“American Storytellers: Nathaniel Hawthorne”  
(1857)

I. The Old American Ethos

The poet who said that man is a flower whose roots reach down to hell should have been born in the United States. The wicked nature of man, the evil spirit of our species—oh, we might as well cut to the chase!—the Devil himself has no larger dominion than the literature of America. He is not always named: sometimes he is called human perversity, corruption without remedy; sometimes the power of evil, the fatality of crime. But who is the mysterious being hidden behind these names if not the Satan of the old Puritans? But now he appears in a different form. Instead of being a supernatural character, half man and half animal, he is a philosophical and religious principle—abstract, no doubt, but always standing at the forefront of consciousness. He is the only demon in which the nineteenth century feigns belief, but he is indeed real and present in the American imagination. Beelzebub, reduced to an abstraction, might seem to mean nothing. On the contrary, he is everything. Suppose that in all souls there is a deep belief in the principle of evil that shackles them and now and then pulls them down, much like those unfortunates who always drag around an iron leash, bolted to their ankles for crimes they do not remember; the ball and chain of human misery cruelly warns them of their weakness. They want to throw themselves joyously into life and feel—just at that moment—the drag of
damnation pulling behind them. Who can ever measure the weight of evil? How little is needed to counterbalance an infinite measure of good! Alter imperceptibly the proportions of their mixture; add a few drops of vice and criminal intent to the dose. What a heavy burden for the soul! Under this oppression it can hardly breathe! All its joys grow dim, its lightness vanishes, and even its laughter becomes sad.

The idea of the mysterious power of evil has been dismissed in Europe for some time, but it has never left Puritan America. One might even say that the Devil emigrated to the New World with all his infernal cortège. There a new Chosen People, Bible in hand, have continued warring against Asmodeus, Astaroth, and Belphegor. One could even say that the evil spirits of folktales have resurrected themselves in that country. We do not want to ridicule turning tables, rapping spirits, and self-winding clocks, nor to reproach America for the hundredth time for all the bizarre superstitions from which she seems to have recovered. But it is useful to observe that these terrors of the mind, the only possible ones these days, come to us from across the water. Puritan nonsense has spawned a serious belief in the Fiend. Nowhere is human nature more reviled than in this nation that believes itself called to renew humanity. Those people like to think of themselves as God’s elect; but, if you believe that, you also have to acknowledge that no other nation has a more unique relationship to the Devil.

What sort of literature comes from such a country? A constant, relentless depiction of man’s battle with evil. The writers will have piercing vision (especially for perceiving evil tendencies), a rare sagacity for discovering our corrupted fiber, an insatiable appetite for revealing vice hideously worming its way through the heart of all human virtues, an incomparable talent for sorrowful moral anatomy. Among all the beautiful and great things that the human soul keeps to itself, American writers will seek out its horrors. Their portraits will not only be severe, but desperate. Evil has no remedy. When it seizes the heart, nothing can get rid of it: it is a spirit of darkness for which there is no exorcism. Try as you might to hunt it down, once it has entered the soul it will abide forever. There shall be no reconciliation: the man who has sinned is one of Hell’s elect. If the author is Christian, he will nevertheless be a fatalist; if he is not religious, he will be even more of one. He might not believe in God, but he certainly believes in the Devil. His impiety resembles that of the Old World, where we believe in the goodness of man but can do without God, persuaded that we no longer need Him. He, on the other hand, is convinced of the power of evil, the attraction of crime, the prestige of perversity. He has a mystic belief in evil, even when he no longer believes in good. Neither class of writers has remained simply
Puritan. The religious have gravitated to Transcendentalism, an American philosophy penetrated completely by German thought; the irreligious (there are few, but they exist) have borrowed from England and France. Both of these groups, maturing into schools and keeping up with the times, have always remembered the lessons of their ancestors. At the risk of making a grand generalization, we would define American literature as the literature of a people reared by Puritan tutors.

No one believes more firmly than Nathaniel Hawthorne in the permanence of inherited moral types. A reformed socialist, he pushes the principle of transmission to such extremes that he makes us stand back, modest conservatives that we are. It seems sufficient to us that the son inherit the family fortune: for better or worse, Hawthorne wants him to inherit the heart, the temperament, and the paternal passions. All of his characters reproduce in a fatal way the virtues and vices of the forebears who gave them life, not just the traits of their physiognomy. Little Pearl, born out of wedlock, has the follies and audacity of a nature that rebels against all rules; Zenobia, daughter of an opulent Fauntleroy, has the pride and ambition of a queen; Priscilla, daughter of a ruined Fauntleroy, has the sickly docility of a magnetic subject. It would not be unjust or arbitrary to follow the author’s example and to apply to him the laws he applies to all of his heroes. Patere legem quam [ipse] fecisti—follow the laws you have made. Hawthorne the novelist, who has made himself known through his stories and longer fictions written between 1840 and 1852, is indeed the son of Hawthorne the Puritan who came to Salem two hundred years ago. Make the mystical sectarian go through two centuries of labor, pursue adventures, experience religious and philosophical decomposition; for a hundred years, make him penetrate the wilderness and clear the soil; for another hundred years, quarter him on a ship. Suppose that, having become in appearance the perfect Yankee ( schooled by work, commerce, and Benjamin Franklin), one day he ceases from that drudgery and, just for a moment, has quenched his thirst for lucre. A hardy, yet generous philosophy makes him despise the commercial and materialist society that surrounds him. For the first time in two hundred years, he thinks. The old man quickly goes through changes of garb, habits, and opinions. He takes up a pen and writes Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novels. We would not understand the novelist well if we saw, in those sad and fantastical conceptions, only caprice or calculation. We would even be unjust if we turned their occasionally ambiguous morality against him. Simply put, he is a Puritan who has changed with the times. Permit me to treat the author as he treats his characters. I will strive to compare him to his forefathers.
Hawthorne’s ancestors brought a lot of superstitious baggage to America, which they cherished almost as much as Aeneus loved his Di Penates. They lived surrounded by spirits, and the supernatural world was in daily contact with the world around them. Is the novelist truly sure that he does not believe in spirits? In his *Old Manse*, he hears the ghost of a clergyman who comes and goes, who sighs in a certain corner of the hall, who riffls through the pages of an invisible sermon. The author and his friends, meeting at twilight, make out in intervals of silence the flitting of a minister’s silk robe as he traverses the meditative circle and brushes the chair of a poet or philosopher while passing by. In the kitchen, strange noises emerge at the hour of midnight: the shadow of a cook, with the shadow of an iron, irons the shadow of a minister’s collar, or, with the phantom of a grinder grinds the phantom of coffee of which there is no trace the next day. The author jokes with his visions: the ghostly minister wants his manuscript discourses published; that specter of a cook has regrets about a poorly-starched cravat, scruples that bring the poor girl back from her tomb and that make her work every night without wages. These reflections prove that the author has imagination; but his visions are not just pure chatter. Everything that touches him becomes a phantom: his imagination could not take flight without being carried away by the supernatural.

Does he want to paint a contrast between the practical mind and fantasy? He imagines the story “The Snow-Image.” The fantasy is a charming little girl of snow who some children shape with their own hands, and who—suddenly coming to life—sets off running in the garden. The practical mind is Mr. Lindsey, who catches the little, light phantom, moralizes on the thoughtless parents who have let the girl run around all alone, and locks her in front of a Heidenberg stove. Two minutes later, there is nothing left of the poetic and sprightly apparition besides a small puddle of cloudy water on the floor. Does he want to capture that moment of brusque transition that happens to a woman, the first accident that reveals her true character through the inalterable sweetness of a honeymoon? He invents the little story of “Mrs. Bullfrog.” Two young newlyweds are traveling, poetically, in a coach. What chariot does Love not transform into an elegant carriage? If a man who is riding in a carriage with his paramour is not a little bit of a poet, one must give up hope on his imagination. Just think with what sort of eyes he must see this young bride who belongs to him! Those caring looks that fix upon him, those lovely curls that he has not yet seen in disarray! All of the sudden, the carriage flips. What a sad turn of events! In the midst of cries and confusion, there is a diabolical apparition. They cannot find the beautiful, young, amiable girl. Is she hidden under some trunk? Amid
the chaos of packages and baggage tossed from the overturned carriage, the young husband sees a sort of demon dressed as a woman, swearing, storming about, abusing the coachman—God have mercy: she even lands two or three punches on the poor soul’s head! Where is his fiancée? Where has this odious vision, with a scarlet, contorted face and a screeching voice, come from? Just like his carriage, the new husband’s reason has turned upside down. Little by little everything returns to order: the coach is back on its four wheels and the young man’s mind on its normal footing. A sweet voice calls to him: God be praised! His beautiful bride has been found. The journey resumes, but what has happened to that ugly little diabolical being? She is left behind on the highway.

