Miles Coverdale projects the romance of Blithedale into the future one summer day, as he and Hollingsworth lift stones into place to repair a wall. In a century or two, he says to his silent companion, Zenobia, Priscilla, Hollingsworth, and he will be mythic characters; legends will have grown up about them, and they will figure heroically in an epic poem. But to Hollingsworth, feckless speculations like these are infuriating; the utopian project at Blithedale is, in his view, a wretched,
insubstantial scheme, impossible of realization and worthless if possible. "It has given you a theme for poetry," he growls at Coverdale. "Let that content you."

It is a question whether Hawthorne's experience at Brook Farm brought him more, although he boasted, according to Emerson, of having lived in the utopian community during its heroic age. He was there, on his own explanation, to find a way of supporting a wife, but he was there against the grain. A shy, solitary man, Hawthorne was always cool to reform movements, always skeptical of the possibility of progress. Still, impelled by whatever unaccountable enthusiasm, he left Boston for Brook Farm in April, 1841, arriving (like his fictional counterpart at Blithedale) in a snowstorm: "Here I am in a polar Paradise!", he wrote to his fiancée Sophia Peabody. He labored manfully, though with rapidly diminishing enthusiasm, in the "gold-mine" and in the fields; and, predictably, he became disaffected. The proposed union between intellectual and manual labor turned out to be less natural than had been hoped. Brook Farm proved, said Elizabeth Peabody, Sophia's bluestocking sister, that "gentlemen, if they will work as many hours as boors, will succeed even better in cultivating a farm." Hawthorne was more interested in the harsher lesson on the other side of the coin: "a man's soul may be buried and perish under a dungheap, or in a furrow of the field, just as well as in a pile of money." Hawthorne left Brook Farm before the end of the year; what it was he sought there he had not found. But he had been given a theme for poetry.

Hawthorne, it is true, denied it, claiming that he had from Brook Farm not a theme but a theater where the creatures of his imagination could play out their "phantasmagorical antics." It was no part of his purpose, he said, to deal in his fiction with his former associates of the socialist community or to make any judgment with respect to socialism itself. Brook Farm offered
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...itself as the setting for his romance because it was the closest analogue he could find to the poetic and fairy precincts, shadowed and obscure, so abundantly available to Old World romancers, so lamentably lacking in the sunshine of America. He chose Brook Farm because, in a special sense, it was unreal. His own experience there had been unreal even at the time he was living it. "It already looks like a dream behind me," he writes to Sophia Peabody during a fortnight's vacation from the rigors of farm work. His life at Brook Farm is an "unnatural . . . and therefore an unreal one." Ten years later, the experience has been transmuted into the most romantic episode of his career: "essentially a day-dream, and yet a fact,—and thus offering an available foothold between fiction and reality." In short, an American setting for romance.

It is doubtless true, as the late Richard Chase and others have argued, that the American genius for fiction has expressed itself most characteristically and most brilliantly in the romance with its infusion of the mysterious, rather than in the novel proper with its sturdy grounding in the actual, the solid, the real. Given Moby-Dick and The Scarlet Letter, we would be churlish to complain. But many a reader of The Blithedale Romance has wished that in this instance the allurements of the mysterious had given way in Hawthorne's mind to a concern for the actual; we would gladly trade veiled ladies and handsome villains with false teeth and snake-headed canes for a Flemish portrait of Brook Farm. Admittedly, there has been a good deal of speculation about whether the book is in fact a roman à clef, and some members of Brook Farm felt that Hawthorne's portrayal had done them injustice; but in truth so little of the actuality of Brook Farm appears in the book that, as Henry James said, the complaining brethren had more reason to feel slighted than misrepresented.

