

HAWTHORNE



HENRY JAMES

FOREWORD BY DAN MCCALL

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By Henry James

WITH A FOREWORD
BY DAN MCCALL

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ITHACA AND LONDON

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Foreword

by Dan McCall

HENRY James's *Hawthorne* (1879) is an essential text in American cultural history. James wrote the book for the English Men of Letters series; he was the only American contributor, Hawthorne the only American subject. Edmund Wilson was not altogether accurate when he famously claimed in *The Shock of Recognition* (1943) that *Hawthorne* was "the first extended study ever made of an American writer." Before it there had been several "extended studies" of Edgar Allan Poe both in America and in France, valuable "appreciations" of Walt Whitman starting as early as the 1860s, and William Gilmore Simms's critical assessments of James Fenimore Cooper. But Wilson was surely right to rank *Hawthorne* as "still one of the best."

Among other achievements James correctly placed *The Scarlet Letter* for us as "the finest piece of imaginative writing yet put forth in the country," and asserted that "something might at last be sent to Europe as exquisite in quality as anything that had been received, and the best of it was that the thing was absolutely American; it belonged to the soil, to the air; it came out of the very heart of New England." But what James so graciously gave with one hand he swiftly took away with the other.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, he says, “there is a great deal of symbolism; there is, I think, too much. It is overdone at times, and becomes mechanical; it ceases to be impressive, and grazes triviality. We feel that he goes too far, and is in danger of crossing the line that separates the sublime from its intimate neighbour. We are tempted to say that this is not moral tragedy, but physical comedy.” Words to gladden the hearts of all those poor high school students who learned to hate literature and feel dumb by undergoing a forced march through the weird, killjoy prose of this “darksome tale.”

When *Hawthorne* was first published there was considerable public outcry against James's severe tone and general condescension. Who was this traitor to his native land, this expatriate snob who had “gone British” and thumbed his London nose at his predecessor's achievements? James wrote to William Dean Howells that the American critics were “bloodhounds” ferociously drenching “the decent public” with his “gore.” In an anonymous review in the *Atlantic* the following month Howells said that “in some quarters” James would be found guilty of “high treason.” *Harper's* hoped that the book had been written only in a “momentary fit of indigestion.” James called these reviews “a melancholy revelation of angry vanity, vulgarity, and ignorance.” He said, “I thought they would protest a good deal at my calling New England life unfurnished, but I didn't expect they would lose their heads and their manners at such a rate.” He drew himself up, “prepared to do battle for most of the convictions expressed” in his “little book,” but willing to admit some minor faults; he wrote to Howells, “It is quite true I use the word provincial too many times — I hated myself for't, even while I did it (just as I overdo the epithet ‘dusky.’)” Still he thought the clamor was “a very big tempest in a very small teapot,” and he complained, “What a public to write for!” He hoped “they are not the real American public. If I thought they were, I would give up the country.” Who needed such a “clucking of a brood of prairie hens”? For all the bluster we can see he was wounded; this reception really hurt.

Criticism has continued since. F. W. Dupee said of the book,

"Its scholarship was weak even for its time (all frankly taken from Lathrop's biography)." James's very first footnote is to that text, *A Study of Hawthorne* (Boston, 1876) written by Hawthorne's son-in-law, George Parsons Lathrop: "Without the help afforded by his elaborate essay the present little volume could not have been prepared." Privately, though, he called Lathrop's work "singularly foolish and pretentious." It is. The Nathaniel Hawthorne who emerges from its pages could not have written the books he did. The son-in-law emphasizes Hawthorne's kindness to his dog Leo, his pity for "some little lambs startled by the approach of his party," and his "fondness for cats" as if his father-in-law's view of the world had been "not that of a fatalist, but of an optimist" with "a very profound faith in Providence" whose "warm, pure, living sympathy pervaded all his analysis of mankind." Lathrop's sentimentality makes him shrink from the "harsh closing chord" of Hawthorne's life — i.e., his death — because in "a life so beautiful and noble to surround its ending with the remembrance of mere mortal ailment has in it something of coarseness." It's a garland of wildflowers.