With Hawthorne the marvelous always has a practical end. In the same way, the sectarians who peopled the shores of America had many visions, but they were never useless; every wonder had a moral lesson. If signs appeared in the sky, it was to announce the punishment of crimes; it was a sermon given to preachers by meteors. There we find none of the purely naïve wonder that abounds in pagan religions: everything has a meaning and a moral. Ann Radcliffe piles up phantoms, specters, and wonders that are then easily explained: amusing and frivolous phantasmagoria that have nothing in common with the marvels of a people accustomed to nourishing themselves with the Bible. Hoffmann believes in his visions, but they are only food for his sickly imagination. He feels sincere fright, but this same fright is an end in itself. He takes harsh pleasure in his horrors, and when he has made his hair stand on end, he is content. A truly American imagination, and such is that of our novelist, only admits the marvelous on the condition of proving something.

The American storyteller would have refuted his Puritan filiation, if gay or even sweet or laughing apparitions ever appeared in his work. Puck, Ariel, Titania—gracious creations—are foreign to him. How could mid-summer nights’ dreams be transplanted to the home of Reformed religion, the bivouac of Calvinism, on the borders of those immense forests where they thought they could hear the witches’ sabbath every night? It is not Shakespeare, but the Bible that supplied the fairy tales of mothers and nurses; and from the Bible, they chose the terrible miracles of the Old Testament. Readers of Hawthorne, then, will never want for sad and menacing legends, a fantastical world destined to take the real world to task, visions sent by an irritated or jealous God. What pleasure they will get, for example, spending the night with the cadaver of Judge Pyncheon in one long chapter of The House of Seven Gables! Every night, at midnight, all the deceased members of the family meet in the lower room of that mansion where the portrait of
their forefather hangs, the head of their house and the author of the original sin that has weighed on them for two centuries. The procession begins with the subject of the portrait himself, the phantom of a Calvinist of the first years of the seventeenth century, wearing a black coat, breeches held in place by a leather strap, and carrying a large sword with a steel hilt. He looks at the painting, which has been kept in this place as a condition of his last will and testament. All is well; he is always obeyed; and yet a cruel thought deepens the furrowed creases of his forehead. He goes away with a sad nod of the head. Then his descendants arrive, hurrying and elbowing one another to get to that faded portrait. All the generations of the family that the novel parades before our eyes follow one another: ancestors of all ages, in their different costumes—ministers in starched Puritan garb, officers in red uniform, a shopkeeper with rolled-up sleeves, wrinkled grandmothers, young and pensive women, powdered gentlemen dressed in brocade—one by one they come to look at and to touch the portrait. A mother lifts her child in her arms so that he might feel it with his small hands. What are these specters seeking? A parchment concealed behind the painted likeness that proves the right of the Pyncheon family to vast lands, to a more than princely property. An enemy fatality, chastisement for their avarice, has deprived them of their title for two hundred years. Judge Pyncheon has vaguely known of the existence of this treasure. In order to acquire it for himself, he comes to threaten his poor cousin Clifford, but just at the moment of committing this crime, the hereditary crime of the family, a hideous death takes him by the throat. His blood suffocates him as it did his uncle, and all of his lineage, even the first of his ancestors. Keeping watch the whole of a long night next to his cadaver, the novelist attends this meeting of the Pyncheon specters.

Hawthorne is a philosopher. His reason is no longer Puritan, but his imagination still is. If his ancestors occasionally come back at night (why shouldn’t they, in a country where the dead are not used to leave the living alone?), if they visit his study to flip through his manuscripts, they certainly will not be surprised to find there fat treatises on theology, twenty-volume commentaries (in quarto) on one chapter of the Apocalypse, books (in folio) on the invisible world, learned manuals on the procedures for battling witches. Least surprising of all, they will utter deep groans when they discover that their unworthy grandson writes novels! But I am sure that they will recognize themselves despite all that separates them from their prodigal son. Only hear their regret that he does not turn this precious knowledge of the invisible world to better use!

Let us pursue this comparison of the novelist with the ancient founders of New England. If anything might delight them in their tombs, it would no
doubt be that their spirit still reigns in the country that they settled. Which of Hawthorne’s tales is the most popular? Perhaps “The Celestial Railroad,” that allegorical satire of the laxity of the latter-day Puritans, a parody of old Bunyan, the author of *Pilgrim’s Progress*. The famous Anabaptist ironmonger, who lived twelve-and-a-half years in Bedford prison with no other companions besides the Bible and Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*, forged iron fetters by which to live by writing books of piety in which he scattered treasures of imagination and fanaticism. Hawthorne wrote “The Celestial Railroad” in his old manse in Concord, in between a transcendental conversation with Emerson and a boat outing with the poet Ellery Channing. This connection says everything about the two eras.

Since Bunyan, civilization’s progress has rendered life incomparably easier, even for a Christian. It has done away with distances, even between heaven and earth. No longer is the City of Destruction the point of departure for Bunyan’s arduous pilgrimage—a railway has been laid that leads to the Celestial City. The directors of the Company have thrown up an admirably daring (but flimsy) bridge over the Slough of Despond, into which (according to Bunyan) over twenty thousand cartloads of wholesome instructions had been thrown without making the ground solid. Now one can cross over in an omnibus and with lots of excess baggage. The Evangelist who, in Bunyan’s time, gave each pilgrim a mystic scroll is now charged with giving out passes through a window of the ticket-office. One must be grateful to the Company for having perfected these tickets: they are so much more convenient and now fit in one’s pockets, and they have secured a promotion for the Evangelist. The most remarkable service that this railway has rendered to religion has been making it fashionable: now the world’s rich and carefree can run—what am I saying?—they can fly on the route of salvation in first-class coaches. In other times, few voyagers, almost all of them poor and covered in rags, carrying their heavy burdens, trod the demanding pathway between heaven and earth. Today the most respectable men—men of State, magistrates, financiers, great landowners—now serve as examples. The best of society is on the road. They chatter about everything: the news of the day, business, politics, pleasure. They even have the good taste not to talk about religion. Even the most susceptible unbeliever would not find the slightest pretext to be shocked. Going to Hell is so much harder than attaining salvation! Even more admirable in this arrangement of the new railway is that the directors have gone into partnership with a prince named Beelzebub, whose minions once directed their arrows ceaselessly against the poor pilgrims. Thanks to mutual concessions, a friendly treaty was signed, and the agents of that former enemy are now employed by the Company—
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carrying luggage, stoking the firebox, or offering a thousand friendly services to the passengers. We were wrong about them: they are proving themselves to be, as they say, relatively good devils. Oh, Bunyan, Foxe, Bellingham, Endicott!—some martyrs, others tyrants, where are you? Persecutors and persecuted, what has happened to your great grandsons? Some, most of them, are lukewarm and sensual. Not only do they flee the straight and narrow path, but they also insist that it be convenient. They no longer want to go by foot, even to Heaven. They must be carried there as if by enchantment. As long as the names remain the same, they worry little that things have changed. As long as the railway’s tickets carry the Puritan stamp, they are happy and do not worry whether the tickets can be redeemed at the end of the trip. In the other descendants (and how few there are!), the flame of religious ardor still burns—but for what? For a philanthropic league or for a temperance society. Today there is no shortage of goodwill; but how hard it is to be persecuted! One has to libel someone to have a martyr’s honors. A minister, a partisan of the temperance movement, paints a verbal picture of Hell and the Devil: Hell resembles a known distillery, and the Devil, a certain maker of whisky. The minister is condemned to a month in prison. From his comfortable cell, he lectures on Bunyan and makes his reputation and his fortune. That is today’s Puritanism.

But we have not yet touched upon the principal trait of the Puritan spirit in Hawthorne. Here it is. He possesses a melancholy that comes not from life’s suffering, painful experiences, or social disapproval, but rather from deep within the soul: a religious melancholy, borne from a vision of Evil. This is Calvinist melancholy, not René’s or Childe Harold’s—Christian melancholy, almost disproportionate, occasioned by the ineffaceable shadow of sin. To embrace it was a sign of election, it distinguished saints, having been sent from God. It was life, while the sadness of the world was death. In order better to preserve this precious melancholy, Puritans dressed in black. In the same way, Hawthorne’s paintings are overlaid with a somber tint. All the passions that stir in his little dramas are inspired by this melancholic vision of human things, as those of true Calvinists are borne out of pious sadness. They had such blind ardor, fierce hate, insatiable anguish, because everywhere they saw only sin. This ardor, this hate, those tortures have vanished, but the constant vision of evil lives on. Hawthorne, no longer a Puritan by faith, is still one in his heart and his imagination. Laws inscribed on tablets of stone are less durable than that those inscribed upon the fleshy tablet of the human heart, where they are written not with ink, but with the essence of the soul.