Hawthorne's refusal as an artist to confront the issues posed
by Brook Farm is one of a series of evasions that make this work tantalizing, slippery, finally unsatisfactory. His choice of Brook Farm as a setting necessarily entailed legitimate expectations from readers. This is a matter of history and fact, not of literary device. Brook Farm was famous even in its failure; interest was high in the social theory by which it had operated and in the great personalities who had been attracted to it. When the book appeared (five years after the final break-up of the Association), many people concluded immediately that Zenobia's character was modeled upon that of Margaret Fuller, whose close association with Brook Farm (although she was not a member) was widely known. Miss Fuller's tragic death by drowning two years before Blithedale's publication was a significant link in the identification and revived interest in Brook Farm itself. Most important, Hawthorne had been there—a witness and a participant in an episode that was real in American history, if not in his own imagination. Given these special circumstances, the setting of his book created its own demands; it cried out for detailed, novelistic treatment: for description and solidity of specification and judgment as the novelist appropriately renders these. But Hawthorne evaded such claims by his choice of form, which precluded, he said, "the actual events of real lives," as well as a moral or political judgment of socialism. He wanted it both ways at once—the romance of Brook Farm without making the commitment that evaluation would have entailed. The evasion provoked some readers to indignation. Would he have refused judgment similarly if his setting had been a picturesque slave plantation?, demanded George Eliot.¹

To be sure, despite Hawthorne's disclaimers, judgment of Blithedale does emanate from the book. It is not, however, the product of a hard look at the workings of the community—its hopes, tensions, follies, achievements, failures; we see almost
nothing of this. It comes instead from scattered comments, mostly unfavorable, of two or three of the principal characters and from the pervading tone of the work. The tone is imparted, of course, by the narrator, by Miles Coverdale, minor poet, *voyeur extraordinaire*, assiduous parrot of Hawthorne’s Journals, dubious spokesman for his creator. Coverdale’s relations with Blithedale are most complex. One is never sure, for example, why he made the initial plunge: why he puffed out the final whiff of cigar smoke and left his bachelor rooms in Boston—the fire burning in the grate, the closet stocked with champagne and claret—to sally out “into the heart of the pitiless snowstorm, in quest of a better life.” The gesture is generous, idealistic, self-revealing, and Coverdale hastens to clothe himself in irony. He speaks with mock grandiloquence of his own “heroism,” of “the mighty hearts” of his companions and himself, which barely had throbbing room in the narrow streets of Boston, of their task: “the reformation of the world.” The mannered hyperbole belittles both the speaker and the enterprise on which he is launched. It is a consistent tone.

From the beginning, Coverdale has doubts about the legitimacy of the Blithedale venture. His first meeting with Zenobia, that magnificent woman, throws everything else out of focus: her mere presence at Blithedale “caused our heroic enterprise to show like an illusion, a masquerade, a pastoral, a counterfeit Arcadia.” Occasionally he takes a positive stance, as in his fine climactic scene with Hollingsworth where he speaks fervently of “this fair system of our new life, which has been planned so deeply, and is now beginning to flourish so hopefully around us. How beautiful it is, and, as far as we can yet see, how practicable!” But more characteristically he laughs aloud in mocking recognition of the ridiculousness of their scheme. Like Hawthorne with Brook Farm, Coverdale can doubt the reality of the whole experience. A few days away from the farm and
it all comes to seem "dream work and enchantment" to him. The lofty aims and fine assurances of the first few days have evaporated; what remains in his mind is the deadening reality of hard work.

In his most ambitious moments of assessment, years after the experience, Coverdale makes explicit the duality of his feeling toward Blithedale. The enterprise was folly, he muses, but admirable folly. It was a vision, impossible of achievement but worthy to be followed. It was generous, but fully as absurd as generous. Coverdale had toyed with utopia and seen it fail; and like a middle-aged American today looking back on a rash plunge into political experience in the 30's, he is proud that he once had the idealism to be misled.

Coverdale's ambivalence toward Blithedale is a favorable judgment compared to other evaluations. Hollingsworth is contemptuous of the project from the beginning, seeing it as a miserably frivolous thing compared to his own scheme for reforming criminals. Zenobia at first takes something of Coverdale's tone as she plays with self-conscious irony on the notion that they are reconstituting Paradise. But at the end, after her fortune is presumed gone and Hollingsworth has thrust her aside for Priscilla, her condemnation is bitter: "I am weary of this place, and sick to death of playing at philanthropy and progress. Of all varieties of mock-life, we have surely blundered into the very emptiest mockery, in our effort to establish the one true system." Even Westervelt adds his variation on the theme as he ridicules the inhabitants of this latter-day Forest of Arden.

