

# HAWTHORNE

By W. C. Brownell

## I



HAWTHORNE was so exceptional a writer that he has very generally been esteemed a great one. In America such an estimate has been almost universal.

He won his way slowly, but his first solid achievement met with ready appreciation and thenceforward fame awaited his subsequent, and retroactively rewarded his earlier, performances. We stood in much need of great writers at the time; and, though our literary pantheon is now more populous, it would occur to no one, probably, to displace his figure from the niche where it was speedily installed, and where even a lesser one would have been welcome. His works never having been supplanted among us, it is hardly surprising that with us they stand where they did. Comparisons are in their favor. And their style, clear, chaste and correct, is of the preservative order. They form a large constituent portion of our classics—our somewhat slender sheaf of truly classic production. As such they are read—more precisely, have been read—by everybody. Up to the present time at least they have been universally part of the “required reading,” so to speak, of youth and the recollection of old—a recollection always roseate if afforded half a chance and in Hawthorne’s case, one suspects, enjoying practical immunity from the readjustments and rectification of later re-reading.

On the whole, Hawthorne and his country are quits. If he enriched its literary treasure and contributed generously to its literary glory, as incontestably he did, it furnished him with both a comparatively clear field for the exercise, and a comparatively undistracting background for the exhibition, of his genius. In no literature would his works have been unobserved or even obscured by competition. But, as contributions to American literature they have abroad undoubtedly achieved success by an ampler margin, and at home have

been awarded an importance commensurate with their originality. Hitherto, at all events, among ourselves their lack of substance has been deemed a quality instead of a defect and, indeed, their “airy and charming insubstantiality” their chief title to fame. We have had so few poets! The temptation has been great to eke out the roll with Hawthorne, and, sometimes, not to put too fine a point upon the matter, to call him the greatest of them all. “His beautiful, light imagination,” says Mr. James in an exquisite sentence, “is the wing that on the autumn evening just brushes the dusky window.” “The rarest creative imagination of the century, the rarest in some ideal respects since Shakespeare,” says Lowell in his hearty wholesale way. We shall see. But one thing is certain. If Hawthorne’s importance is to remain at its present evaluation it will not be because of his “insubstantiality.” It will be, as it is in the case of every writer who makes no sensuous appeal, because of the amount and quality of significant truth effectively expressed in his writings.

## II

THIS was not quite his own view, it may be said. And what his own view was he made perfectly plain. Though not an expansive, Hawthorne’s was a perfectly candid nature. A recluse in life he overflows to the reader. The preface to the “Twice-Told Tales,” in which and in the “Mosses from an Old Manse,” he felt his way to his larger fiction is, in the main, an admirable piece of self-characterization, much of it as applicable to his entire work as to these unpretending stories. It contains three especially significant sentences. “The sketches are not,” he says, “it is hardly necessary to say, profound, but it is rather more remarkable that they so seldom, if ever, show any design on the writer’s part to make them so.” Again they “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." And, finally, in words that go to the root of the matter: "Whether from lack of power, or an unconquerable reserve, the author's touches have often an effect of tameness." Now it is evident that intercourse with the world is not opened on these terms. The world assumes that the recluse issuing from his seclusion should bring with him his warrant for dwelling in it, should communicate the result of communing with his own mind and heart. If this result is not profound or deeply and permanently valuable, it is asking too much of the heedless world to ask it to accept unconquerable reserve as the reason. The world is bound to esteem this the best you can do and refuses to ascribe its lack of profundity merely to the—truly remarkable, as you say—absence of any design on your part to make it more worth while. It may, of course, be said that a recluse is as much entitled to claim attention for trifles as any one else. Only, in that case his status of recluse is immaterial. And, plainly, Hawthorne was not at all disposed to consider it immaterial. He thought it, as others have done, the most material fact about both him and his work, as is plain from his calling his reserve "unconquerable." So that it is impossible to share his uncertainty as to whether the tameness of his touches proceeds from this reserve or from lack of power. The answer clearly is: both. And to go a step further, and, as I say, to the root of the matter, his unconquerable reserve proceeds in all probability from his lack of power—at least of anything like sustained, unintermittent power which can be relied upon and evoked at will by its possessor.

Energy at all events is precisely the element most conspicuously lacking in the normal working of this imagination which to Lowell recalls Shakespeare's. Repeatedly he seems to be on the point of exhibiting it, of moving us, that is to say; but, except, I think, in "The Scarlet Letter," he never quite does so. His unconquerable reserve steps in and turns him aside. He never crosses the line, never makes the attempt. He is too fastidious to attempt vigor and fail. His intellectual sensitiveness, to which failure in such an endeavor would

be acutely palpable, prevents the essay. In the instance of "The Scarlet Letter," where he does achieve it, he does so as it were in spite of himself, and it is curious that he instinctively reestablishes his normal equilibrium by failing to appreciate his achievement. At least he prefers to it his "House of the Seven Gables." He is much more at home in amusing himself than in creating something. "I have sometimes," he says, "produced a singular and not unpleasing effect, so far as my own mind was concerned, by imagining a train of incidents in which the spirit and mechanism of the fairy legend should be combined with the characters and manners of familiar life." He was content if his effect was pleasing so far as his own mind was concerned. And his own mind was easily pleased with the kind of process he describes. That is, he follows his temperamental bent with tranquil docility instead of compelling it to serve him in the construction of some fabric of importance. The latter business demands energy and effort. And if he made so little effort it is undoubtedly because he had so little energy.

His genius was a reflective one. He loved to muse. Revery was a state of mind which he both indulged and applauded, and there can hardly be a more barren one for the production of anything more significant than conceits and fancies. Reality repelled him. What attracted him was mirage. Mirage is his specific aim, the explicit goal of his art—which thus becomes inevitably rather artistry than art. His practice is sustained by his theory. Speaking of a scene mirrored in a river he exclaims: "Which, after all, was the most real—the picture or the original?—the objects palpable to our grosser senses, or their apotheosis in the stream beneath? Surely the disembodied images stand in closer relation to the soul." If this were a figure expressive of the mirroring of nature by art it would be a happy one, though not convincing to those who believe that the artistic synthesis of nature should be more rather than less definite than its material. But it is not a figure. It is a statement of Hawthorne's preference for the vague and the undefined in nature itself as nearer to the soul. Nearer to the soul of the poet it may be, not to that of the artist. The most idealizing artist can count on enough vague-

ness of his own—whether it handicap his effort or illumine his result in dealing with his material. And it is not near to the soul of the poet endowed with the architectonic faculty—the poet in the Greek sense, the maker. It is the congenial content of contemplation indeterminate and undirected.

The contemplative mind, the contemplative mood, are above all hospitable to fancy, and in fancy Hawthorne's mind and mood were wonderfully rich. He had but to follow its beckoning and entrust himself to its guidance to make a pretty satisfactory journey, at least so far as his own mind was concerned. The result was amazingly productive. How many "Mosses" and "Twice-Told Tales" are there? Certainly a prodigious number when one considers the narrowness of their range and their extraordinary variety within it. Their quality is singularly even, I think. Some of them—a few—are better than others, but mainly in more successfully illustrating their common quality. What this is Hawthorne himself sufficiently indicates in saying, "Instead of passion there is sentiment; and even in what purport to be pictures of actual life we have allegory." But his consciousness of his limitations does not exorcise them, though his candor, which is charming, wins our appreciation for their corresponding excellences.