Our novelists see human nature through different eyes. They see the goodness in man. They can be fatalistic, but only by suppressing, as it were,
the evil of human nature, and by displacing it on circumstances, on fate, on society. Thus evil becomes good—our passions are natural things, our vices, virtues. A novelist like Hawthorne is fatalistic in making his characters slaves to Evil. They are born under evil stars, predestinated by their passions, and the author resembles an astrologer who looks for proof in men’s lives to justify his horoscopes. Open *The Scarlet Letter* to see what I mean: Hester Prynne, guilty of adultery, recognizes in her child those ardors and follies that were her own, when, at a fatal moment, a spirit descended from on high and sullied her breast with common dirt. The crime of Pearl’s birth is a fatal constellation that weighs upon the destiny of this child. Her tastes, her penchant, her destiny will be the logical consequence of adultery. Hawthorne draws everything rigorously from that principle. The Governor and clergymen want to take this child from her mother, as if removing her from Satan’s clutches. But the author himself is not far from believing that Pearl is possessed by a demon. She turns on the other children and frightens them with her childish tantrums. A living regret to her mother, she has a mysterious sagacity to guess Hester Prynne’s crime. Hester is condemned to wear a red letter on her chest, the first letter of that fatal word that explains her crime. This letter, the color of Hell’s fires, tortures and burns her. It is the visible symbol of an ineffaceable evil. And when at last she is able to cast away from her that hideous mark (which has made her suffer like the brand of a burning iron), an invincible compulsion forces her to respect the proof of her condemnation and restore it to her breast.

A third character carries the pain and trace of the same crime: Hester’s accomplice, the minister Dimmesdale. He eats away at himself in his vain efforts to erase the evil he has committed. For what purpose are the vigils, the prayers, the scourges, the discipline with which the Calvinist preacher tears apart his chest in secret? How many times, from the pulpit, he is tempted to confess: “I, whom you behold in these black garments of the priesthood,—I, who ascend the sacred desk, and turn my pale face heavenward, taking upon myself to hold communion, in your behalf, with the Most High Omnipotence,—I, in whose daily life you discern the sanctity of Enoch,—I, whose footsteps, as you suppose, leave a gleam along my earthly track, whereby the pilgrims that shall come after me may be guided to the regions of the blest,—I, who have laid the hand of baptism upon your children,—I, who have breathed the parting prayer over your dying friends, to whom the Amen sounded faintly from a world which they had quitted,—I, your pastor, whom you so reverence and trust, am utterly a pollution and a lie!” (*SL* 143). A true and dreadful image of crime in Calvinist doctrine—Prometheus’ vulture. On one sole day, the adulterous minister is
weakened. He throws off the yoke of a ceaseless and inescapable repentance. He sees Hester again and will flee with her. The fight has ended in his heart. What is there to say? Does the drama of adultery begin, the drama of an unyielding passion, that drags us in its wake, across bitter joys, toward a denouement that is terrible for the crime or painful for moral sentiment? No—it is the intimate and curious drama of a soul freed from the power of Evil—even, one might say, from demonic possession. Returning home, after his encounter with Hester, Dimmesdale meets one of his deacons, a good old man whom he has always respected as if he were his superior. Their meeting lasts only two minutes, and he takes great pains to stop himself from expressing who knows what blasphemous thoughts upon the sacrament of communion. He trembles and becomes entirely pale for fear that his mouth will betray his will, and yet he cannot contain his laughter at the idea of the fright that the old man would feel in hearing such impious words. Another incident: an elderly, pious lady finds herself in his path, a poor widow without children, without fortune, whose sole consolation is in her Bible and in some words from her pastor. Would she not blaspheme Heaven if the pastor were not to offer her words that would change her suffering into a source of joy? Dimmesdale no longer knows a word of the Bible. Satan would not be more hard pressed to find a text. Diabolical verses come to him. His mouth murmurs, without his willing it, who knows what pithy, irresistible arguments against the soul’s immortality. These funereal words, distilled in the ear of this poor woman, like a subtle poison, might have killed her outright if she had understood them. A third encounter: a newly converted young woman in the minister’s chosen flock, a young and candid soul, touched by his recent sermons, resolute in changing the passing pleasures of the world for the everlasting life of Heaven, beautiful and pure like a lily in the garden of Eden. He knows that his own image is enshrined within this stainless heart, that he is there, hidden beneath the white veils of modesty, imparting to religion the warmth of love, and to love, a religious purity. When this young girl approaches, an infernal power whispers something in his ear. If he could only concentrate in one word the venom of Hell, and place in her chaste breast the seed of Evil, to grow there in the dark, to bear one day its sinister fruit! He knows that this is the power he holds over this soul. One look from him could lay waste to the field of innocence, one word plant corruption there. It takes a terrible effort on Dimmesdale’s part to pass her in silence, covering up his face with his coat, hurrying his step, pretending not to know her, leaving the poor girl with the scruples of an agitated conscience that betrays her the next day in her swollen eyelids.
I would like to imagine this scene upon the stage: in the theater, we only believe what is human. The supernatural power of Evil is as unbelievable there as that of Good. The conversion of Félix in Polyèucte leaves us cold;

8 a demonic possession would leave us laughing. Dimmesdale is nothing else, and yet he strikes us forcefully. The novel is nourished not only by what is, but also by what might be. It has no limits but those of the human soul, and the soul is not content with this world: it still embraces Heaven and Hell.

Death's approach makes the curtain fall, and the soul, little by little letting go of the flesh, knows itself better. Remorse overtakes Dimmesdale: his crime begins burning his heart anew. We see him again, as he has done for many years, painfully holding his hand to his chest. I am afraid to make a profane comparison, but the adulterous minister carries on his heart a stigma slowly imprinted by the tortures of conscience, comparable to those produced in other times by the enthusiasm of the Catholic faith. This grandson of the Puritans has robbed it from us: a curious petty theft that carries a Calvinist stamp. A marvelous stigma was to the mystical saints of the Middle Ages a celestial favor, a sign of election. Hawthorne makes of it a withering scourge, the burning imprint of Evil. With the death of Dimmesdale, they discover on his left side (where his heart, now icy, once beat) a scarlet letter similar to the one that Hester wears. Was it a piece of fabric that he glued to his side in order to wear, like his accomplice, the pain and the livery of adultery? Was it a real and miraculous stigma? No two witnesses can agree, according to the author.

The great success of The Scarlet Letter is proof of the vivacious power of Puritan thought. In this way, the works of the modern imagination have roots in the beliefs of past centuries. In this way, generations past suffered, fought, and struggled to leave ineffaceable traces in the last of their descendants, and we cannot read the works that enthral men of our times without reminding ourselves of those ancient doctrines that once enthralled their ancestors. We might say that The Scarlet Letter is Indiana, that it is Lélia. 9 Yes, but with the distinction that here (in its French incarnations) we have novels that reject human corruption, and there, one that exaggerates it. Here, vice does not exist; there, it is irreparable. Here, we flatter all that is in man; there, he is damned without mercy.

II. The New Ethos

Now we confront a person who demands his place in this study. He has been described by all travelers who have visited America; he is well known; he is
called the Yankee. Therefore, we can sketch his portrait with broad brushstrokes. Imagine the Puritan of two-hundred years ago, covered with a thick layer of the rust of time and money. His life is made up of work, calculation, and frugality. His time is capital, a relationship he understands with marvelous exactitude. His indefatigable labor knows no rest except on Sundays, and two or three holidays imposed upon him as a citizen of a republic. His economy never fails—even in the heart of a virgin forest, he stingily counts the logs of his hearth. His arithmetic weighs men like bags of money. If he comes into wealth, he behaves like an aristocrat who distinguishes nuances of rank slighter than a hair's breadth. If he sinks into bankruptcy and falls to the bottom of the ladder, he picks himself up bruised but resigned, and renew his weary ascent. Do not speak to him of literature or philosophy until his shop is closed. He will gladly converse with you, as long as it costs nothing and doesn't take too much time. On Saturday night, he buys a newspaper and some quack remedy, in order to adorn his mind and purge his body on the one day when his merchandise does not clamor for him. A theological tract for his clergyman and an almanac for him—that is the only literature he finds indispensable! The work of other writers is irrelevant and can scarcely attract his attention. He has heard, now and then, of some successful authors, but these are rare. He waits until books have proven their worth in the marketplace before he bothers with them. Their dollar value increases, but not enough for him to hold them in high esteem. While waiting, he shrugs and says that Americans will never have great poets like the English, or, even more complacently, that America has nothing to envy of England: that after men like Philip Freneau and Brockden Brown, what else could one hope to achieve in poetry or novel-writing? It is not much of a stretch from Puritan to Yankee. One can find a good deal of the first in the second. Dissident sects were founded, maintained, and multiplied by the peddlers that traversed England with their sacks full of merchandise and fanatical sermons. English proselytism was commercial; it still is. The Puritan was a saint-merchant. The Yankee is a merchant who maintains a place for saintliness in his all-important ledger, just so long as it pays.

Against this spirit of materialism and avarice, new ideas are coming to light. We find them in the writings and lives of Emerson, Ripley, Channing, Curtis, Margaret Fuller, and others. For now, we are going to trace the steps of Nathaniel Hawthorne. He is from Young America; he was a Transcendentalist and a Socialist; he is a Democrat. He has passed through all of these doctrines, without spending much time with any of them, but without forgetting them entirely. A germ of utopianism can be found in each of his books, but he is never enslaved by it. He escapes not by virtue of skepticism,
weakness, or calculation: rather by virtue of good sense and generosity. In him we find the persistence of the old American ethos. Even his socialism is Puritan. In the old American ethos we discover a new principle: utopianism is by its very nature antipathetic to a young civilization.