Thus every major character in the book (except Priscilla) rings changes on the notion that life at Blithedale is mock-life, artificial, insubstantial. As in the masquerade scene, everything is "put on" for the pastoral occasion; and the pastoral is the most studiedly artificial of genres. Miles Coverdale, who confesses to
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having a "decided tendency toward the actual," finds himself getting so far out of reckoning with the real that he has to leave Blithedale to get his moorings once more. For reality Coverdale goes to Boston.

An odd twist shows here. The very quality of life which made Brook Farm available to Hawthorne as the setting for his book constitutes, in the mouths of his characters, a criticism of the socialist experiment at Blithedale. This critique may be summed up by citing Coverdale's harsh comment on the manner Zenobia chose for her death: her drowning had "some tint of the Arcadian affectation that had been visible enough in all our lives, for a few months past."

Here, singly and in sum, is judgment in plenty; and no voice is raised in opposition. Is it Hawthorne's judgment? Given the operative conventions of fiction, of course it is not. Furthermore, many of the negative criticisms have the most dubious bearing on Blithedale. Any remark of Westervelt, for example, can be immediately dismissed because he is the devil, or a very near relative. Hollingsworth is a monomaniac, incapable of seeing beyond his own incredible scheme; his opinions of Blithedale lack cogency in proportion as he lacks balance. Zenobia's denunciation of the "mock-life" of Blithedale tells heavily against the community, but as criticism it is not earned by the experience depicted in the book. Zenobia is sick to death, not of the socialist experiment, but of the perverseness of a New England blacksmith who could choose the debile and childlike Priscilla over her own opulent self. Psychologically plausible as it is, Zenobia's outburst reveals far more of her own sickness than any of Blithedale's. "Take the moral of Zenobia's history," writes George Eliot, "and you will find that Socialism is apparently made responsible for consequences which it utterly condemned." George Eliot overstates, but it is an overstatement that the economy of the book abets.
Miles Coverdale is the only character in the romance whose judgment of Blithedale bears directly and with relevance on the kind of experience Hawthorne had lived at Brook Farm. Coverdale is ambivalent, as we have seen, proud at one moment to be on the point of progress as it thrusts out into chaos, shrewdly skeptical the next as he reflects on the anomalous position of a utopian community forced to compete for livelihood with the world it has rejected. But this is practical criticism, not moral judgment. A condition of moral judgment—if it is to carry weight—is that we have full confidence in the judge; in his character, his sensitivity, his human sympathy. Coverdale is not a man to inspire such confidence. True, in his frank characterization of himself, his charm and intelligence come through; and his very frankness in revealing his own failures of character predisposes us to sympathy toward him. This is one of a number of seductive consequences following upon our being exposed to a sustained "inside view" narrative. But sympathy falters when Coverdale tells us of the "cold tendency" which makes him pry into other people's passions—a tendency that has helped, he says, unhumanize his heart. He shows us himself in a series of scenes as a compulsive Peeping Tom (he even dreams of peeping); we see him being sadistically cruel to Priscilla, malevolent to Zenobia, bitterly revengeful toward Hollingsworth. What are we to make of a man who, looking back over the avowed emptiness of his life, searches his mind for a cause worth dying for and finds one, in these terms: "If Kossuth . . . would pitch the battle-field of Hungarian rights within an easy ride of my abode, and choose a mild, sunny morning, after breakfast, for the conflict, Miles Coverdale would gladly be his man, for one brave rush upon the levelled bayonets. Further than that, I should be loath to pledge myself." Somewhere Coverdale refers to the "customary levity" of his speech; the phrase characterizes precisely the tone of his moral
life. He is not one—Hawthorne will not let him be one—whose judgment of the Blithedale experiment can command assent.