Or, rather, no. It is so absolute as to make us feel a little ungracious at our inability to take quite his view after all. After all, it is plain that he has a paternal feeling for them that it is a little difficult to share. Sentiment replaces passion, it is true. But the sentiment is pale for sentiment. It is sentiment insufficiently *sent*. Allegory, it is true, replaces reality, but the allegory itself is insufficiently real. The tales are not merely in a less effective, less robust, less substantial category than that which includes passion and actual life, but within their own category they are—most of them—unaccented and inconclusive. They are too faint in color and too frail in construction quite to merit the inference of Hawthorne's pretty deprecation. They have not "the pale tint of flowers that blossomed in too retired a shade." They are hardly flowers at all, but grasses and ferns. And while he exaggerates in saying that "if opened in the sunshine" they are "apt to look exceedingly like a volume of

blank pages," he is distinctly optimistic in thinking that they would gain greatly by being read "in the clear, brown, twilight atmosphere" in which they were written, and that they cannot always "be taken into the reader's mind without a shiver." They can—always. There is not a shiver in them. Their tone is lukewarm and their temper Laodicean. Witchery is precisely the quality they suggest but do not possess. Their atmosphere is not that of the clear brown twilight in which familiar objects are poetized, but that of the gray day in which they acquire monotone. The twilight and moonlight, so often figuratively ascribed to Hawthorne's genius, are in fact a superstition. There is nothing eerie or elfin about his genius. He is too much the master of it and directs it with a too voluntary control. Fertile as it is, its multifarious conceits and caprices are harnessed and handled with the light, firm hand of perfect precision and guided along a level course of extremely unbroken country. There is no greater sanity to be met with in literature than Hawthorne's. The wholesome constitution of his mind is inveterate and presides with unintermittent constancy in his prose. Now caprice, conducted by reason, infallibly incurs the peril of insipidity, and it is not to be denied that many of the tales settle comfortably into the category of the prosaic.

Why, then, have they their reputation, and why does one feel a little awkward and unsympathetic in confessing that he finds them dull? In the first place, the fondness of the public for them has been, in strict history, an acquired taste. They met with very little favor at first. The genial Longfellow praised them to deaf ears. After the appearance of "The Scarlet Letter" readers turned back to them in appreciative disposition and, as is usually the case under such circumstances, found or fancied in them what they looked for. But mainly they won and have kept their classic position, it is not to be doubted, because of their originality, their refinement, and their elevation. There is certainly nothing else like them; their taste is perfect; and, in general, they deal with some phase of the soul, some aspect or quality or transaction of the spiritual life. They are the echoes of no literary precedent, but as much Hawthorne's own as his physiognomy. They

exhibit a literary fastidiousness not so much free from as absolutely dead to the manifold seductions of the meretricious, a literary breeding so admirable as to seem unconscious of the existence of vulgar expedients. And their informing purpose lies quite outside the material world and its sublunary phenomena. No small portion of their originality consists, indeed, in the association of their refinement and elevation with what we can now see is their mediocrity. Elsewhere in the world of fiction mediocrity is associated with anything but fineness of fibre and spirituality. The novelty of the combination in Hawthorne's case was disconcerting, and it is small wonder that for a time at least—for a generation, no doubt, so gradual is the readjustment of popular esteem of the unpopular—the importance of the "Twice-Told Tales" and the "Mosses" was argued from their distinction. Finally, some of them—too few, assuredly—are good stories.

### III

THE rest are sterilized by the evil eye of Allegory under whose baleful spell for some reason or other he early fell. Allegory justifies itself when the fiction is the fact and the moral the induction—"Gulliver" and "The Pilgrim's Progress," for example. Bunyan's imagination created a world of types so vividly presented as to have the force of individuals, provided them with adventures as animating as the incidents of romance, and enforced his moral by giving an independent and ideal verisimilitude to its innocent and unconscious exponents. "The Pilgrim's Progress" is undoubtedly a tract, but if it had been only a tract it would never have made its triumphal tour of the world. It is the splendid panoramic construction of a great imagination inspired by the experience of the soul in the struggle with sin. It is, in a word, a work of art in itself, leaning lightly—though, of course to all the more purpose—on its moral, as lightly as a dream on its interpretation or a vision on the conscious concentration of the seer. Most persons probably read "Gulliver" for the story and miss the satire. The "Divine Comedy" and "Don Quixote" and "Paradise Lost" are allegories; Æsop's "Fables," even Plu-

tarch's "Lives" are allegories; history, conceived as philosophy teaching by example, is an allegory. So, in a sense, is all art. But allegory is art only when its representation is as imaginatively real as its meaning. The mass of allegory—allegory strictly devoted to exposition and dependent upon exegesis, allegory explicitly so-called—is only incidentally art at all.

Hawthorne's is of this order. His subject is always something other than its substance. Everything means something else. Dealing with the outer world solely for the sake of the inner, he is careless of its character and often loses its significance in mere suggestiveness. His meaning is the burden of his story, not the automatic moral complement of its vivid and actual reality. Hence the sense of reality is absent from it, and for this nothing will atone in any form of art where the sense of unreality is not sought instead. It is rather singular that this latter effect is one he never sought. He never entered fairy-land—except to retell its classic tales in his manuals, "The Wonder Book" and "Tanglewood Tales."

His faculty of discovering morals on which tales could be framed is prodigious. It rises to the distinction of a special capacity of the mind, like the gift for languages or a genius for chess. It is, as one may say, a by-product of the Puritan preoccupation. He did not find sermons in stones. He had the sermons already; his task was to find the stones to fit them. And these his fancy furnished him with a fertility paralleling his use for them. But his interest in shaping these was concentrated on their illustrative and not on their real qualities. Instead of realizing vividly and presenting concretely the elements of his allegory, he contented himself with their plausibility as symbols. On this he always insisted and to compass it he expended much ingenuity. His fancy was of the kind that never completely loses its hold of the actual. His literary taste was too serious to content itself with pure mystification. The insubstantiality he sought was to consist in the envelope, not in the object. He desired to dissemble, not to abjure reality. But the sense of reality even as a substructure for fancifulness is not to be obtained merely by the ingenuity which finds a possible scientific basis for what performs its sole service as apparently imaginary.