On paper, or in our minds, we can invent new social states in Old Europe; however, we have a hard time realizing them. In America, the proof is in the pudding. Would you like to become a Mormon? An Icarian? The path is clear. Imagine a new way of living—big tracts of land are there waiting for their masters. In one of our salons, we can prattle ad nauseam (as they did in the eighteenth century) about Nature's superiority to Civilization. In America the question is moot: the ever-present wilderness swallows it up. Americans have nature at their door. What could be more preposterous than to question it? Hawthorne loves nature: he, too, gives short shrift to social niceties, prejudices, and conventions. He goes back to the Assabet River with his friend Channing, alights in some very rustic spot, kindles his campfire, prepares his meal as a tattooed Indian might have three hundred years ago, and returns in the evening, reconciled with social life. America is a laboratory of the new. Paradoxical republics, impossible societies, combinations, associations—everything is imaginable there, everything ferments there, everything goes into the pot, into the mill. By and by, diversity has been distilled into the common air. Ask, choose—there is something for every taste. Every experience has happened or will happen. There is also no country where projects for the renovation of the human race are more frequent or less durable. Hawthorne was part of a socialist colony at Brook Farm. He is enthusiastic; he hopes for much in the future. But the multitude of dreamers has soured him on utopias. In Concord, the group of empty dreamers who surrounded Emerson, like moths around a flame, alienated Hawthorne from philosophical and humanitarian speculation. We can see that rabble of bizarre men, with their dubious looks, their motley dress, who believe themselves, each and every one, called to regenerate the world—true nightmares to thought and common sense. Such has been the unfortunate influence of that original thinker: those who live too close to him have been besotted by his breath and saturated by false originality. Truth goes to their head like wine. Such is the vulgarity of innovation, the originality of bad taste that would make a man abhor all ideas that predate his own century.

Imagine, in the time of Plato and beyond the gates of Athens, vast lands to be cleared, virgin Nature, a world offering itself to any hands that would take hold of it. It is likely that such a Republic, full of dreams and poetry, would have ignored his Dialogues. In one little corner of the realm,
Antiquity would have seen established a community of chattels, women, and children—lasting for at least one generation (time enough to give rise to little citizens). What would have been the result of this? It is probable that humanity, constrained or misunderstood, would have taken its revenge. Selfish interests, stripped of their appearances, would have fought back one beautiful night; and from this would come divisions, the rupture of society, and the fall of the Republic. Dreaming of riches in the land beyond, every man would have run to claim his share of the Goldrush of drachmas, perhaps even abandoning his wife to the Republic because of the impossibility of reclaiming her as well as his money. That, realistically, is what would have happened with such an experiment. Undoubtedly, Plato’s beautiful book would have suffered: the actual Republic would have compromised the imagined Republic. And Antiquity would have found some Nathaniel Hawthorne to recount the greatness and decadence of Platonopolis.

We know that events like this have occurred in the literary and philosophical world of New England. There we find the same situation: the same thoughts of reformation; a democracy attached only to its traditions and to its material needs; men of science and talent who do not have sufficient room for their ambition; a master who is both poet and philosopher and whose name serves as his flag; disciples who have their own ideas, but who come with them to this new Plato, like those who have found precious gems and show them to a jeweler in order to find out their value or to bring out all of their beauty; young, enthusiastic men who leave their professions as poets, journalists, ministers, lawyers to become laborers and workers, spade in hand, for the progress of humanity. Then, likewise, the ruin of this beautiful and generous utopia, this lost illusion: reformers disenchanted with their fellows; the poet, the journalist, the lawyer who return to their half-begun poems, to their indulgent subscribers, to their faithful clients; they all come back to their lecture halls, their picture galleries, their noisy sidewalks, their dinners at the Hotel Albion, the billiard parlor, the concert, the theater. At last, they reclaim their true selves, in which dreams have not obliterated either the moral sense of their Puritan ancestors or the shrewdness and practicality of the Yankee. Then one appears who dares to tell the truth, who first sounds the alarm about utopias, and who tells the story of the communal error.

The Blithedale Romance is such an idealized story. This work is already known in France; we need not waste time describing it. If we wanted to analyze Hawthorne’s best novel, we would not choose this one. Still, it is of a piece with the storyteller’s other tales. The development of its plot and its characters does not concern us. Instead, let us consider the contest between
the modern mercantile spirit and the lingering sense of an older morality: this is what we can draw out from *Blithedale* (and from all of Hawthorne’s other works). This is what is important. This is what remains to be said.

The vaguely communistic association that was Brook Farm, attempted sixteen years ago, was a protest against the mercantile spirit that we have already sketched. In other words, its members did what was least Yankee-like in the world: they freely renounced all conveniences in life, all that was comfortable. We make note of this point, because attempts at communism in the Old World have had a different bearing. Those who flirt with communism generally have had nothing to lose, and think that they have everything to gain. The masses are brought to it by poverty and irresistible ambition. Those American communists were of a different order. They left their carpeted offices, well furnished with curtains, where they could have let in the sunlight at will or kept cool in their shadows. They forsook their tables covered with books and periodicals, their offices with their poem or article just begun. They deprived themselves of capacious sideboards, covered with entrées, their entertainments, their teas. And why? To hoe, to reap, to sweat, and to tire themselves out. To serve as chambermaids to a pair of bulls and a dozen cows. To eat a little salted beef earned by the sweat of their brows, to win the honor of fever and consumption by working too hard. A dozen Yankees played at Arcadia, but unlike shepherds at the Opera, they were not dressed in doublets decorated with ribbons, in pants and silk stockings, in court shoes tied with artificial roses:

In outward show, I humbly conceive, we looked rather like a gang of beggars or banditti, than either a company of honest laboring men, or a conclave of philosophers. Whatever might be our points of difference, we all of us seemed to have come to Blithedale with the one thrifty and laudable idea of wearing out our old clothes. Such garments as had an airing, whenever we strode afield! Coats with high collars and with no collars, broad-skirted or swallow-tailed, and with the waist at every point between the hip and arm-pit; pantaloons of a dozen successive epochs, and greatly defaced at the knees by the humiliations of the wearer before his lady-love;—in short, we were a living epitome of defunct fashions, and the very raggedest presentment of men who had seen better days. It was gentility in tatters. Often retaining a scholar like or clerical air, you might have taken us for the denizens of Grub Street, intent on getting a comfortable livelihood by agricultural labor; or Coleridge’s projected Pantisocracy in full experiment; or Candide and his motley associates at work in their cabbage-garden; or anything else that was miserably out at elbows, and
most clumsily patched in the rear. [We might have been sworn comrades to Falstaff’s ragged regiment. Little skill as we boasted in other points of husbandry, every mother’s son of us would have served admirably to stick up for a scarecrow.] And the worst of the matter was, that the first energetic movement essential to one downright stroke of real labor, was sure to put a finish to these poor habiliments. So we gradually flung them all aside, and took to honest homespun and linsey-woolsey, as preferable, on the whole, to the plan recommended, I think, by Virgil,—‘Ara nudus; sere nudus’—which as Silas Foster remarked, when I translated the maxim, would be apt to astonish the women-folks.

\[BR 63–64\]

The moral thinking of the association would not contrast any less than its appearance with the national ethos. It is a not a question of suppressing the spirit of competition that preempts one’s neighbor, and wins before him, by force or by ruse, the bread upon which he already has a hand. Competition is the life of modern peoples, but to the American, it is the soul of his life, the blood of his heart, the marrow of his bones. One cannot know the meaning of ruthlessness unless one knows America. That is what was supposedly conquered by the forces of the little community at Brook Farm. A naïve, or even crazy thought, if you will, but a generous one. Those poets wanted to elevate manual labor to the level of their poetry; they tried to spiritualize fatigue and sweat. Labor was supposed to be their prayer and the liturgy of their devotions. Every stroke of the spade was destined to uncover some root of wisdom with its invigorating balm, hidden until now from the light of day. Every time they took a break to wipe the sweat from their brow in the breeze, they were supposed to look heavenward to find some sign of infinite truth. Nature’s smile sometimes recognized her elect. But these happy accidents became more and more rare. No matter how much or how often they ploughed, they could not successfully transform such drudgery into sublime thoughts. Instead of absorbing manual labor into the poet’s soul, the poet’s soul became absorbed by his work, and his thoughts became heavy like the clumps of soil he tilled. In this way, these men of letters, who at first feared themselves not to be workers enough, feared themselves at last to be nothing else.

And that is not all: that mental work, however weighty, was not wholesome. The diverse opinions brewing in their heads made them spin. Blithedale was a sort of Bedlam. After a short stay, they lost the sense of the real. In the middle of the most varied discussions about the new world to be established, they ended up no longer knowing the one in which they were
living. Everything became indecisive and irresolute. It seemed as if the earth’s crust was no longer solid, and that it could easily shift underfoot. Hawthorne (who hides behind the name of Coverdale) concluded that, were he to live exclusively among these reformers, he would lose his reason. He felt that it was time to return to the world of merchants, professors, men of affairs. He needed to feel the earth under his feet. In the blur of opinions, he was looking for men who had two or three ideas hatched prior to yesterday. The Yankees certainly got their revenge.