Thus, although there are many judgments of Blithedale in the book, none of them—singly or in combination—can be said to represent Hawthorne's own final and reliable judgment; in this sense his disclaimer in the Preface is justified. One must feel that this is a major weakness of the book—the weakness that Henry James was touching upon, I think, when, with his eye upon opportunities lost, he complained that Hawthorne was not a satirist. "There is no satire whatever in the Romance," he lamented; "the quality is almost conspicuous by its absence." This is not entirely accurate. Zenobia sometimes functions as a satirist; she spins a fine satirical fantasy on Coverdale turned country bumpkin, for example—the fantasy a sharp critique of the sentimentality of Blithedale values. Westervelt, that implausible villain, draws a deft satirical portrait of Hollingsworth and is so overcome with delight at his accomplishment that he bursts into metallic laughter, thereby disclosing the brilliant sham of his dental arrangements. Even Miles Coverdale demonstrates an occasional feeling for the tone of satire, as when he decides (mistakenly) that Hollingsworth is, after all, a philanthropic man—"not that steel engine of the devil's contrivance, a philanthropist!" But all this is quite incidental and does not affect the validity of James's point. What is wanted at the heart of the book is the stringency of the satiric view.

The difficulty is bound up in the conception of Miles Coverdale, a narrator whose self-protecting irony enables him to avoid taking a rigorous stand on anything. The most common rhetorical pattern in Coverdale's musings throughout the book is for him to make a statement of judgment or conclusion—this followed immediately by a new sentence beginning with "But ...," which retracts or qualifies or blurs what has just been stated. Coverdale is the classically uncommitted man; he
could hardly have been a satirist any more than he could have been a single-minded utopian.

The most tantalizing puzzle in the *Blithedale Romance* is that involved in the relation between Hawthorne and the man he created to tell his story. If we look at the work with a post-Jamesian eye, it is possible to think of Coverdale as an “unreliable narrator,” in Wayne Booth’s terms, with Hawthorne standing in a critically ironic relation to him. Hawthorne, after all, is the one who makes Coverdale display himself as a deplorably inadequate human being. “I have made but a poor and dim figure in my own narrative,” Coverdale writes at the end. At times, Hawthorne seems to be laughing at his alter ego. In the grotesque voyeur scene in Boston, for example, Coverdale has been caught out by Westervelt and Zenobia as he peeps into their window across the street. Zenobia, hurling a glance of scorn “directed full at my sensibilities as a gentleman,” drops a window curtain between them. The speed with which Coverdale rationalizes his outrageous behavior can be nothing short of comic: “I had a keen, revengeful sense of the insult inflicted by Zenobia’s scornful recognition, and more particularly by her letting down the curtain; as if such were the proper barrier to be interposed between a character like hers and a perceptive faculty like mine.” The play on words here is amusing and pointed (Coverdale is consistently proud of his delicate intuitions but relies overmuch on his excellent eyesight); it reinforces our momentary sense that Hawthorne may be mocking his narrator.

But when we look for further evidence of this kind, evidence developed at all systematically, we do not find it. So little ironic remove is there between Hawthorne and Coverdale that we are forced to think of the play on “perceptive faculty” as either unintentional or an isolated, and therefore incoherent, flash of wit. If Hawthorne deliberately created Coverdale as an unre-
liable narrator (and in some sense he unquestionably did so create him), he provided almost no clues by which the reader could redress the unreliability. He is no more a satirist with respect to Coverdale than Coverdale is a satirist with respect to the utopia he left. Neither Blithedale nor the man who tells of Blithedale is finally placed in the moral (which is to say, the fictive) structure of the book. This is a limitation sanctioned only superficially by the form Hawthorne chose; the true limitation, we must feel, is in the romancer, not the romance.

Despite some interesting efforts by recent critics, it has seemed to most readers that *The Blithedale Romance* suffers from a radical incoherence. Even the greatest ingenuity cannot bring into meaningful relation the Veiled Lady—Fauntleroy—Westervelt business with the thematic interests of the work, nor do these interests reveal themselves in notable harmony. It occurs to me that the harmony was available, implicit in the experience described, but that Hawthorne failed finally to achieve it because, like Coverdale, he remained a witness and refused the role of judge. Or, if this is overstated, at least he refused to push his judgment to that point which would have enabled him to unify the ideological materials with which he worked.

Of course certain morals are drawn in the clearest terms. Zenobia is a figure straight out of homiletic literature, out of Juvenal, say, or *The Vanity of Human Wishes*. All that makes her the superb woman she is—her vitality, her intelligence, her radiant sexuality—all that sets her apart as a figure of heroic drama, conspires to her ruin. She is what she is because she lives "out of the beaten track"; and it is this, she says, drawing her own bitter moral, that pulls the universe down upon her.