To take a crude instance of this oftenest subtle practice: "Egotism, or the Bosom Serpent," is not, artistically speaking, made more real by the foot-note that explains the actual occurrence of the physical fact in several cases. The story *as a story* stands or falls by the reality with which the man with the snake in his bosom is presented. In the course of this presentation the victim exclaims, "It gnaws me! It gnaws me." "And then," the narrator says, "there was an audible hiss, but whether it came from the apparent lunatic's own lips, or was the real hiss of a serpent, might admit of discussion." We are, of course, spared the discussion, which might easily fail to interest us, but the point is that the suggestion of it is precisely one of those touches which diminish the sense of reality in the presentation, and of which Hawthorne is so inordinately fond. Here it is of small comparative importance. The same thing is even charming, I think, in the author's speculation about Donatello's possibly pointed ears in "The Marble Faun," though I think also that he greatly overworks his faun-like resemblance, which apparently he cannot convince himself he has made sufficiently clear; and follows to ridiculous lengths in Donatello's skippings and capriolings, as well as in his conformation and character. But oftenest his intrusion of symbolism, that parasite on allegory itself, is a crying abuse of a perfectly superficial and trivial expedient. He was, in fact, allegory-mad. Allegory was his obsession. Consequently, he not only fails to handle the form in the minimizing manner of the masters, but often fails in effectiveness on the lower plan<sup>e</sup> where the moral occupies the foreground. "The Birthmark" is an instance. Nothing could be finer than the moral of this tale, which inculcates the fatal error of insisting on absolute perfection in what one loves most absolutely. But it is a moral even more obscurely brought out than it is fantastically symbolized. On the other hand, the moral of "Rappacini's Daughter," distinctly the richest and warmest of Hawthorne's productions, is still less effectively enforced. It is quite lost sight of in the development of the narrative, which is given an importance altogether disproportionate to the moral, and which yet is altogether dependent upon the moral for significance—sustained as it is and attractive as it might

have been had it been taken as a fairy tale frankly from the first.

In consequence, too, of this obsession by allegory, the tales in which he leaves it alone altogether, or at all events does not lean upon it, are the best, I think. His excellent faculty is released for freer play in such tales as "The Gentle Boy," in which, if he is less original, he is more human, and takes his place and holds his own in the lists of literature—instead of standing apart in the brown twilight and indulging his fancy in framing insubstantial fictions for the illustration of moral truths, not always of much moment. But the tendency grew upon him and developed into a fondness for almost pure symbolism, symbolism in which paradoxically the allegorizing element itself becomes attenuated and no truths at all are illustrated—the result being simply one thing told in terms of another. A great deal of his writing would be the better for the extraction of the allegorical and symbolic elements combined with it and constituting in its author's view its *raison d'être*. Very certainly it would be if upon the rest he had seriously exercised his imagination, instead of so completely surrendering to his fancy, content to deprecate complete irresponsibility by the counterpoise of his disillusioning good sense—which was remarkable, but the intrusion of which leaves his story often still more in the air.

#### IV

FOR the real misfortune of Hawthorne—and ours—was the misconception of his talent, resulting in this cultivation of his fancy to the neglect of his imagination. Issuing from the curious by-paths of literature into which this led him—a seclusion that quite matched the seclusion of his life—and engaging in the general literary competition on the immemorial terms for the exercise of the imagination, it is not to be doubted that he would have produced works far otherwise important than those which in the main he wrote. "The Scarlet Letter" is there to prove it. In the main he produced his effects by following the line of least resistance, not by effort and concentration. Instead of giving a tale more substance he wrote another equally slight. And he neglected his imagination because

he shrank from reality. Now, reality is precisely the province, the only province, the only concern, the only material of this noblest of faculties. It is, of course, as varied as the universe of which it is composed. There is the reality of "Tom Jones" and the reality of "Lear," for example; the reality of the ideal, indeed, as well as that of the phenomenal—its opposite being not the ideal but the fanciful. And Hawthorne coquetted and sported with it and made mirage of it. Instead of accepting it as the field of his imagination he made it the playground of his fancy.

Imagination and fancy differ, according to the old metaphysic, in that, both transcending experience, one observes and the other transgresses law. Everyone thus discriminates, at all events, between the imaginative and the fanciful. No writer ever had a deeper sense, or at least a firmer conviction, of the august immutability of law—those ordaining principles of the universe unbegotten by the race of mortal men and forever immune from the sleep of oblivion itself—to paraphrase the classic panegyric. His frequent theme—the soul and the conscience—absolutely implies the recognition of law and involves its acceptance. And philosophically his conception of his theme fundamentally, even fatalistically, insists on it. Three of the four novels embody its pre-determination. But too often in his treatment of his theme its basis crumbles. The centre of gravity too often falls outside of it—falls outside of law as well as of experience—because reality impresses and appeals to him so little, because his necessity for dissolving it into the insubstantial is so imperative, that the theme itself is frittered away in the course of its exposition. The law, the moral truth, which is the point of departure, or, as I say, the foundation of his more serious work, is not only not enforced but positively enervated. At every turn the characters and events might, one feels, evade its constraint, so wholly do the unreal and the fantastic predominate in both their constitution and their evolution. Beings so insubstantial and transactions so fantastic (one or both elements are generally present), can but fitfully or feebly illustrate anything so solid and stable as the moral principles upon which the real universe is conducted.

I do not suppose anything could have been

made of "Septimius Felton, or The Elixir of Life" in any case, except under the happiest circumstances and with the nicest art. But it is a capital instance of what Hawthorne's fancy can do with a theme of some suggestiveness in the way of emptying it of all significance. Contrast his performance for a moment with the treatment of the same theme by unmixed imaginative genius—Swift's account of his Struldbrugs. The mere material of this vision of earthly immortality, without the addition of any further detail, felicitously moulded into the form of a romance, would make one of the masterpieces of literature. For its profound and sombre power resides in its appalling reality. *This* is what a draught of the Elixir of Life would produce if the puerile decoction over which Septimius Felton labors through so many wearisome pages had crowned his hopes—this, and not the insipid experiences foreshadowed in the vaporings of his infatuated fancy. But "Septimius Felton" is a posthumous production and one of Hawthorne's failures. Consider a work of far more serious ambition if not in all respects of more representative character—"The Marble Faun." There is the same *kind* of ineffectiveness and for the same reason, the frivolity of fancy. The theme of "The Marble Faun," the irretrievableness of evil conjoined with its curious transforming power—the theme in short of that profoundly imaginative masterpiece, the myth of the Fall of Man—is rather stated than exemplified in the story, overlaid as this is with its reticulation of fantastic unreality. Its elaboration, its art, tends to enfeeble its conception; its substance extenuates its subject. It has had an extraordinary vogue. In Rome for thousands of Americans "Hilda's tower" probably still divides interest with the Sistine Chapel and the Vatican Stanze. Dean Stanley said he had read it seven times and meant to continue. But though the central conception is one of the noblest in literature, and though there are charming and truly characteristic touches in it—for instance, the effect on innocence of the mere consciousness of evil as shown in Hilda, the admirable little icicle existing for this express purpose—its significance is entombed rather than exhibited in its treatment. Probably its admirers considered that the treatment poetized the moral.

That is clearly the author's intention. But a truth is not poetized by being devitalized, and certainly the consequences of sin and the inexorableness of expiation are inadequately presented in a tale padded out of all proportion by material alien in its nature however "artistic" in its atmosphere and constituting half its volume, and obliged to make its moral plain in a formal statement, and to rectify its inconclusiveness in a postscript. The lack of construction, of orderly evolution, in the book is an obvious misfortune and shows very clearly Hawthorne's artistic weakness, whatever his poetic force. But its essential defect is its lack of the sense of reality, to secure which is the function of the imagination, and through which alone the truth of the fundamental conception can flower into effective exposition.