What really got James into trouble with the American custodians of culture was a little list, the most famous passage in the book (on page 34 in this edition). For half a century critical readers assumed that this laundry list of New England shortcomings and deprivations was a take-off on a list of Hawthorne's own, in his preface to *The Marble Faun* (the passage is quoted by James just a page before his own); Hawthorne had declared that "no author, without a trial, can conceive of the difficulty of writing a romance about a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, not anything but a commonplace prosperity, in broad and simple daylight, as is happily the case with my own dear native land." A curious verdict on America at the very eve of the Civil War. But even so, can this be the real "source" for James's itemized bill? One can hear at least a whisper of it much earlier, in "The New England Holiday" chapter of *The Scarlet Letter* where Hawthorne lists the absence of "appliances of popular merriment that would have been so readily found in the England of Elizabeth's time": "no

rude shows of a theatrical kind; no minstrel with his harp and legendary ballad, nor gleeman with an ape dancing to his music; no juggler with his tricks of mimic witchcraft; no Merry Andrew to stir up the multitude with jests, perhaps hundreds of years old." This sequence goes on to "Wrestling-matches" and other sports such as "an exhibition with the buckler and broadsword," and other peoples, "a party of Indians" and "the crew of the vessel from the Spanish Main": all those things, in short, that are decidedly *not* of New England and therefore excluded from "the incomplete morality of the age" and its rigid "moral solitude." Here are all the vivid touches and variety of flavors missing from seventeenth-century Boston's claustrophobia.

One can hear later whispers too; for example, in *The Portrait of a Lady* (which James began to write while *Hawthorne* was being debated in America), the cruelly deluded Isabel Archer dresses out Gilbert Osmond's poverties as triumphs: she sees him as a man who has "no property, no title, no honours, no houses, nor lands, nor position, nor reputation, nor brilliant belongings of any sort." All three of these lists go "no . . . no . . . nor . . . nor."

But to know where That Famous List really comes from we are indebted to F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth Murdock for their monumental edition of James's *Notebooks*. Early on, after one of James's little lists of "*Names*" we find this striking passage (the reader should take special note of the first six words):

In a story some one says — "Oh yes, the United States — a country without a sovereign, without a court, without a nobility, without an army, without a church or a clergy, without a diplomatic service, without a picturesque peasantry, without palaces or castles, or country seats, or ruins, without a literature, without novels, without an Oxford or a Cambridge, without cathedrals or ivied churches, without latticed cottages or village ale-houses, without political society, without sport, without fox-hunting, or country gentlemen, without an Epsom or an Ascot, an Eton or a rugby!"

Notice that when James puts this list into *Hawthorne* he democ-

atically takes out "a picturesque peasantry" and, aesthetically mindful, he puts in "no museums, no pictures." And adds insult to injury with "no personal loyalty."

The point here is that when we discover that the source of the list is something James wanted someone to say in a story, we realize we are in a brave new context: James speaks as an artist as well as a critic, locating his own powerful energy in both roles, and locating Hawthorne in both roles as well.

Matthiessen says the *Hawthorne* book "is tantalizing in what it omits to say, since it was written at the very period when James was most determined to abandon all traces of romance for realism." James saw Hawthorne as "a man but little disposed to multiply his relations, his points of contact, with society." Hawthorne "was not a man with a literary theory; he was guiltless of a system, and I am not sure that he had ever heard of Realism." And again: "It cannot be too often repeated that Hawthorne was not a realist." In other words, Hawthorne had failed to do exactly what James was now determined to do himself.

Stephen Donadio has powerfully argued that "Hawthorne's own view of his predicament was just the reverse. It was not the paucity of materials that frustrated art, but his own persistent inability to master the abundant (and abundantly complex) materials available to him." We are, that is, bound to recognize that Hawthorne meant it when in "The Custom-House" introductory to *The Scarlet Letter* he gives up on his sketch by saying "a better book than I shall ever write was there" in his experience as a surveyor in Salem, if only he could make sense of all the surrounding details. Lifelong, he makes the same complaint: in *Our Old Home* he wrote that "the Present, the Immediate, the Actual has proved too potent for me. It takes away not only my scanty faculty, but even my desire for imaginative composition." James laments that in *The Scarlet Letter* there is "little elaboration of detail, of the modern realism of research." He concludes that "the faults of the book are, to my sense, a want of reality and an abuse of the fanciful element." Hawthorne's novels don't have what James would later call, in his great phrase, "the solidity of specification" upon which nov-

elistic success “helplessly and submissively depends.” James’s move to England and the Continent, along with his program of “Realism,” is an effort to mark out a place for himself, a way out of what trapped his mentor. Indeed, how could poor old Hawthorne achieve solidity of specification when poor old New England had no solidity to specify? No wonder then the angry hubbub in Boston!