Thrown into the middle of this vortex of progress and regeneration, Hawthorne is said to have met women reformers there, too. Brook Farm counted women among its inhabitants, and the storyteller masquerading by the name of Zenobia is the celebrated Margaret Fuller, that imperious muse of Transcendentalism. If the sentiments of the poet Coverdale are indeed those of Hawthorne, one must admit that he came under the powerful charms of that rich nature. Envious of his liberty in a utopia that was, in fact, already partial to residents with whiskers, he nevertheless submitted gladly to the charm of feminine eloquence when she appeared. But this illusion could not last for long. Hawthorne was one of the first to revolt against the pride of that American Aspasia.¹¹ No one, in that land of Bloomerism,¹² has had a better grasp of petticoat charlatanism and pedantry. Without passion, without bitterness, he saw that women reformers were always women whom destiny or error had diverted from their natural path. At first they stray from it imperceptibly, but necessity pushes them on. They veer off, so to speak, at an inappreciable angle, made as inconspicuous as possible. But, going farther and farther afield, the course they have set for themselves—adjacent to the normal one—opens an abyss between them and society.¹³

How does it happen that these women of the Anglo-Saxon race, a race superstitiously attached to old traditions, should present to us this spectacle of restless ambition and declarations of rights of which our constitutions have never dreamed? Is it because private life is disappearing more and more? In America particularly, public life invades everything: all citizens live under each other’s eyes; no one hesitates to call attention to himself or his family. All aspects of private life are broadcast—even domestic matters of the hearth and table. They clamor for public notoriety by every means. A respectable citizen announces in a newspaper that, having a kettle that whistles pleasantly on the stove, he has baptized it after the name of his favorite singer. Every house is open to the public, invited by those who live in them: not even the birth chamber is off limits. Take away from women the domain and the empire of private life that belongs to them, and what do they have left? Let us leave the home. What do we see? Clubs, salons, assemblies where one hears
endless chatter but never true conversation. Politics, business, the “institution” (that is to say, slavery), commerce, annexation, compromise, the territories—gracious themes, inexhaustible subjects! From the stuffy talker who holds you by your buttons to the long-winded orator who preaches his gaudy eloquence from the rooftops, you hear nothing else. Take conversation away from the women who are out of the home, and what do you expect them to do? They will become orators, they will make themselves male citizens. Their path has already been set out before them. For a very long time, it has been observed, English and American women have been becoming men. By now we can see that the women of that race have had all the virile liberties that decency will tolerate. “We seldom meet with women, now-a-days, and in this country, who impress us as being women at all; their sex fades away and goes for nothing, in ordinary intercourse” (BR 17). Eloquence—or, rather, let us say slickness—is the dominant character of the people of the United States. The gift of the nation is the gift of gab. It is an art that is practiced at every hour in every place from one end of North America to another. Is it possible that women would not be jealous of the privilege of masculine loquacity? What? There is only one manner of speaking practiced in this country! And they ask women to abstain?

The American women reformers have only one object: speaking. To fight for the rights of women to be heard, that is the great female reform, the great women’s charter. Other rights are only occasions to use this great right. But when one talks, it must be about something.

“It is my belief [Zenobia says]—yes, and my prophecy, should I die before it happens—that, when my sex shall achieve its rights, there will be ten eloquent women, where there is now one eloquent man. Thus far, no woman in the world has ever once spoken out her whole heart and her whole mind. The mistrust and disapproval of the vast bulk of society throttles us, as with two gigantic hands at our throats! We mumble a few weak words, and leave a thousand better ones unsaid. You let us write a little, it is true, on a limited range of subjects. But the pen is not for woman. Her power is too natural and immediate. It is with the living voice, alone, that she can compel the world to recognize the light of her intellect and the depth of her heart!”

(BR 120)

The woman who silently pursues her life on the straight path made for her by the world’s prejudices is the female Yankee. Anything outside of her rut, anything new always shocks and displeases her. She takes cover as soon as her traditions are wounded. That is what most of those pale and somewhat
sad women from New England are like, great granddaughters of Puritan matrons, arrived long ago from England, with drab clothing, but with a more vigorous temperament and more blooming complexions. From the breast of this timid generation springs Margaret Fuller, the Madame de Staël of the United States. To what extent is she represented by Zenobia? The author has given her beauty and weaknesses that Fuller did not have, while preserving her ambition, her disdain, her caprice. He has profited from his memory of her eloquence. Perhaps even the tragic ending (in which Zenobia drowns, achieving neither the goals of her ambitions nor the object of her love) is destined to recall Margaret’s tragic shipwrecked drama: her arrival from Italy and capsizing in sight of land, lost at sea with her husband, her child, her manuscripts—all of her life—her current love and her ambitions of yester-year. Despite several attempts to throw off the reader, the public was not mistaken in seeing Fuller’s image.

Male and female Yankees—that is what American society is made up of, following in the footsteps of our philosophers and socialists. Everyone thought that there was much to change in intellect, in life, in institutions. Some went all the way; others stopped midway. Some established Brook Farm; others were happy to visit there on a few occasions. Today, enthusiasm has cooled. The school has dispersed. Those who strayed farthest are also those who distance themselves most from their error. Hawthorne is among these. Should we say he loves what he has consigned to the fire? Among all the illusions to which he attached himself, disgusted with vulgar reality, does anything remain but a distrust of his first faith and a regret for having aspired to a better ideal? He gives us the residue of his enthusiasm in the last chapter of *The Blithedale Romance*. These words reveal a sincere soul, a heart without venom, half-impassioned, like so many these days. They are still the words of a democrat, but a democrat who needs some rest. As with so many today, his faith is tepid, almost nonchalant:

I by no means wish to die. Yet, were there any cause, in this whole chaos of human struggle, worth a sane man’s dying for, and which my death would benefit, then—provided, however, the effort did not involve an unreasonable amount of trouble—methinks I might be bold to offer up my life. If Kossuth, for example, would pitch the battle-field of Hungarian rights within an easy ride of my abode, and choose a mild, sunny morning, after breakfast, for the conflict, Miles Coverdale would gladly be his man, for one brave rush upon the leveled bayonets. Farther than that, I should be loth to pledge myself.

*(BR 246–47)*
III. The Author’s Manner

It is not contingent upon an author to give one shape or another to his thoughts. The needs and habits of the public predetermine the occasions it will devote to its novelists, even the length of its attention. America’s interest in its writers is fleeting. The American public is like Judge Pyncheon, whose busy itinerary fills his whole day. He has no need to carry a watch in his pocket, because his internal chronometer ticks perfectly and never needs winding. He sets aside half an hour for his family, or almost that, leaving margin for the presence of women, whose garrulity demands it: they use a hundred words when fifty would suffice. Next on his date book comes a list of things to do. See a broker who will invest several thousand dollars (spare change, really) in snug securities, paying heavy interest. Half an hour later, attend an auction at such and such a street, at such and such a number—a lot that would fill out his property perfectly. Four-score years ago, the parcel was alienated from the Pyncheons; but ever since he was old enough to reason, the Judge has been waiting for the moment when he could buy it back. Be prompt: you don’t want to arrive to the sound of the gavel fatally marking a prior sale. Buy a horse to replace the one no longer worthy of a worthy American, accustomed to breaking his neck in pursuit of money. If all this can be accomplished expeditiously, attend a meeting of a charitable society, whose name he has not written down, a small detail forgotten amid the multitude of things to be done. If there is time, go to the cemetery to have a family tombstone replaced, possibly that of Mrs. Pyncheon, who passed away, a good woman, in spite of her rattled nerves and her unreasonable taste for coffee. She departed without even a prayer—why haggle now over a piece of marble? Even death has its rightful place in his crowded date book. The Judge will find a moment to cry, provided that his tears are dry before his appointment with a political committee. By and by, give orders to expedite the delivery of fruit trees (a rare variety) to your country home. What marvelous peaches you will eat next Fall! Be punctual for the committee meeting where you will endorse one of the party’s candidates: the fate of the country is at stake! Pay a visit to the widow of one your old friends (who has a very pretty daughter). Attend a dinner where there will be much conversation after the remains of turtle, salmon, English mutton, and roast beef. Go home with ambitious plans and a huge headache, go to sleep while planning out tomorrow. That is the life of an American. How can literature find a place in an itinerary so crowded? Only by making itself modest, by shrinking down to fit in a small volume. That is why short stories and novel-las are so popular.
From this we can hazard a generalization: a lot of American novels are only diffuse short stories. Hawthorne has written a multitude of tales, and even his novels are tales. It seems as if the author’s imagination, accustomed to this mold, did not want to change, even when celebrity and the assurance of having a readership permitted him broader scope. *The Scarlet Letter* and *Blithedale* present very few incidents; *The House of the Seven Gables* hardly has any more. There are barely two or three situations: just enough to construct a short story, but by superadding philosophy, feeling, and humor, Hawthorne has made a novel out of it. Hawthorne is never diffuse because he is a thinker and an artist. But he is like a poet who conceives a drama in one act and then wants to spread it into three. However, he does not take sufficient trouble to invent incidents, to complicate the action. With what, then, does he fill this enlarged framework? This leads us to speak of a second characteristic of the author.