Though what I have called its alien constituent is real enough—ruins, studios, the campagna, the carnival, etc.—the material of "The Marble Faun" is perhaps too miscellaneous and unrelated for Hawthorne's imagination to unify into a solid support of his moral theme, even if it had not, after its habitual fashion, relaxed into the fantasticality of fancy in the detail. But certainly his imaginative success varies directly as the density of his material. This is greatest in "The Scarlet Letter," for instance; least in "Septimius Felton," among the longer productions. In "The House of the Seven Gables" there is detail enough but of singular thinness and an almost gaseous expansion. The interest of "The Blithedale Romance," the most artistically articulated as well as the most naturalistic of his novels, resides almost altogether in the part suggested directly by Hawthorne's Brook Farm experience. "Everything, you know," he says or makes Sybil Darcy say, "has its spiritual meaning, which is to the literal meaning what the soul is to the body." This unfortunate doctrine is the only thing that Hawthorne ever appears to have taken literally. But even this doctrine, taken literally, recognizes the literal meaning and the body as media for the manifestation of the spiritual meaning and the soul. Hawthorne's distinction assuredly lay in his treatment of the soul, yet since he was in no danger at all from materialistic excess or emphasis but quite the contrary, his treatment of the

soul is most successful when he is least neglectful of the body. It is indeed generally true that even the magical and the miraculous gain rather than lose from the emphasized reality of their setting; it is even true that some of the most noteworthy works of the imagination containing this element have depended for their abiding interest on this setting even more than on their miracles and magic.

And however his divorce from reality and consecration to the fanciful may have succeeded in giving Hawthorne a unique position and demonstrating his originality—however successful he may have been, that is to say, from his own point of view—there is one vital respect, at all events, in which he almost drops out of the novelist's category. There is no element in fiction at all comparable in importance with its portrayal of human character and its picture of human life. Fiction is the genre-painting of literature as its decorative painting is poetry. But Hawthorne cared nothing for people in life and made extraordinarily little of them in his books. In no other fiction are the characters so little characterized as in his, where in general their *raison d'être* is what they illustrate not what they are. In none other are they so airily conceived, so slightly sketched, so imperfectly defined. Mr. James points out, I think justly, that with the partial exception of Donatello in "The Marble Faun" there are no types among them. Elsewhere, to be sure, he complains that "Holgrave is not sharply enough characterized" and "is not an individual but a type." The inconsistency is natural, because it is natural to think of a character in fiction as either a type or an individual, and when you are considering one of Hawthorne's as either, you think he must be the other, the truth being that he is neither. He has not enough features for an individual and he has not enough representative traits for a type. His creator evokes him in pseudo-Frankenstein fashion for some purpose, symbolical, allegorical, or otherwise illustrative, and has no concern for his character, apart from this function of it, either for its typical value or its individual interest. He cares nothing for his personality; the more real he made it the more superfluous it would seem to him, since, though it is a prime necessity to establish it first of all if his actions are to have the

effect of reality, the effect of reality is precisely what he does not desire to secure. Consequently his dramas have the air of being conducted by marionettes.

This is less important in the short stories, of course. It may be said that of such a character as the minister in "The Black Veil" the reader needs to be told nothing, that his character is easily inferred and, anyhow, is not the point, that the point is his wearing the veil and thereby presenting a rueful picture illustrative of our uncleaned condition from secret faults. In that case the idea is enough, and a hortatory paragraph would have sufficed for it. And in any case it is easy to see how immensely the idea would have gained in effectiveness, in cogency, if the minister had been characterized into reality—if he had been characterized, say, by the author of the "Vénus d'Ille," a story, for example, which makes an abiding impression on readers whom its significance, if it have any, wholly escapes. But in sustained fiction, in novels, to neglect the personality of the personages is to invite failure. Few novelists probably realize their characters sufficiently to be able to say, with Thackeray, that they "know the sound of their voices." But most of them doubtless would like to. The origin of most characters, indeed, in fiction of any moment is well known to be such as Thackeray himself has described in speaking of "a certain Costigan whom I had invented (as I suppose authors invent their personages) out of scraps, heel-taps, odds and ends of character." Hawthorne's, it is needless to say, were not thus conceived. When he needed a character to illustrate one of his deeply meditated truths or one of his fanciful conceits, he invented it *ad hoc*. His characters, indeed, are not creations, but expedients. Roger Chillingworth is an expedient—and as such the only flaw in "The Scarlet Letter," whose impressive theme absorbed its author out of abstractions, as I have heretofore intimated, and compelled him, except in the case of Chillingworth, to create the only real people of his imaginary world. In creating Dimmesdale and Hester—and I am quite sure Pearl, also—Nature herself, as Arnold says of Wordsworth, "seems to take the pen out of his hand and write for him." Even here, one is bound to add, the portraits lack the loving touch. Hawthorne seems himself to care quite as much

for Feathertop as for Hester Prynne. In fact he is rather partial to Feathertop—a circumstance which a reader similarly disposed to the symbolical might feel justified in considering significant. He has perhaps a weakness for such characters as Phoebe in "The House of the Seven Gables" and Hilda in "The Marble Faun." But no one would pretend to say they were realized with any definition. They are such generalized portraits as the fancy might paint of youth and innocence in a sunbonnet or a Leghorn hat passing its window in a quiet street of Concord or Salem. Kenyon is certainly *sculpté en bois*; considering the state of the art among his compatriots then in Rome it was perhaps a happy stroke to give him his particular profession. Hollingsworth is a caricature—etched with unaccountable acidity for philanthropism, than which, at least in its less odious forms, one would say there were worse things. Zenobia, Miriam, linger in one's memory rather as brunettes than as women. Coverdale is quite as anemic a character as Priscilla is in the physique given her largely for mesmeric reasons, and the concluding announcement that he is in love with her is probably an idle boast. Hawthorne particularly enjoyed Trollope, and he had a shrewd observation for casual types in actual life. One would hardly infer it from his own personages and is inclined to find in the inconsistency, not, or not only, the frequent contrast between actual taste and artistic practice, but additional evidence of his curious conception of and respect for his peculiar and original "genius."

The result was that his genius took him out of the novelist's field altogether. His novels are not novels. They have not the reality of novels. And they elude it not only in their personages but in their picture of life in general. "The Scarlet Letter" itself is the postlude of a passion. Just so much of the general Salem scene as is necessary for the setting of the extremely concentrated drama is presented and no more. Nowhere else is the scene treated otherwise than atmospherically, so to speak. It does not constitute a medium or even background but penumbra. The social picture does not exist. The quiet Salem streets of the "House of the Seven Gables," the community life of Blithedale, the village houses and hillocks and gossip and



happenings of "Septimius Felton," though the War of Independence is in progress and Concord fight is actually an incident, contribute color, not substance, to the story. The Roman ruins and churches, and studios and museums, the campagna landscape and the Italian towns and country contribute even less to the drama of "The Marble Faun," being distractions and digressions in large part, and so not only not an integral part of it but even applied rather than integumental embroidery of it. The action is always a skeleton. Its direct illustrative function is exclusively considered. It receives no aid from anything incidental or indirect, anything superfluous or subsidiary, which in a certain degree is absolutely necessary if the theme is to be presented with the fulness and concreteness of a picture. It is presented on the contrary with the lean explicitness of the diagram. One "gets the idea"—a *sine quâ non*, to be sure, of a serious fiction that is designed like Hawthorne's to enforce some particular truth—but the sensuously (and logically) inclined must ruefully reflect that if this is all that is to be had, it could be had at even less expense; a statement would serve as well as a story. It is like a building in which the supports and buttresses should exactly, instead of superabundantly, counterbalance the weights and thrusts. The insubstantial effect so much admired in Hawthorne would be secured, but it would hardly be satisfactory to the eye or the mind which are adjusted to the sense of substance in the embodiment of even the ethereal.