But *Hawthorne* was written when Henry James was in his mid-thirties, still a relatively young man, with all his major work ahead of him. For Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne had been an immediate and profoundly enabling presence, as the dedicatory note to *Moby-Dick* so grandly makes clear: “In token of my admiration for his genius, this book is inscribed to Nathaniel Hawthorne.” Hawthorne–Melville is a great subject for study; Hawthorne–James is a trickier problem. If you have a mind to, you can see Nathaniel Hawthorne in Henry James’s work at the very beginning, in the middle years, and perhaps most impressively in the last masterpieces. Everywhere you look in James you find Hawthorne.

Lionel Trilling outlines with great elegance what he sees as one of the central flaws in James’s 1879 argument: “To the religious elements of Hawthorne’s stories, James gives no credence beyond an aesthetic one.” Puritanism was just a “pigment.” All that James would grant to Hawthorne was that “His imagination ‘borrowed’ a ‘color’ and ‘reflected’ a ‘hue.’” Trilling concludes that “James is unequivocal and emphatic in his belief that Hawthorne’s interest in Puritanism was nothing but artistic.” Trilling wonders, “What are we to do with a judgment of this sort — how are we to escape its embarrassments?”

In several ways. First, Hawthorne at the time James wrote the book was very different from “Our Hawthorne” (Trilling’s title) today. Standing roughly midway between James’s and ours, interestingly enough, is D. H. Lawrence’s “sugary, blue-eyed little darling of a Nathaniel.” We sometimes forget that in Hawthorne’s own time he was celebrated as the author of *A Wonder-Book for Girls and Boys*, *Tanglewood Tales*, and other “baby

stories," as Hawthorne called them. Richard Brodhead has cautioned us to remember that in the nineteenth century, the Victorian era, Hawthorne's "domestic and juvenile pieces were as authentic a part of his oeuvre as the darker tales we value now." Second, the genteel tone of Victorian "high criticism" was one of sweetness and light — "charm" and "sentiment" were key terms, the "pure" and "ethereal" were paramount virtues — and certain orthodox pieties prevailed (Lathrop at least knew his audience). Third, when James says that Hawthorne "contrived to transmute this heavy moral burden into the substance of the imagination" and that "what pleased him in such subjects was their picturesqueness, their rich duskiness of color, their chiaroscuro" we find here an example of what Henry James frequently does when he talks about literary excellence, especially when it deeply moves him: he speaks of writing as if it were painting. The verdicts are hardly sentimental pictures: "It may be said that when his fancy was strongest and keenest, when it was most itself, then the dark Puritan tinge showed in it most richly." And, again, James is young; as he grows older and creates his mature work, his sense of Hawthorne grows up along with him.

In one of the most beautiful sentences of the 1879 book James writes "that the flower of art blooms only where the soil is deep, that it takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature, that it needs a complex social machinery to set a writer in motion." This is the goal of James's passionate pilgrimage — though he is always mindful that "Hawthorne forfeited a precious advantage in ceasing to tread his native soil." Yet James never forsakes Hawthorne; he returns to him almost obsessively, again and again. For example, James complains of *The Blithedale Romance* that "we cease to feel beneath our feet the firm ground of an appeal to our own vision of the world" and that we need a great deal more "about the little community in which its earlier scenes are laid." James makes note "of the absence of satire in the novel, of its not aiming in the least at satire," and there is "no reproduction of strange types of radicalism." Six years later, in *The Bostonians* James attends to each and