After busy-ness, one of the most salient traits of the American is curiosity. He lives on the run, but not in a straight line; he loves adventure. Everything that strikes him has a claim to his attention, and he feeds at the breast of a nature that always brings novelties to him. He also has a genius for details and particulars. He is an intrepid observer. What are the formulas we most often encounter in American literature? “A skilled observer would have easily surmised from this person’s movements, etc. . . .” “Nothing in this room would have jumped to the observer’s eyes, but soon, etc. . . .” The word *spiritual* is always on the lips of spirited people (or spilling from their pens)—they can’t help it—in the same way that curious people speak without end of penetrating observers. But there are different kinds of observation: the one of which we speak delights in infinite detail. For example, if there is an old family in decline, as in *The House of the Seven Gables,* the author analyzes this decadence down to the chicken coop, where three or four emaciated descendants of some aristocratic hen reside. The rooster, no larger than a partridge perched on two little stilts, struts with a dignity that recalls his many forefathers. His two wives have grown to the size of a quail. But all interest lies in a tiny chicken who would seem still to be able to make a home for himself in his egg, but whose antiquated, withered, and wizened air make him the worthy founder of this lineage. All the perfections and all the singularities of his race are summed up in this little body. His mother, thus, looks at him as if he were the one chicken of the world, necessary to the existence of the universe. No lesser sense of this runt’s importance could explain how she ruffles her feathers (until she is twice her normal size) and flies in your face if you even look at this child of gallinaceous ancestry. What nervous clucking when he is hidden from sight by tall grass! What
pleasurable cooing when he is back under her wing! By degrees, the observer comes to feel as much interest in this little fowl as its mother. This chicken is no more than a symbol of the noble and funereal Pyncheon household, an enigma covered in feathers, a mystery hatched from an egg.

Hawthorne, the prototypical American, is one of “those storytellers who have never seen anything except with a microscope.” He says through Zenobia in *The Blithedale Romance* that he looks at things through opera glasses, like all the other poets of his day. Yet, his glasses do not stop at the exterior surfaces of things. They resemble the pince-nez of Delphine Gay in the novel of the same name: they penetrate through to the soul. But in surveying the recesses of the conscience, they also reveal the train of thought. Hawthorne does not simply disclose the private ruminations of his hero, but (what is more) how he perceives them. His glasses have no magical or inexplicable powers like a talisman. Rather, by directing his magnifying glass at the fleeting expressions of the face, the mysterious relations of our physical attitude and our moral state, the timbre of our voice and the music of our soul, the storyteller comes to grasp the birth and torment of feelings, much as the biologist examines microbes in a drop of water. Hawthorne has all the curiosity of a physiognomist and all the patience of a psychologist. His method is too experimental not to cast a chilling pall over the drama.

In order to move the reader, a writer must work sympathy and tears into a novel; if an author wants warm tears to fall on the reader’s heart, he must work quickly or they might freeze up. I fear that Hawthorne may have painted himself when he has Holgrave say these words in *The House of the Seven Gables*:

> “Undoubtedly . . . I do feel an interest in this antiquated, poverty-stricken old maiden lady; and this degraded and shattered gentleman—this abortive lover of the Beautiful. A kindly interest too, helpless old children that they are! But you have no conception what a different kind of heart mine is from your own. It is not my impulse—as regards these two individuals—either to help or hinder; but to look on, to analyze, to explain matters to myself, and to comprehend the drama which, for almost two hundred years, has been dragging its slow length over the ground, where you and I now tread. If permitted to witness the close, I doubt not to derive a moral satisfaction from it, go matters how they may.”

(*HSG* 216–17)

Hawthorne derives pleasure in evoking touching dramas and looking on with a cold heart. The reason for this is that he yields to commiseration less
than to curiosity. He is American to the core. Zenobia expresses this, when she says to the poet Coverdale:

“[I]t has gratified me to see the interest which you continue to take in my affairs! I have long recognized you as a sort of transcendental Yankee, with all the native propensity of your countrymen to investigate matters that come within their range, but rendered almost poetical, in your case, by the refined methods which you adopt for its gratification.”

(BR 162)

Zenobia says it all: Hawthorne’s optic is the magnifying glass of Transcendentalism.

This method has its advantages. It gives something of the Ideal to the novelist’s conceptions. Especially in America, the Ideal is something precious and rare—no less in demand for its scarcity!—because America was just born yesterday. Some look for it in the novel of the sea or the novel of the frontier. Strangely for us, others see the Ideal in Europe (which we would not have guessed so poetic). Hawthorne has found his own Ideal in a philosophical view of objects. This method also has some disadvantages: the pace of the narrative slows to a crawl; every topic invites digression; the illusion of reality is suspended at every moment. Standing at the counter where she has replaced her elderly cousin, Phoebe sees a relative enter whom she does not know—Judge Pyncheon. “Is it possible that you are Phoebe Pyncheon,” he inquires, “only child of my dear cousin and classmate . . . ? Yes; yes; we must be better acquainted! I am your kinsman, my dear” (HSG 117–18). In response to these words, Phoebe curtsies. The judge leans forward across the counter to place a paternal kiss on Phoebe’s cheek. Unfortunately, Phoebe backs away at this moment, and leaves her respectable relative, with his body sprawled on the counter, lips pursed outward, to experience the pleasure that Ixion must have felt kissing the void. The author takes this critical moment to create a study of Judge Pyncheon’s face and Phoebe’s involuntary repugnance. All sorts of expressions succeed one another in the physiognomy of this giver of kisses. First, his face displays a satisfaction as wide and as massive, as it were, as the person of the Judge himself. Then, as quickly as a country landscape darkens when a thundercloud advances, his face becomes cold, hard, implacable. Next, his demeanor abruptly reveals an unexpected resemblance to a portrait that hangs in a lower chamber of the House of the Seven Gables (and at which Phoebe cannot look without trembling): the portrait of an ancestor that prophesies all the grim inflexibility in the face of this descendant. Herein are reflected all the weaknesses, the bad passions,
the vile tendencies, the moral maladies that lead to crime: all of them perpetuated from generation to generation (with corresponding facial traits) by an inheritance inscribed on the book of destiny. At last, the nimbus cloud breaks up, the fatal resemblance fades away. Then comes a smile that operates on poor, trembling Phoebe like a warm ray of sunshine on a flower or the entrancing gaze of a snake upon a defenseless bird: “I like it much, my little cousin! You are a good child, and know how to take care of yourself. A young girl—especially if she be a very pretty one—can never be too chary of her lips” (HSG 119–20). The scene is over, but two pages of psychology, during which a character is left in such a difficult and inconvenient position, is a stretch. We prefer the long speeches that Homer’s heroes give when they already have their arms raised in combat.

The most remarkable use of this psychological method is the long and interesting study of an intelligence happily gifted in principle, but ruined by the outrages of unhappiness and injustice, and waking up from its lethargy through the feeling of the beautiful, by an unexpected communion with life and youth. We mean to speak of Clifford and Phoebe in *The House of the Seven Gables*, the book to which we return often because it is Hawthorne’s best, and about which we have the privilege of speaking more or less first.¹⁸ Even the title is a Puritan idea: anyone can see that the seven gables of the doomed mansion are meant to signify the seven deadly sins. Founded on avarice and transgression, the house has been haunted periodically by avarice and transgression. At the present moment, an elderly Clifford lives in it with his elderly sister, Hepzibah. Superstitious terrors, ghosts, and memories of old crimes reside there with them. But they dare not leave. Submitting to their destiny, they become their own jailers. On circumstantial evidence, Clifford had been accused of killing his uncle; he would have been condemned if it were not for the influence of his cousin, Judge Pyncheon. But the truth is that the Judge placed the blame of that frightful accusation on an innocent person, seeking to destroy his cousin’s reputation while enhancing his own. That uncle, however, died of an apoplectic attack, a genetic condition in the family passed down ever since the original patriarch of the Pyncheon line first atoned for his crime by that horrible death. Clifford’s reason is wrecked by this unhappiness. With a past that was painful (and, in others’ eyes, criminal and bloody), with a future that is nothing more than a great and terrifying void, for him the present can only be peopled by terrors, sorrows, and ghosts. He lives in a house that weighs upon him like one of those capes of lead that Dante placed upon the shoulders of certain of the damned.¹⁹ How can poor Hepzibah, his sister, with her incurable nostalgia and her equally incurable scowl (both fatal and hereditary) hope
to restore his mental balance and the health of his soul? How can Clifford not be crazy?