Not that the novels have any effect of succinctness corresponding to their slenderness, or of pith matching their lack of luxuriance. On the contrary at least three of them are distinctly too long. But this is simply, not to put too fine a point upon it, because they are spun out. "The Scarlet Letter" he, perhaps unfortunately, conceived as a short story and, beyond doubt unfortunately, pieced out with an incongruous portal. The episodic form of "The Blithedale Romance" injures its evolution, which, however, its interest would hardly have justified prolonging. But, if in these two works he did not very well know how to continue, in "The House of the Seven Gables," "The Marble Faun," and "Septimius Felton" he did not at all know how to stop. The first

is swamped in detail over which the author lingers as if mesmerized by his own dagguerotypist and unable to awake from his dream of rendering it intangible by endless retouching. In "The Marble Faun" not only is the action retarded by frequent breaks, but the narrative is greatly expanded by what, as I have said, is not *rempissage* but incrustation. In "Septimius Felton" bulk is achieved by the primitive expedient of pure redundancy. Its redundancy passes the prolixity of Cooper in his most complacent moods, and is the plain witness, the unmistakable symptom, of a sterility in the subject that illusion itself could only hope to fertilize by indefatigable persistence.

The incompleteness of Hawthorne's characters, the inadequacy of his social picture, the lack of romantic richness in his work have, to be sure, been attributed largely to the romantic poverty of his material—his environment. But to this it may be replied, in general, that so far as regards his material the true artist's concern is not with his star but with himself; and, in particular, that Hawthorne's environment furnished him material exactly, exquisitely, suited to his genius. His subject was the soul, and for the enactment of the dramas of the soul Salem was as apt a stage as Thebes. The New England of Hawthorne's time certainly cannot be considered as a possible theatre for the *Comédie Humaine*, but Hawthorne has himself demonstrated that the New England of an even blanker and bleaker period was a fit theatre for the human tragedy. "The Scarlet Letter" is so exclusively a drama of the soul as to be measurably independent of an elaborate setting in a social picture. But if Hawthorne's other works were as well-placed, as firmly anchored, as deeply rooted in their environment they would be works of very different value. That they are not is not the fault of their *milieu*, but of their author.

## V

SOMETHING seems distinctly left out of his organization—that particular faculty whose function it is to make the most of its fellows. In default of it he took apparently the same serenely fatalistic view of himself, of his own genius, that he did of life in his books.

We are all acquainted with the morally fatalistic character, with its acceptance of its own constitution as unalterable, experiencing satisfaction without elation and accepting discouragement without thought of amendment, self-centred and independent, without alien support or altruistic endeavor, never dreaming of regeneration or submissive to discipline, attempting to mould its environment only where it is irksome and never subdued to what it works in, above all sceptical of climbing on stepping-stones of its dead self to higher things. And this morally fatalistic temperament Hawthorne undoubtedly possessed. But what is more remarkable is that he possessed the mental organization to match it. Back of both lay the feeling of reasonable self-satisfaction—the self-satisfaction which the instinct of self-preservation makes an indispensable postulate of fatalism. Though they have depressed moods, as Hawthorne certainly did, few Calvinists, probably, doubt their own election. It is almost amusing to note the old Pagan pride, having in due course of evolution passed through the phase of the Christian *humiliatio*—the great mediæval virtue—reverting to type in the self-satisfaction of the Puritans, of whom Hawthorne was a very genuine son.

Hence, no doubt, in considerable measure, his bland acceptance of his genius as something fixed rather than potential, and his diversion into its particular channels of the material he might otherwise, by energy and effort, by study and application, have dealt with on a larger scale, to profounder purpose and with more substantial results. "The Scarlet Letter" is an eloquent and convincing witness against his comfortable and unfortunate illusion. Yet he seems to see only its leaden casket, and calls its negligible successor "more characteristic of my mind and more proper and natural for me to write." "In the name of the Muses, then," one feels like exclaiming, "bring some pressure to bear on this sacrosanct mind and, with less regard for what is proper and natural to its preferences, demonstrate by another masterpiece, and still another, that its constitution is not so immutable as you conceive it."

Descend into the arena, however, and contend for the world's prizes in the recognized lists of literature, Hawthorne could not. Of the mental constitution and capac-

ities which heredity disposed him to look upon as final, environment, too, restricted the development. He was, to be sure, quite out of sympathy with his time and its tendencies. But New England transcendentalism was too universal a movement for anyone wholly to escape its influences. Hawthorne's aloofness did not secure his immunity. It was indeed a gospel expressly designed for the isolated. Thoreau at Walden was its archetype. And, though Hawthorne's solitude was less express and voluntary and certainly not of an explicit transcendental sanction, but rather due to temperament and mood, it nevertheless fostered his preoccupation with the soul rather than with the mind or the senses. He could think out his allegories and polish up their articulation with the actual more unremittingly by himself than by talking them over with Alcott. But transcendentalism was in the very air he breathed, and though he had little joy in the company of its votaries he hardly changed his moral atmosphere in sequestering himself from their society.

Transcendentalism was the sublimation of the gospel of individuality and may be summed up in Carlyle's pronouncement that the light of one's own mind is "the direct inspiration of the Almighty." Hawthorne could not only perceive but satirize the eccentricities derived from a literal subscription to this doctrine. But the contemplation of these increased his self-concentration, and the doctrine itself was as much his own as it was that of the most fantastic speculators around him. And as a corollary of this universal belief in individual inspiration the belief in the prevalence of genius was general. There has never, probably, before or since, been so much "genius" abroad. The word talent does not exist in the transcendental vocabulary. The profession of literature presupposed genius. Everyone who wrote had it. Channing, Everett, even Alcott had it. Hawthorne was singularly modest. His belief in his genius, its peculiar character and the propriety of considering this in his writing was not in the least vainglorious. His serene satisfaction with what he conceived to be its limitations, as inevitable, as inimitable, led him in fact to exaggerate them. Thus both his ancestral fatalism and his transcendental environment obscured for him the fact that he had an extraordinary

amount of talent which it behooved him to cultivate, and magnified his consciousness of having a particular kind of talent which it amused him to exercise. And thus he made what I have noted as the cardinal error of his career—an error of tragic import to American literature—by indulging his fancy in lieu of developing his imagination.