every one of these defects. Hawthorne's romance and James's novel are both about women's rights, New England, reform movements — and even little details count: in *Blithedale* Westervelt's false teeth are visible in his spooky displays with the Veiled Lady, and in *The Bostonians* we see Selah Tarrant's "terrible smile" when he goes into his creepy routines with his daughter. Very big things count, too: James said of *Blithedale* that "the portion of the story that strikes me as least felicitous is that which deals with Priscilla, and with her mysterious relation to Zenobia." So when the time comes for James to do his own version of the story, he explores, as Millicent Bell remarks, "the bond between Olive and Verena, making it more deeply and exactly penetrative of such a relation than any novel had ever done before." Indeed, it is almost comic the way these two books balance and complement each other: Hollingsworth and Basil Ransom both save the frail, vaguely sappy heroines by marrying them at the last minute, whisking them away from mesmerists. The painful and the tragic also resonate: Olive's vision of the body of a drowned "unknown young woman, defaced beyond recognition, but with long auburn hair and in a white dress" takes us right back to *Blithedale* and Zenobia's watery grave.

Another sort of tribute — another kind of dependency — occurs in one of James's finest novellas, *The Aspern Papers*. Many critics still think of the long-dead poet Jeffrey Aspern, as Byron or Shelley (both appear in the source anecdote James recorded in his *Notebook*). But when James wrote the story, the English genius turned into an American one, and everything about him we have seen before. He is Hawthorne. One passage is worth quoting at length:

He had lived in the days before the general transfusion. It had happened to me to regret that he had known Europe at all; I should have liked to see what he would have written without that experience, by which he had incontestably been enriched. But as his fate had ruled otherwise I went with him — I tried to judge how the general old order would have struck him. It was not only there, however, I watched him; the relations he had entertained with the special new had even a livelier interest. His own country after all had had most of his life, and his

muse, as they said at that time, was essentially American. That was originally what I had prized him for: that at a period when our native land was nude and crude and provincial, when the famous 'atmosphere' it is supposed to lack was not even missed, when literature was lonely there and art and form almost impossible, he had found means to live and write like one of the first; to be free and general and not at all afraid; to feel, understand and express everything.

Change each and every "he" to "Hawthorne" and it works perfectly. There's the little play on The List, a clever nod to the Counselship at Liverpool and the residence in Rome, and, of course, the entire conception: "one of the first," the "essentially American." Who speaks here? — our slippery unnamed narrator or Henry James himself, who had said exactly the same things about Hawthorne a decade earlier?

Back in 1872, in a review of Hawthorne's *French and Italian Notebooks*, James called Hawthorne "the last pure American." Seven years later, discussing Hawthorne's European sojourn, James wrote, "I know nothing more remarkable, more touching, than the sight of this odd, youthful-elderly mind, contending so late in the day with new opportunities for learning old things, and, on the whole, profiting by them so freely and gracefully." And whom have we here? In an astonishing prevision, the hero of *The Ambassadors*, Lambert Strether to perfection!

And in a formal literary sense, James's prefaces to the great New York Edition of his work, the most stunningly brilliant exercise in practical criticism ever written, are indebted to the Hawthorne whom James cited as "in general never more graceful than when prefatory." One can see Hawthorne's compulsive distinctions in his prefaces between Romance and Novel — especially the one to *The House of Seven Gables* — in James's sly preface to *The American*: "There have been, I gather, many definitions of romance, as a matter indispensably of boats, or of caravans, or of tigers, or of 'historical characters,' or of ghosts, or of forgers, or of detectives, or beautiful wicked women, or of pistols and knives." This too is Hawthornean in its lovely humor, conversational ease, and laconic discriminations.

