for petty secrets, to what, at last, she recognizes as a particle of almost indefinable strangeness, but which she writes off as one of the elements common to the indolent nature of an honest bourgeois.

Following this masterful portrait, we have Wakefield’s escape, leaving home under the pretext of travel and promising to return after eight days. We have his last handshake with mistress Wakefield. We see the door gently reopen that he had slammed behind him, and we are surprised by the equivocal smile he extends, like a Parthian arrow, to his mistreated wife. We follow him afterwards to the hideout he has made for himself in the middle of London. He is happy with the success of his ruse! How he lauds himself for having escaped detection! What delicious titillations are felt in the depths of this perfidious soul when the abstract idea of desertion is realized in the form of a headless household, and in the face of that inconsolable widow who struggles in vain, asking repeatedly for news of her Wakefield! Sometimes the fugitive feels vague remorse, sometimes he anxiously asks himself about the possible consequences of his indefinable mischief, sometimes his solitude weighs upon him. But when he must decide whether to return to the burden of the yoke, hesitation returns—a strange combination of vanity, laziness, and curiosity—that comes from an equally strange situation. Very often Wakefield, having gone out for air, finds himself, without knowing why, in his old neighborhood and almost at his door. Is it chance? One day, in a throng occasioned by the overcrowded street, does he not find himself face to face with mistress Wakefield! What terror that day! What a speedy getaway! How he gallops home, climbs the stairs four steps at a time, and jumps into bed fully clothed and pulls the covers up over his head! Mean-
while, mistress Wakefield, her prayer book in her hand, continues peacefully on her way to church. It is only when she arrives there that, stopping on the steps, she looks behind her to see if, by chance, that unknown man, whose traits reminded her of her husband, has not been following her.

Here we cannot, as Hawthorne does in his story, explore the minutiae of this personality and the details of this situation; but we have already explained what the work of the novelist consists of, and how masterfully his insights capture our interest in a tale otherwise so barren and stripped of surface charms. The way in which he brings Wakefield back home after twenty years is not the least felicitous aspect of the story.

One evening, in the twentieth year since he vanished, Wakefield is taking his customary walk towards the dwelling which he still calls his own. It is a gusty night of autumn, with frequent showers that patter down upon the pavement, and are gone before a man can put up his umbrella. Pausing near the house, Wakefield discerns, through the parlor windows of the second floor, the red glow and the glimmer and fitful flash of a comfortable fire. On the ceiling appears a grotesque shadow of good Mrs. Wakefield. The cap, the nose and chin, and the broad waist, form an admirable caricature, which dances, moreover, with the up-flickering and down-sinking blaze, almost too merrily for the shade of an elderly widow. At this instant a shower chances to fall, and is driven, by the unmannerly gust, full into Wakefield’s face and bosom. He is quite penetrated with its autumnal chill. Shall he stand, wet and shivering here, when his own hearth has a good fire to warm him, and his own wife will run to fetch the gray coat and small-clothes, which, doubtless, she has kept carefully in the closet of their bed chamber? No! Wakefield is no such fool.

We shall let him go back peacefully, with that same sardonic smile on his lips, to the home where he has craftily snared his better half. Their happiness does not concern us; but, without impertinent curiosity, we can ask ourselves what philosophical teaching (in the eyes of the romancer) there might be, in this bourgeois adventure, whose hypothetical contrivance has not, far from it, vulgarly disguised it. The author charges himself to reveal it to us: “Amid the seeming confusion of our mysterious world, individuals are so nicely adjusted to a system, and systems to one another and to a whole, that, by stepping aside for a moment, a man exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place forever. Like Wakefield, he may become, as it were, the Outcast of the Universe” (TTT 140). Who would have expected to find such
a solemn line at the end of a whimsical, almost ridiculous story? Surely no one, and the narrator even less so than anyone else. But he could not have been a friend of Waldo Emerson without retaining some reflection of that man’s amazing facility for enlarging the small incidents of life, for reducing the great facts of humanity, for switching their relative importance and shattering generally accepted ideas by new modes of appreciation, by virtue of a completely independent—and absolutely individual—critical method.