For the development of his imagination, too, his own temperament was too little enthusiastic. He was eminently a man of sound sense—distinctly the most hard-headed of our men of genius. Beyond thinking the vague and the mysterious nearer the soul and real truth than the definite and the explicit, and consequently the proper content of literature, he did not go. He never systematized in the least nor even speculated. There is no mysticism in his philosophy. He had not in fact any particular spiritual adventurousness. His entire body of doctrine is traditional. What interested him in the speculative sphere is to be found in the theology in which he had been brought up—the irreparableness of sin, the necessity of expiation, the allegory of the Fall and its fast anchorage in human nature, the suffering of the innocent through the guilty. The emancipation of transcendentalism was as much moonshine to him as was the materialization of dogma and doctrine. But his clear-seeing mind robbed revelation of its sanctions without in the least reconstructing its fundamental data. He was not only hard-headed, he was distinctly unsentimental, if the epithet may be applied to a nature just, kind, and devoted in the family relations and domestic life. He was particularly insensitive to exterior personal influences. All the enthusiasm for reform with which the middle decades of his century echoed left him cold. He was unmoved by their numerous agitations, from questions of diet to problems of philosophy, from reform of attire to negro emancipation. Philanthropy in general he thoroughly disbelieved in. He ridicules it throughout the whole course of one of his few novels and tries hard to prove there is something sinister in it, his imagination having discovered a veritable mare's nest, apparently, in pondering in his seclusion the adage that "Charity begins at home." He says expressly, and to considerably more purpose, in a letter to his sister-in-law, "The

good of others, like our own happiness, is not to be attained by direct effort, but incidentally"; which statement is nevertheless singularly free from the ardor of illusion. But the ardor of illusion is exactly what he never had. This is why a discerning French critic, Émile Montégut, describes him as a "romancier pessimiste"—a pessimist being precisely a nature without illusions. And he had even less ardor than illusion.

His nature clearly was self-sustaining. He never felt the need of the support that in the realm of the affections is the reward of self-surrender. He had no doubt an ideal family life—that is to say, ideal in a particular way, for he had it on rather particular terms, one suspects. These were, in brief, his own terms. He was worshipped, idolized, canonized, and, on his side, it probably required small effort worthily to fill the rôle a more ardent nature would have either merited less or found more irksome. He responded at any rate with absolute devotion. His domestic periphery bounded his vital interests. He had a few early friends, such as youth that is not abnormal or eccentric, and Hawthorne certainly was neither, cannot fail to make, and these he kept throughout life with admirable loyalty, but without adding to their number. Loyalty itself is of a quite different fibre from warm-heartedness. It has often less than nothing to do with susceptibility to the attractiveness of others. Hawthorne's loyalty to Pierce was more than honorable to him, it was in every way admirable, the trait of a man instinctively convinced that there is nothing in the changes of circumstance, or even of character this side of grave deterioration, to make a change of real feeling in a friendship more important than its conservation. With Hawthorne opinion had certainly no more than its just weight, and differences in it were of small account compared with fundamental agreement of feeling. Of course, too, he never differed greatly with Pierce in opinion. He was, after all, a Democrat, though he was for his day extraordinarily non-partisan. Non-partisanship, however, *inter arma*, is itself a proof of a cool temperament when it is not itself of an ardent nature, as Hawthorne's was not. He was thoroughly patriotic in his sympathies, rejoiced at Northern victory

and despaired at Northern defeat, but he stood rather aloof from the struggle, not so much because he saw both sides so sympathetically as because *Schwärmerei* in any degree was foreign to him.

He met and conversed with Lincoln, but quite missed his personality, which was curious considering his eye for character. For character he had the observer's not the divining eye. He was eminently an observer—lynx-like on occasion. He made little or no use of his faculty of observation in his novels. But his note-books testify to an almost microscopic exercise of it. He notes everything; far beyond the confines of the significant he is still scrutinizing. And the "Tales" and "Mosses" here and there witness a searching notation of the "types" of his environment, from the old apple-man to the parson, from the custom-house lounge to the sequestered spinster, their various characteristic traits, and the various suggestions of these as they appealed to his indefatigable but otiose fancy. Yet his study of traits never led him to create a character, nor his reflection on character to illustrate a moral truth with one—save in the exotic instance of Donatello, whose abundantly described faun-like *nature* is "transformed" into rather characterless character. Among his personages his manifest preferences are for Phoebe, Priscilla, Hilda, Pearl, according with his predilection for the undeveloped. He observed too coolly, lacking the ardor in which the data he accumulated should fuse into some general imaginative conception of real significance and substantial proportions. His humor lacks mirth. He has less sentiment than Irving—far less. His stories do not touch him. Occasionally there is a note like that of "The Gentle Boy." But even here it sounds rather plaintive than pathetic, and hardly moves us as the franker feeling of Irving's "Rural Funerals," for example. He is not moved himself. He preserves his equilibrium a little too admirably. The subject does not call for reserve; it is too slight. Considered as a creative artist he writes too much like a critic. His detachment is too great.

With such a character—so eminent for good sense, so unsentimental—his much-talked-of shyness is perhaps a fable. One of those friends from whom nothing saves the shyest, Dr. Loring, his fellow towns-

man, says: "The working of his mind was so sacred and mysterious to him that he was impatient of any attempt at familiarity or even intimacy with the divine power within him. . . . The sacredness of his genius was to him like the sacredness of his love." But this may easily be the transcendental way of recording an occasion on which when engaged in composition he was unwilling to be disturbed, even by Loring. He was less shy than taciturn—his own epithet. "Hawthorne was among the most enterprising of the merry-makers," says Fields of a picnic occasion. In England he turned out a ready and apt after-dinner orator—an impossibility for a shy man. He apologizes in "The Scarlet Letter" prologue for his tendency to talk about himself to his readers and, as I have said, this tendency was marked. He writes to Longfellow, a dozen years after leaving college: "By some witchcraft or other—for I cannot really assign any reasonable why or wherefore—I have been carried apart from the main current of life. . . . I have secluded myself from society; and yet I never meant any such thing." That is Hawthorne's weakness. In a sense he never meant anything. He drifted. In his own words: "An influence beyond our control lays its strong hand on everything we do and weaves its consequences into an iron tissue of necessity." He was, in fact, a fatalist. No wonder that his ideality was fanciful and insubstantial, and that its glimpses of real and vital truth are less frequent than they are sombre and profound.

## VI

THUS predisposed by heredity, by environment and by constitution to work what he conceived to be his own peculiar vein, and what everyone around him agreed was his rare and original genius, Hawthorne, for the most part, as I say, supinely suffered his real gift to lie fallow. What it needed was development. And for development it needed not only exercise but nurture. With its moral austerity it would have responded beautifully to the influences of culture. And from such influences he protected himself with signal perversity and success. His imagination was not nurtured because his mind was not enriched. His mind, in fact, contained no furniture at all compared with that of any writer who has ever been called

great. He had no particular amount of reading—beyond that current at the time among all so-called educated people: Dr. Johnson, Scott, Byron, Tom Moore, the belles-lettres of the period then closing. Instead of reading he reflected—"brooded," perhaps, in his pythian character. But he had very little to brood over. Hence the insubstantial nature of his fanciful progeny. Hence his fondness for mirage. Familiarity with the best that has been thought and said—and done—in the world would have diverted him from his irresponsibility and not only stimulated his imagination by enlarging its horizon but provided it with material—dispensed him from the necessity, however dissembled as his true and native function, of spinning his web of fantasticality from his own substance. Not only was his imagination of just the quality to react admirably under such stimulus and deal admirably with extended material, but his temperament was of just the order to be developed instead of paralyzed by external agencies. What drove it in upon itself was not sensitiveness but non-receptivity. He had the good sense, the lack of enthusiasm, the disillusioned pessimism of the man of the world. Only, his world was Salem and Concord when it was not, indeed, the still narrower confines of the custom-house and the old manse.