Have you not met the man we have been describing?—do you not see all around you, dear reader (even, perhaps, in your own person) people who find only unhappiness and suffering in what, for others, would be a source of happiness and peace? They are forever fighting against the current: in whatever broad social channel fate has thrown them, inevitably they cannot go with the flow and the torrent passes over their body. Gladly they destroy all the promise of their intelligence, the flower of their youth. They starve themselves of the very food essential to their elite nature; they are the instruments of their own torture, and prepare with their own hands the poison with which they will nourish themselves at the very start of life's grand banquet. It is easy for them to arrange a passable existence: they accustom themselves to alienation, solitude, torture. Let us not mock these poor souls, and let us not say, with superior wisdom, that there is an art to being unhappy. Let us be sympathetic to them. These are the souls whose bitter chalice is never empty, because they have a cruel need bring it to their lips. Its bitterness never goes away for them. They brood over it slowly, perpetually, so well that they eventually succumb to it. Others drown their reason in the cup of pleasure: they die, distilling until the end life's absinthe.

Such a man is Clifford. His whole life is a relentless study of the secret of suffering, and the fruit of this long effort is a sort of lunacy. To speak in Transcendentalist terms, he is the Representative Man of all souls devoted to unhappiness. The term comes from Hawthorne himself. He has not shrunken from applying to a character in his novel the philosophical term applied by Emerson to the greatest men of history. Clifford, creature of his fantasy, seems to him worthy of analysis, as it were, in the same way that Plato, Swedenborg, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Napoleon, and Goethe appealed to Emerson. Is there any other trait that can better establish the importance that the storyteller attaches to his fiction? Those of us who are critics are sometimes touched by a scruple in the presence of these English or American works of the imagination: “Let us not take these novels too seriously,” we are tempted to say to ourselves; “are they anything more than games of fancy played for the amusement of others? Can we really hope to find in them the expression of a society, the faithful mirror of a country, an epoch, and a people?” Well, yes! There are some pages that reassure us, that require us to treat these works without disdain or levity. Here is a very distinguished writer, a philosophe, who makes with his own hands an imaginary being, and sets out to study him as if he were an historical figure. He employs the same zeal and curiosity to explain Clifford that one would expect from any other case history
of dementia (the poet Cowper, say, or King George III). Here, he begs the reader’s indulgence: “The author needs great faith in his reader’s sympathy; else he must hesitate to give details so minute, and incidents apparently so trifling . . .” (HSG 150). Elsewhere, when Phoebe’s presence restores to the old man a smile and a glimmer of reason, the author says, “But we strive in vain to put the idea into words. No adequate expression of the beauty and profound pathos with which it impresses us, is attainable” (HSG 142).

The arrival of little cousin Phoebe in the doomed house produces an effect just like that of a drop of rose oil sprinkled in a large chest crammed with all kinds of things—even mourning clothes. An unexpected balm permeates the darkness, lends its fragrance to all those souvenirs, dispels the air of melancholy. Phoebe’s beauty, her voice, her youth remind her old cousin Clifford of the notes of some forgotten melody, a tune familiar in his youth. In Phoebe’s presence he becomes a child again, he begins life anew. Hawthorne’s delicate analysis of Clifford’s regeneration is charming, as little by little his mind loses its somber cast through the simple incidents of the drama. His cousin the Judge, inheritor of the Puritan physiognomy and of the Pyncheons’ hypocritical avarice, receives his punishment just at the moment when he is about to complete his crime. Persuaded that Clifford knows the secret of a treasure passed down by a common ancestor, the Judge threatens these vulnerable inhabitants of the House of the Seven Gables if they do not agree to reveal its whereabouts to him. At this moment the blood of the Pyncheon family rises to the throat of their worthy descendant and strangles him. This death lifts thirty years of anguish, degradation, and insanity from the breast of the poor lunatic. He then finds the courage to flee the voluntary prison with his sister. Poor frightened owls, they escape from their darkness to the streets, where the townspeople are stunned to see them. As if by instinct, they run to the train station, jump into a car, and depart without knowing where—so long as it is far from their tyrannical hypocrite, far from that fatal house, far from damnation, from pain and madness. Clifford’s flight affords Hawthorne one of his most charming chapters; delightfully, we see him regain his senses and rediscover the happiness of breathing, of living, of letting his imagination run free.

Next to the Pyncheons (the sly persecutor, and the fallen persecuted), next to the vivacious Phoebe (a young, positive, and steady girl—descended from Puritan stock but brightened by a golden thread of gayety), the author places Holgrave, the daguerreotype artist. He is the image and the model of an adventurer in a country where everyone is invited to do the same. He is Gil Blas in a Puritan and democratic country. He has held every job that an honest man can have, and, thus, he has also been a man of letters.
He is only twenty-two years old. He was first a country schoolmaster, then a salesman in a general store. From there, or perhaps at the same time, he was the publisher of a political newspaper. Before long, he was a peddler of cologne and other essences for a Connecticut manufactory; then, by and by, he practiced dentistry—just another episode in the drama of his life. As a supernumerary officer on an ocean liner, he visited Europe and found a way, before coming back, to see Italy, a part of France, and Germany. In a more recent period, we find him in a Fourierist association, and, lastly, lecturing on animal magnetism. Today, he works with daguerreotypes, but is no more interested in this than in his other professions. There is one thing, however, that he holds dear: he has retained his conscience, and we are grateful to him for it, because after so many various adventures, it would be difficult to keep.

Holgrave is from the generation that believes that the world is not made of granite, and that it is easy for him to change its form. The human race—an old and evil subject, with grey hair and a wrinkled complexion, more decrepit than respectable—appears to him in the shape of a beautiful adolescent, capable of infinite progress and every virtue. He has reason to believe that we are not condemned to mope around an old and unhappy rut. It would be better for the young man never to have been born, and for the aged man to die, than to believe in such a pitiful doctrine. But his mistake is to think that the time in which he is living is destined, by a flattering privilege, to strip off Antiquity’s rags and to furnish itself in a brand new outfit, instead of replacing its garments (as our fathers did, bit by bit) by means of mending. He believes himself to be a thinker. His intellect is shallow; he has barely been educated; but his nature is forceful. His culture is incomplete, but sturdy; his philosophy is rude, coarse and vague; but these traits are accompanied by a practical mind, a discreet ambition, an ardor for human progress, a distrust of old institutions; in him are faith and infidelity. With what he has—and what he lacks—Holgrave is the modern American type, the Representative Man of generations who will call themselves tomorrow the Republic of the United States. Let us hear some of the words of this American Gil Blas:

“Shall we never, never get rid of this Past?!” cried he, keeping up the earnest tone of his preceding conversation.] It lies upon the Present like a giant’s dead body! In fact, the case is just as if a young giant were compelled to waste all his strength in carrying about the corpse of the old giant, his grandfather, who died a long while ago, and only needs to be decently buried. Just think a moment; and it will startle you to see what slaves we are to by-gone times—to Death, if we give the matter the right word!

[“But I do not see it,” observed Phoebe.
“For example, then,” continued Holgrave. [A] Dead Man, if he happens to have made a will, disposes of wealth no longer his own; or, if he die intestate, it is distributed in accordance with the notions of men much longer dead than he. A Dead Man sits on all our judgment-seats; and living judges do but search out and repeat his decisions. We read in Dead Men’s books! We laugh at Dead Men’s jokes, and cry at Dead Men’s pathos! We are sick of Dead Men’s diseases, physical and moral, and die of the same remedies with which dead doctors killed their patients! We worship the living Deity according to Dead Men’s forms and creeds. Whatever we seek to do, of our own free motion, a Dead Man’s icy hand obstructs us! Turn our eyes to what point we may, a Dead Man’s white, immitigable face encounters them, and freezes our very heart! And we must be dead ourselves before we can begin to have our proper influence on our own world, which will then be no longer our world, but the world of another generation, with which we shall have no shadow of a right to interfere. I ought to have said, too, that we live in Dead Men’s houses; as, for instance, in this of the Seven Gables!”

“And why not,” said Phoebe, “so long as we can be comfortable in them?”

“But we shall live to see the day, I trust,” went on the artist, “when no man shall build his house for posterity. Why should he? He might just as reasonably order a durable suit of clothes—leather, or gutta percha, or whatever else lasts longest—so that his great-grandchildren should have the benefit of them, and cut precisely the same figure in the world that he himself does. If each generation were allowed and expected to build its own houses, that single change, comparatively unimportant in itself, would imply almost every reform which society is now suffering for. I doubt whether even our public edifices—our capitol, state-houses, court-houses, city-hall, and churches—ought to be built of such permanent materials as stone or brick. It were better that they should crumble to ruin once in twenty years, or thereabouts, as a hint to the people to examine into and reform the institutions which they symbolize.

[“How you hate everything old!” said Phoebe in dismay.—“It makes me dizzy to think of such a shifting world!]

“I certainly love nothing mouldy,” answered Holgrave. “Now this old Pyncheon-house! Is it a wholesome place to live in, with its black shingles, and the green moss that shows how damp they are?—its dark, low-studded rooms?—its grime and sordidness, which are the crystallization on its walls of the human breath, that has been drawn and exhaled here, in discontent and anguish? The house ought to be purified with fire—purified till only its ashes remain!”