It is in the renewal of what we would gladly call “the metaphysical process,” in the originality of certain perspectives (none altogether reliable) that we locate the interest of those scattered chapters in Hawthorne’s work that are simple essays, discussions of a given topic. “Sunday at Home,” “The Vision of the Fountain,” “Sights from a Steeple,” “Buds and Bird-Voices,” and “Snow-Flakes” belong to this category, in which we also find two noteworthy chapters that seem to have contributed more than the others to popularize Hawthorne’s name. In one, he animates a public fountain and makes it speak. This free translation of the murmur of water is full of charming and poetic motifs. It has thus become a classic, as it were, of American literature. “A Rill from the Town-Pump” is as well known in the United States as one of Merimée’s best sketches is in France. The other essay, which one finds cited almost as often in American Elegant Extracts, is entitled “The Celestial Railroad.” A rewriting of John Bunyan’s parable-novel, The Pilgrim’s Progress, this work satirizes the religion of convenience that we have substituted for the rigors of primitive Christianity, but it will only be half intelligible for French readers, who take no interest in lukewarm Protestants. “The Procession of Life,” another of Hawthorne’s philosophical visions, suits our temperament better and lacks neither truth nor grandeur. From his moss-covered manse, the lone thinker looks on humanity and observes the current classifications that make the rich live with the rich, the nobles with the nobles, and the workers to themselves, according to which profession they belong. He supposes himself charged with rearranging this imposing cortege according to less common criteria that have sprung up in his imagination. His herald, armed with a trumpet that looks a lot like that of the Last Judgment, calls one by one to the four corners of the globe, summoning all who suffer from the same diseases, the afflicted who are consumed by the same chagrin, the guilty who have dirtied themselves with the same crimes, and so forth. Young or old, rich or powerful—from now on they are jumbled together, forming successive fragments of an endless column, the categories of a great cortege guided by death to the doors of eternity. What a happy and beautiful idea, in that vast human procession, to have reserved a special rank for all those that life’s fortunes have displaced, and who, disinherit by chance, have failed
to reach the rank or perform the functions for which they would have been useful, honored, happy! Here they are together, in the same group, united by the same vague worry, by the same vague hope. Here we see

the members of the learned professions, whom Providence endowed with special gifts for the plough, the forge, and the wheelbarrow, or for the routine of unintellectual business. We will assign to them, as partners in the march, those lowly laborers and handicraftsmen, who have pined, as with a dying thirst, after the unattainable fountains of knowledge. The latter have lost less than their companions; yet more, because they deem it infinite. Perchance the two species of unfortunates may comfort one another.

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Next come the Quakers in whom the instinct of war foments, and soldiers who were born to be Quakers; writers to whom nature has given, along with a crazy opinion of their genius, the passionate wish for celebrity but no means by which to acquire it; others still who, strong in thought, do not have one of the indispensable conditions to manifest the force with which they are entrusted: silent orators, singers without a voice, great captains without armies; yet again the victims of eminent success that they cannot possibly justify, those who by chance attain celebrity, but who have not one of the indispensable qualities to keep it and to make it grow; writers, actors, painters who see their laurels shrivel for the rest of their lives as their heads turn gray; politicians whom a mischievous fate has put at the head of affairs, and who, pierced by the recognition of their worthlessness, curse (while the world looks on, dumbstruck) both fortune that has served them so poorly and even the day they were born; finally, amid these social climbers, we see the man with exceptional talent, to whom only a revolution might give his due, ensconced at the heart of a peaceful, inert, and lethargic society.

We now know Nathaniel Hawthorne’s work. All we have left to do is to look one last time at the physiognomy of his style. Among the storytellers to whom we can compare him, Charles Nodier and the Genevan novelist Töpffer head the list. Yet, we must remember differences of place and literary education. We must remember, for example, that if there is more philosophical sincerity in Hawthorne, in Nodier there is a more curious study of the effects of style, a grammatical chiseling more painstaking and knowing, as well as more delicate satire, more exquisite taste. Töpffer moves in a more restricted horizon than the American romancer. His imagination cuts closer to earth. It does not have to the same degree the gift to make poetic all the agents it employs, be it a rooster or a cat, like the “Chanticleer” or
“Grimalkin” of *The House of the Seven Gables*, or a town pump, like the one in Salem at the corner of Essex and Washington, and whose chatty monologue, translated by Hawthorne, rang out to all America. Above all, his work does not achieve the same degree of terror that the American author can always produce, nor does it exercise the remarkable fascination that even the most rebellious reader feels towards Hawthorne’s work.