The real world was to him *terra incognita*, or at least negligible. Europe, especially, was but a museum to him. Nothing is more ridiculous than the detached and essentially supercilious attitude betrayed in his account of it. England, France, Italy, all rubbed him the wrong way. Yet he never had the remotest glimmer of a suspicion that the fact might be his fault. His candor is delightful; his conviction that it is the one virtue of criticism, that it "lets him out," so to speak, still more so; his loyalty to his crudest conclusions, most of all. English readers find him ungallant in recording his view of the British matron as compound of steaks and sirloins. His answer is that he loves Englishmen as much as his own countrymen but that the passage must stand because the view is correct. He *was* beautifully honest—always. No doubt he would have been if he had appreciated how it made him appear, if he had realized that one opinion is not as good as another. But as a sensitive plant he is surely a superstition. He travelled all over England, and chronicled

his journeys and reflections with the assiduous minuteness—and about the interest—of Irving's account of Columbus's voyages. But he never became familiar with English life and rarely met any representative Englishmen. Those of his own profession he avoided with marked success. He never met Thackeray or Dickens, or Bulwer, or Disraeli. George Eliot he would not go to see because there was another Mrs. Lewes. He seems to have had no curiosity—which, of course, is the *primum mobile* of culture. His substitute for it is the most singular interest in the world—peculiar probably to American psychology—namely, that of travelling around the great world and applying one's own yard-stick to the phenomena it presents to one's virgin view. The English are more unmoved, more listless in their contemplation of what the world has to offer. I remember in Athens, once, a party of Nonconformists returning from Palestine and delayed a few hours by the necessity of changing steamers at the Piræus. They were sitting around the Palace square. I asked their "personal conductor" why he didn't take them up to the Acropolis. "I tried to," he replied, "but they said they 'had seen ruins enough.'" Analogous Americans would have gone up but would not have been unduly impressed.

Art occupied a good deal of Hawthorne's thoughts while he was in Italy, but it certainly did not unduly impress him. He never found out what it was. The fact is not so remarkable as it may seem at the present time. In his day most Americans, educated or not, were in his case. That art had a particular province, language and sanction of its own was not widely understood. But then the subject was, in general, wholly neglected. There was, however, a colony of American artists in Rome and Hawthorne saw a good deal of these, and naturally came to consider the subject a good deal and with his usual candor. The amount of attention he paid it, yes, and the exceptional ill-luck he had with it, makes him exceptional among his contemporary countrymen—who, besides, were not great writers. Moreover, he made it a distinct feature of "The Marble Faun." He seems to have thought it was chiefly sculpture, partly perhaps because Story was a sculptor and Hawthorne was very loyal to his friends; having in the case of Pierce got

around the question of slavery, he would naturally not let a bagatelle like art handicap his good-will. He was undoubtedly perfectly sincere in either instance, and the latter at all events shows how lightly, morals aside, he took the world which he had so long made the sport of his fancy. He cannot say enough about Story's "Cleopatra." She is "a terribly dangerous woman, quiet enough for the moment but very likely to spring upon you like a tigress." Her Coptic cast of countenance also illustrates Story's historical accuracy—in modelling a Greek. It is impossible to defend him from the late R. H. Hutton's charge of sprinkling "The Marble Faun" with "puffs of American sculpture"; which shows, too, how lightly he took literature also, or, at least, his own contributions to it. For painting he did not greatly care. He admitted Claude but he preferred Brown—preferred Brown indeed to any one, except possibly Thompson. Furthermore, he seems to have looked upon sculpture as essentially marble, whose "purity" and transparency afforded him positive sensations of pleasure. Bronze left him cold and he would not have subscribed to its current aggrandizement. Perhaps he unconsciously transferred to marble some of his pleasure in the moral spotlessness of such characters as Hilda and Phoebe for which, as I have already said, he shows a preference.

His interest in all art was indeed a specifically moral, not an æsthetic one. He takes the "literary view" with a vengeance. He terms the so-called "Beatrice Cenci" the greatest picture in the world, apparently forgetting that he has not seen all its rivals for such preëminence, and finds its neighbor, the so-called "Fornarina," repulsive—because the one portrait makes him think of a pitiful tragedy and the other recalls the fact that the painter to whom it was then ascribed had a mistress. The so-called question of "the nude in art"—which, so far as it is a question, certainly belongs rather to the police than to general criticism—troubled him a good deal. Mr. James finds his objection to the nude indicative of his lack of the plastic sense, which is surely to consider it as a superfluity. However, another biographer, Mr. Moncure Conway, says he was converted from a position savoring of intolerance so far as to declare his first views only through one of

his characters—rather fatuously, I should say, selecting Miriam for the purpose—and that the honor of this partial conversion is due to Mrs. Jameson, whom doubtless he felt he could trust. The choice he offers among the many evidences of his æsthetic innocence is bewildering, but without being quite sure I am inclined to fix on the gift with which he endows Hilda as the one that demonstrates it most absolutely. Hilda's peculiar talent, it will be remembered, consisted in a faculty of copying the masterpieces of art with such penetration as to bring out beauties in them unsuspected by the masters themselves. It is needless to add that this power was accompanied by a complete inaptitude for original work. Hawthorne's fancy is here at its most characteristic. Providing Hilda with an exclusively sympathetic nature, he deduces from it a faculty incapable of self-expression but able to divine what the greatest artists were groping for in their approximative productions. This puerile degradation of art in the interest of irresponsible fancy is, at all events, both a striking illustration of what Hawthorne perversely preferred to the exercise of a noble imagination, and a striking witness of the insufficiency of his culture to save his intellectual levity from the reduction to the absurd.

With another great factor of civilization and consequently a quintessential of culture, history, namely, his acquaintance was even slighter than his familiarity with plastic art. The Parthenon's reputation might have drawn him to the Athenian Acropolis, but that of Pericles would hardly have stirred him from the palace square. Prattling pleasantly of the Concord battleground, he says with that candor which so frequently fringes fatuity, quite in the conventional manner of pride aping humility: "For my own part, I have never found my imagination much excited by this or any other scene of historic celebrity." "Septimius Felton" is a tale of the Revolution, but its references to it are casual and reluctant. "Our story," says Hawthorne, "is an internal one, dealing as little as possible with outward events, and taking hold of these only where it cannot be helped." In Rome itself he is quite imperturbable and detached. The perpetual pageant passing before the cultivated imagination hardly wins a glance from him. "It is a singular

fascination that Rome exercises upon artists. There is clay elsewhere, and marble enough, and heads to model," he exclaims, identifying, as usual, art with sculpture and sculpture with marble. Beside his "Note-Books" Baedeker reads like Gibbon. His own experiences amid the paraphernalia of the past largely preoccupy his pen. In the Louvre, for example, he encountered Catherine de Medici's dressing-glass "in which," he records, "I saw my own face where hers had been." Profound thought, no doubt, to one, part of whose originality consists in the independence to cherish the banal as well as the recondite, but devoid of historic sentiment. If he withdrew from the world around him it was not into the past that he retired. He had no more the historic sense than he had an ear for music or an eye for beauty—save in landscape of an idyllic character—or an appreciation of art, or a love of poetry. At least if he had them he had them in the germ. And he never cultivated the germ.