In 1896 James wrote another critical and biographical essay

on Hawthorne for Charles Dudley Warner's *Library of the World's Best Literature*. James's article is more sophisticated and frankly passionate than his *Hawthorne* of seventeen years earlier. James now sees that his predecessor's "great complication was the pressing moral anxiety, the restless individual conscience . . . the laws secretly broken, the impulses secretly felt, the hidden passions, the double lives, the dark corners, the closed rooms, the skeletons in the cupboard and at the feast." A "List" again, but what a difference — the morally picturesque has become the darker psychology. This is a profounder Hawthorne than James had known before (and never before known so intimately). It is the Hawthorne who was "happy in an appetite that could find a feast in meagre materials." And in "The Beast in the Jungle," for example, the very idea of the story, with no stretching at all, can be located in Hawthorne's own notebook: "Two persons to be expecting some occurrence, and watching for the two principal actors in it, and to find that the occurrence is even then passing, and that they themselves are the two actors." Once again, Richard Brodhead has the matter exactly right: "It is, uncannily, as if Hawthorne had become the real author." Like crazy Wakefield and that suffering Minister who put on the black veil, John Marcher is possessed from out of nowhere — at least from out of nowhere he knows — by a hideous curse which fatally separates man from woman and all "domestic affections." James had begun this story by asking, "What is there in the idea of *Too Late*?" As Matthiessen and Murdock point out, James was now doing his work in the Hawthorne way: "he started with an abstraction and sought an embodiment for it." And the story proceeds as Hawthorne's best usually do; it is what James called "a negative adventure." Hawthorne was now on James's mind more deeply than any other writer he had ever read.

Nearing the end of his long, great life, James bids a final goodbye to Hawthorne. In *Notes of a Son and Brother* he writes that Hawthorne's work "was all charged with a *tone*, a full and rare tone" which was "for me, at least — ever so appreciably American; which proved to what a use American matter could

be put by an American hand" and proved also that "an American could be an artist, one of the finest, without 'going outside' about it . . . quite in fact as if Hawthorne had become one just by being American *enough*." Had he not said as much almost forty years ago? Suddenly, the instinctive grasp of a young artist concludes in the radiant apprehension of an aging master. Once again, as James says, "Hawthorne is the most valuable example of the American genius."

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I. *Early Years*

IT will be necessary, for several reasons, to give this short sketch the form rather of a critical essay than of a biography. The data for a life of Nathaniel Hawthorne are the reverse of copious, and even if they were abundant they would serve but in a limited measure the purpose of the biographer. Hawthorne's career was probably as tranquil and uneventful a one as ever fell to the lot of a man of letters; it was almost strikingly deficient in incident, in what may be called the dramatic quality. Few men of equal genius and of equal eminence can have led, on the whole, a simpler life. His six volumes of Note-Books illustrate this simplicity; they are a sort of monument to an unagitated fortune. Hawthorne's career had vicissitudes or variations; it was passed, for the most part, in a small and homogeneous society, in a provincial, rural community; it had few perceptible points of contact with what is called the world, with public events, with the manners of his time, even with the life of his neighbours. Its literary incidents are not numerous. He produced, in quantity, but little. His works consist of four novels and the fragment of another, five volumes of short tales, a collection of sketches, and a couple of story-books for children. And yet some account of the man and the writer is well worth giving. Whatever may have been Hawthorne's private

lot, he has the importance of being the most beautiful and most eminent representative of a literature. The importance of the literature may be questioned, but at any rate, in the field of letters, Hawthorne is the most valuable example of the American genius. That genius has not, as a whole, been literary; but Hawthorne was on his limited scale a master of expression. He is the writer to whom his countrymen most confidently point when they wish to make a claim to have enriched the mother-tongue, and, judging from present appearances, he will long occupy this honourable position. If there is something very fortunate for him in the way that he borrows an added relief from the absence of competitors in his own line, and from the general flatness of the literary field that surrounds him, there is also, to a spectator, something almost touching in his situation. He was so modest and delicate a genius that we may fancy him appealing from the lonely honour of a representative attitude—perceiving a painful incongruity between his imponderable literary baggage and the large conditions of American life. Hawthorne, on the one side, is so subtle and slender and unpretending, and the American world, on the other, is so vast and various and substantial, that it might seem to the author of *The Scarlet Letter* and the *Mosses from an Old Manse*, that we render him a poor service in contrasting his proportions with those of a great civilisation. But our author must accept the awkward as well as the graceful side of his fame; for he has the advantage of pointing a valuable moral. This moral is that the flower of art blooms only where the soil is deep, that it takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature, that it needs a complex social machinery to set a writer in motion. American civilisation has hitherto had other things to do than to produce flowers, and before giving birth to writers it has wisely occupied itself with providing something for them to write about. Three or four beautiful talents of trans-Atlantic growth are the sum of what the world usually recognises, and in this modest nosegay the genius of Hawthorne is admitted to have the rarest and sweetest fragrance.

His very simplicity has been in his favour; it has helped