Hawthorne’s tales are interesting not merely because they reveal an original and bold talent: for us they are also a remarkable witness to the efforts that current American literature is making to rid itself of the industrialism that is suffocating it. Today, that society—only dedicated (so they say) to the development of its material greatness—is producing for itself thinkers and poets, accepted at home and abroad, as popular in London and Edinburgh as they are in Philadelphia and Boston. The jealous pride of the Old World is forced to applaud this tentative emancipation, and instead of dismissing—or ignoring—anything with American provenance (as we have done in the past), we now recognize feelings of goodwill and habits of international courtesy whose secret will be found nowhere else than in the progress of purely literary sympathies. Indeed, one of the most characteristic signs of the rapprochement to which we are drawing attention was Thomas Carlyle’s patronage of Emerson. Hawthorne’s rapid success is another symptom of the same sort. Now Carlyle, Emerson, and Hawthorne all possess the same sort of mind: all are freethinkers in philosophy and in politics. Doesn’t this coincidence merit attention?

*Revue des Deux Mondes* (15 Apr. 1852)

**Notes**

1. Griswold alludes to Hawthorne’s maritime genealogy in the headnote to his entry in *Prose Writers of America*. Daniel Hathorne (1731–96), the author’s grandfather, was a privateersman who ran British blockades to get cargo to Salem’s wharves during the American Revolution. His exploits were celebrated in a war-time ballad:

   
   **Bold Hathorne was commander,**
   A man of real worth,
   Old England’s cruel tyranny
   Induced him to go forth;
   She, with relentless fury,
   Was plundering our coast.

The actual surname of the writer’s ancestors was “Hathorne.” He amended the spelling after leaving Bowdoin. Major William Hathorne (ca. 1606/7–1681) arrived in the New
World with John Winthrop aboard the *Arbella* in 1630 and settled in Salem around 1636. His third son, John Hathorne (1641–1717), was a magistrate and chief interrogator of the accused in the Salem witchcraft hysteria of 1692. Later descendants were ship owners and merchant seamen, including Hawthorne’s father (1775/6–1808), for whom he was named.

2. Forgues was misled by Hawthorne’s facetious prefatory remarks to “Rappaccini’s Daughter” (first published in *Mosses from an Old Manse*), in which he affects the French *nom de plume* as the author of *Contes deux fois racontées* [sic]. Both the first and second editions of *Twice-told Tales* appeared with Hawthorne’s name on the title page.

3. Forgues refers to the famous battle at the beginning of the Revolutionary War, in anticipation of which the colonists had been warned by Paul Revere, whose horse ride from Boston alerted them to the advance of General Gage’s troops. As Forgues himself notes, “[The British] were sent to Concord (twenty miles from Boston) to destroy any military preparations for the next battle. The goal of their mission was accomplished, but they had to draw back, faced with an insurrection taking hold of the whole country.”

4. Hawthorne’s tenure at the Boston Customs House lasted from 1839 to 1841. Zachary Taylor (1784–1850) was the successful Whig candidate for the presidency in 1848. Forgues has conflated Hawthorne’s term as a customs official in Boston with his later appointment at Salem (1846–49), from which he was terminated because of Taylor’s election.


6. Forgues’ essay in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* (15 Oct. 1846: 341–66) was the first critical discussion of Poe to be published in France.

7. The phrase is not a literal quotation from Emerson, but corresponds in sentiment to his essay “Love,” in *Essays: First Series* (1841).

8. The Preface to *The Snow-Image* is addressed as a letter to Horatio Bridge (1806–93), who had encouraged Hawthorne’s literary career at least since their days together as classmates at Bowdoin. The quotation is from Centenary Edition, vol. VIII, *The Snow-Image and Uncollected Tales*, edited by Fredson Bowers et al., 1972, 4–5.

9. See note 4, above, for a more accurate chronology of Hawthorne’s career.


11. Forgues’ note: “Mother Ann, the female apostle and founder of the Shaker sect.”

12. The London *Athenaeum*, for example, considered George Sand’s 1833 novel “an unreal mockery . . . a bold, brazen paradox born, fostered and nourished in the very hot-bed of scepticism, in the whirl and turbulence of Parisian politics, manners and questionable morality” (Sept. 1833: 646).

13. Forgues refers here to a tale about a minor demon, “Belphégor,” from Jean de la Fontaine’s 1668 *Fables*.

14. In the first half of the nineteenth century, many anthologies of American writing made claims in their subtitles that they comprised “elegant extracts in prose and poetry.”