One field of history, however, he knew, and knew thoroughly. The New England of the early Puritans he had studied if not systematically at any rate to repletion. He had made it his own. He understood it as a phase of civilization, an epoch, an era, in the community life of the American people. And if any one contests the value of culture, even to a writer of pure romance, a complete answer is to be found in the fact that Hawthorne succeeded in the main when he dealt with the Puritans and almost invariably failed when he did not. There, he had a background, material and a subject of substance.

## VII

"THE SCARLET LETTER" is not merely a masterpiece, it is a unique book. It is not a story of adultery. The word does not, I think, occur in the book—a circumstance in itself typifying the detachment of the conception and the delicate art of its execution. But in spite of its detachment and delicacy, the inherent energy of the theme takes possession of the author's imagination and warms it into exalted exercise, making it in consequence at once the most real and the most imaginative of his works. It is essentially a story neither of the sin nor of the situation of illicit love—presents neither its psychology nor its

social effects; neither excuses nor condemns nor even depicts, from this specific point of view. Incidentally, of course, the sin colors the narrative and the situation is its particular result. But, essentially, the book is a story of concealment. Its psychology is that of the concealment of sin amid circumstances that make a sin of concealment itself. The sin itself might, one may almost say, be almost any other. And this constitutes no small part of the book's formal originality. To fail to perceive this is quite to misconceive it. As a story of illicit love its omissions are too great, its significance is not definite enough, its detail has not enough richness, the successive scenes of which it is composed have not an effective enough cohesion. Above all, Chillingworth is a mistake, or at most a wasted opportunity. For he is specialized into a mere function of malignity, and withdrawn from the reader's sympathies, whereas what completes, if it does not constitute, the tragedy of adultery, is the sharing by the innocent of the punishment of the guilty. This inherent element of the situation, absolutely necessary to a complete presentment of it, the crumbling of the innocent person's inner existence, is absolutely neglected in "The Scarlet Letter," and the element of a malevolent persecution of the culpable substituted for it. The innocent person thereby becomes, as I have already said, an expedient, and though in this way Hawthorne is enabled to vivify the effect of remorse upon the minister by personifying its furies, in this way, too, he sacrifices at once the completeness of his picture and its depth of truth by disregarding one of its most important elements.

He atones for this by concentration on the culpable. It is *their* psychology alone that he exhibits. And though in this way he has necessarily failed to write the *chef-d'œuvre* of the general subject that in the field of art has been classic since monogamy established itself in society, he has produced a perfect masterpiece in the more detached and withdrawn sphere more in harmony with his genius. In narrowing his range and observing its limits he has perhaps even increased the poignancy of his effect. And his effect is poignant and true as reality itself. In confining himself to the concealment of sin rather than depicting its phenomena and its results, he has indeed brought out, as has never been done else-

where, the importance of this fatal increment of falsity among the factors of the whole chaotic and unstable moral equilibrium. Concealment in "The Scarlet Letter," to be sure, is painted in very dark colors. In similar cases it may be a duty, and is, at all events, the mere working of a natural instinct—at worst a choice of the lesser evil. But surely there is no exaggeration or essential loss of truth in the suggestion of its potentialities for torture conveyed by the agony of the preacher's double-life. The sombre close, the scarcely alleviated gloom of the whole story are in fit keeping with the theme, which is the truth that, in the words of the tale itself, "an evil deed invests itself with the character of doom," and with its development through the torture of concealment to the expiation of confession.

Here, for once, with Hawthorne we have allegory richly justifying itself, the allegory of literature not that of didacticism, of the imagination not of the fancy, allegory neither vitiated by caprice nor sterilized by moralizing, but firmly grounded in reality and nature. Note how, accordingly, even the ways of the wicked fairy that obsessed him are made to serve him, for even the mirage and symbolism so dear to his mind and so inveterate in his practice, blend legitimately with the pattern of his thoroughly naturalistic tapestry. Is the fanciful element excessive, the symbolism overdone? I think not, on the whole. Hawthorne seems to have been so "possessed" by his story as to have conducted the development of its formal theme for once subconsciously, so to speak, and with the result of decorating rather than disintegrating reality in its exposition. At all events to this possession (how complete it was as a matter of material fact all his biographers attest) two notable and wholly exceptional results are due. In the first place he *felt* his theme, as he never felt it elsewhere, and consequently presented it with an artistic cogency he never elsewhere attained. The story, in other words, is real and true. If it is thought to show a bias in pushing too far the doom of evil, to ignore the whole New Testament point of view, as it may be called, epitomized in the Master's "Go and sin no more," the answer is that though in this way it may lose in typical value, it gains in imaginative realism, since it is a story of that Puritan New Eng-

land where it sometimes seems as if the New Testament had been either suspect or unknown. Besides, there is enough demonstration of its text on the hither side of what it is necessary to invoke the Puritan *milieu* to justify. Every erring soul may not suffer the extremity of Dimmesdale's agony, but it suffers enough, and the inevitability of its suffering was never more convincingly exhibited than in this vivid picture, softened as it is into a subdued intensity by the artist's poetized, however predetermined, treatment.

For, in the second place, it is here alone that Hawthorne seems to have felt his *characters* enough to feel them sympathetically and so to realize them to the full. They are very real and very human. What the imagination of a recluse, even, can do to this end when held to its own inspiration and not seduced into the realm of the fantastic, may be seen in the passage where Hester pleads for the continued custody of her child. Pearl herself is a jewel of romance. Nothing more imaginatively real than this sprite-like and perverse incarnation of the moral as well as physical sequence of her parents' sin exists in romance. Her individuality is an inspiration deduced with the logic of nature and with such happy art that her symbolic quality is as incidental in appearance as it is seen to be inherent on reflection. Mr. James, who objects to the symbolism of "The Scarlet Letter," nevertheless found her substantial enough to echo in the charming but far less vivid Pansy of his "Portrait of a Lady." Chillingworth, the other symbolic character, is in contrast an embodied abstraction—the one *expedient*, as I have said, of the book. But it cannot be denied that he performs a needful function and, artistically, is abundantly justified. As a Puritan parallel of Mephistopheles he is very well handled. "The Scarlet Letter" is, in fact, the Puritan "Faust," and its symbolic and allegorical element, only obtrusive in a detail here and there at most, lifts it out of the ordinary category of realistic romance without—*since nothing of importance is sacrificed to it*—enfeebling its imaginative reality. The beautiful and profound story is our one prose masterpiece and it is as difficult to overpraise it as it is to avoid poignantly regretting that Hawthorne failed to recognize its value and learn the lesson it might have taught him.