“Then why do you live in it?” asked Phoebe, a little piqued.
“Oh, I am pursuing my studies here; not in books, however!” replied Holgrave.] The house, in my view, is expressive of that odious and abominable Past, with all its bad influences, against which I have just been declaiming. I dwell in it for awhile, that I may know the better how to hate it. By-the-by, did you ever hear the story of Maule, the wizard, and what happened between him and your immeasurably great-grandfather?”

“Yes indeed!” said Phoebe. “I heard it long ago from my father, and two or three times from my Cousin Hepzibah, in the month that I have been here. She seems to think that all the calamities of the Pyncheons began from that quarrel with the wizard, as you call him. And you, Mr. Holgrave, look as if you thought so too! How singular, that you should believe what is so very absurd, when you reject many things that are a great deal worthier of credit!”

“I do believe it,” said the artist seriously—“not as a superstition, however—but as proved by unquestionable facts, and as exemplifying a theory.] Now, see! Under those seven gables, at which we now look up—and which old Colonel Pyncheon meant to be the house of his descendants, in prosperity and happiness, down to an epoch far beyond the present—under that roof, through a portion of three centuries, there has been perpetual remorse of conscience, a constantly defeated hope, strife amongst kindred, various misery, a strange form of death,[*dark suspicion, unspeakable disgrace,*]—all, or most of which calamity, I have the means of tracing to the old Puritan’s inordinate desire to plant and endow a family. To plant a family! This idea is at the bottom of most of the wrong and mischief which men do. The truth is, that, once in every half-century, at longest, a family should be merged into the great, obscure mass of humanity, and forget all about its ancestors. Human blood, in order to keep its freshness, should run in hidden streams, as the water of an aqueduct is conveyed in subterranean pipes.  

*(HSG 183–85)*

We should say that, once married to Phoebe, Holgrave regrets inheriting a country house that is not made of stone. The rich democrat becomes conservative.

For those who would like to get to know the principal gifts of this author in a single book, we confidently recommend *The House of the Seven Gables*. Here are brought together all the traces of the old Puritan ethos, the new ethos (in its successive forms), and the most striking example of the psychological manner of the storyteller: in this one book, as we see it, we find Hawthorne complete. Once a Transcendentalist in his theories and his political opinions, artistically he is still one in the conception of
his characters. After having influenced his convictions and his life, these doctrines only leave traces in his novels, but they give them their particular originality.

Earlier we imagined America as a hypothetical form of Plato’s Republic. What would have become of this platonic Union if, in one of those unanticipated movements that such tentative loyalties might have provoked in Athens, the slaves awoke and cried out for liberty? Would it have declared itself to be for or against the slaves? Would it open its eyes to this new light, or, like Aristotle several years later, would it declare slavery to be an inevitable fact of human societies? There is evidence that this colony of Platonists would have divided, some pushing to extremes the logic of their ideas and the boldness of their temperament, others faithful to the interest of the State and to traditional ideas. That is what has happened to the American philosophical school. The question of slavery, the Sphinx of American society, has placed itself at the center of the Republic at a crossroads where all paths end. No one can avoid it and everyone must have an opinion about it. Each one of them has responded in his own manner. Some, and among them the head himself, have become abolitionists or “free soilers.” Others, having made so many other concessions to the Yankees, have remained loyal to their party and acknowledge rightful ownership of slaves. The former are in the opposition, the others have the confidence and favor of the government. Uncle Sam (the popular name of the latter) reserves its spoils for them, including Hawthorne. An elegant and quick biography of Franklin Pierce (an honorable service rendered to a friend, and a consecration given by a popular pen to the politics of the Compromise) earned the novelist the lucrative position of consul at Liverpool, which he has held for four years. Never has a literary prize been so handsomely awarded. All the same, we can hope that slavery will not be for the United States what the hereditary curse is in *The House of the Seven Gables*, an incurable evil to which the Puritan ethos resigns itself perhaps too easily. “Slavery,” says Hawthorne in his biography of Pierce, “is an evil beyond human remedy. Only Providence can efface it.” All in good time, Hawthorne urges; but would it not be wise and human to clear the path? Do not the partisans of the Compromise and all the other laws protecting slavery make the work of Providence that much more difficult?

*Revue contemporaine* (30 May 1857)
Notes

1. Étienne alludes to Charles Baudelaire’s *Flowers of Evil* (*Les fleurs du mal*), first published in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* and then assembled later for publication as a collection by Auguste Poulet-Malassais in June 1857.

2. Roman gods of the household.

3. First published in *The Snow-Image, and Other Twice-told Tales* (1851).

4. First published in *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846).

5. Published in 1563, this work is an account written by English Protestant John Foxe as a chronicle of those precursors to the Protestant Reformation.

6. Étienne refers to François-René de Chateaubriand’s (1768–1848) *René* (1802), whose main character epitomized the ideal young Romantic hero.

7. Lord Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, published between 1812 and 1818, chronicles a young man’s life and frustrations at the onset of the nineteenth century.

8. Pierre Corneille’s (1606–84) classical drama about Christian persecution in Armenia was first performed in 1643.

9. *Indiana* (1831) and *Lélia* (1833; 1839) were both novels of passion written by George Sand.

10. Followers of Frenchman Étienne Cabet’s (1788–1856) utopian socialist philosophies. They set up a community in Nauvoo, Illinois, during the middle of the nineteenth century. The movement disbanded at the end of the nineteenth century.

11. Aspasia (470 B.C.–400 B.C.), a woman involved in the political sphere in Athens.

12. This remark refers to Amelia Jenks Bloomer (1818–94), an American advocate for women’s rights and temperance, best remembered for her campaign to remedy the deleterious effects of restrictive feminine fashion, preferring loose-fitting trousers (“bloomers”) to corseted dresses and skirts.

13. Étienne’s gloss bears remarkable resemblance to a suppressed passage in Hawthorne’s *French and Italian Notebooks*, notoriously published by Julian Hawthorne in his 1885 memoir, *Nathaniel Hawthorne and His Wife*. Hawthorne’s reflections on Margaret Fuller provoked a firestorm of criticism from her defenders, but their sting has left a mark on much later criticism of both writers. Trying to understand and explain Fuller’s possibly dubious relationship with Giovanni Ossoli, an Italian revolutionary (whom Hawthorne considered a “boor,” a “hymen without the intellectual spark”), the novelist was led to conclude:

As from her towards him, I do not understand what feeling there could have been, except it were purely sensual; as from him towards her, there could hardly have been even this, for she had not the charm of womanhood. But she was a woman anxious to try all things, and fill up her experience in all directions; she had a strong and coarse nature, too, which she had done her utmost to refine, with infinite pains, but which of course could only be superficially changed. The solution of the riddle lies in this direction; nor does one’s conscience revolt at the idea of thus solving it; for—at least, this is my own experience—Margaret has not left, in the hearts and minds of those who knew her, any deep witness for her integrity and purity. She was a great humbug; of course with much talent, and much moral reality, or else she could not have been so great a humbug.
But she had stuck herself full of borrowed qualities, which she chose to provide herself with, but which had no root in her.


14. A quote from *Le dépositaire infidèle* or *The Faithless Depositary* (Book IX, Fable I) in *Les fables* (1668), the renowned work of Jean de la Fontaine (1621–85).

15. In chapter 20 of *The Blithedale Romance*, Zenobia says to Miles Coverdale, “‘You are a poet—at least, as poets go now-a-days—and must be allowed to make an opera-glass of your imagination, when you look at women’” (Centenary Edition, vol. III, 170).

16. Étienne refers here to “*Le lorgnon,*” by Madame de Girardin (Bruxelles: Hauman, Cattoir et Cie, 1837). Delphine de Girardin née Gay (1804–55) was a French author of contemporary sketches who wrote under the pen name “Vicomte Delaunay.”

17. Ixion, from Greek mythology, who slept with a cloud resembling Zeus’ wife Hera while visiting Olympus.

18. In “Poètes et romanciers américains: Nathaniel Hawthorne” (1852), E.-D. Forgues makes brief mention of *The House of the Seven Gables*.

19. Dante envisions this curse for Hypocrites in Canto XXIII of the *Inferno*.

20. Emerson devotes a chapter to each of these figures in *Representative Men* (1850).


22. Étienne paraphrases the most notorious passage from Hawthorne’s campaign biography. Slavery, Hawthorne writes, is

one of those evils which divine Providence does not leave to be remedied by human contrivances, but which, in its own good time, by some means impossible to be anticipated, but of the simplest and easiest operation, when all its uses shall have been fulfilled, it causes to vanish like a dream. There is no instance, in all history, of the human will and intellect having perfected any great moral reform by methods which it adapted to that end; but the Progress of the world, at every step, leaves some evil or wrong on the path behind it, which the wisest of mankind, of their own set purpose, could never have found the way to rectify. Whatever contributes to the great cause of good, contributes to all its subdivisions and varieties; and, on this score, the lover of his race, the enthusiast, the philanthropist of whatever theory, might lend his aid to put a man, like the one before us, in the leadership of the world’s affairs.