Hollingsworth's career is even more clearly an exemplum; the analysis of his character is relentless as we are made to see into what makes this gifted man move, as we watch him, impelled by noble motives, become dehumanized under
the pressure of the idée fixe that rules him. Evidence in the manuscript indicates that one tentative title of The Blithedale Romance was Hollingsworth—some measure of the importance Hawthorne placed on the character and the theme he embodies. Men like Hollingsworth, remarks Coverdale, are not motivated so much as incorporated by their single principle. “And the higher and purer the original object, and the more unselfishly it may have been taken up, the slighter is the probability that they can be led to recognize the process by which godlike benevolence has been debased into all-devouring egotism.” As self-consecrated high priests, they will sacrifice whatever is most precious before their idol, in whose features they see only benignity and love. Hollingsworth’s own soul is doomed to be corrupted, Coverdale sees, by the “too powerful purpose which had grown out of what was noblest in him.” The shape of the corruption is etched in by Zenobia as at the end she sees the man she has loved for what he is. “Are you a man? No; but a monster! A cold, heartless, self-beginning and self-ending piece of mechanism!” Hawthorne’s theme is as old as Aristotle, and it could not be more clear: corruptio optimi pessima.

Blithedale itself might have been encompassed by the same moral referents had Hawthorne chosen to show us, in concrete terms, the community recapitulating in large the progress of its most powerful member. The theme is broached, as a matter of fact, although in fairly abstract terms. We know that the community of Blithedale originates out of the most generous motives, that it is dedicated to the loftiest aims, and that it falls victim to corruption generated out of its own virtues. Blithedale failed, and deserved to fail, says Coverdale in retrospect, because it lapsed into Fourierism. (Three years after Hawthorne left Brook Farm, the members announced officially that they gave unqualified assent to the principles of Fourier and proposed to organize themselves into a “perfect Phalanx,” with, presumably,
the total systematization of life that implied.) Coverdale's remark recalls an earlier scene. During his convalescence at Blithedale, he read widely in Fourier, ploughing through the tedious volumes because he recognized an analogy between Fourier's system and their own, opposed as their respective principles might be. Coverdale explains parts of Fourier's system to Hollingsworth and translates some of the more egregious passages for his benefit. They take particular delight in Fourier's famous prophecy that in the fullness of progress the ocean shall be transformed into lemonade. Both men are contemptuous of Fourier's principles and his grandiose plans. Fourier "promulgates his system, so far as I can perceive," says Coverdale, "entirely on his own responsibility. He has searched out and discovered the whole counsel of the Almighty, in respect to mankind, past, present, and for exactly seventy thousand years to come by the mere force of his individual intellect!" Hollingsworth is outraged that Fourier should choose man's selfishness as the motive force for his system. "To seize upon and foster whatever vile, petty, sordid, filthy, bestial and abominable corruptions have cankered into our nature, to be the efficient instruments of his infernal regeneration!" The devil himself could contrive no worse. "And his consummated Paradise, as he pictures it, would be worthy of the agency which he counts upon for establishing it."

How remarkable Hawthorne's prescience is!—his sensitivity to the signals that issues of the future send out before them. Here we have two men, members of a utopian community, discussing the corruption of the utopian principle, seeing that in the absolutism of Fourier's vision lies the making of a utopian hell. Coverdale's reference to the awful truth in Pilgrim's Progress—"from the very gate of heaven there is a by-way to the pit"—is made with Hollingsworth in mind; but its application in this context is exact. Hawthorne is on the verge of one of the
twentieth century's most compulsive themes: the fear of utopia. There are adumbrations here of the ideology behind Ivan Karamazov's vision of the Grand Inquisitor (that great vision of utopia turned in on itself), behind Eugene Zamiatin's extraordinary novel We, behind Brave New World—adumbrations of a good deal that is most significant in twentieth-century thought. 

Corruptio optimi pessima sums it up well enough.

Remarkable as Hawthorne's insight is, however, we must not claim for him too much. The discussion of utopianism is brief and abstract. In only the most casual way is it made to bear on Blithedale: the community fell into Fourierism, says Coverdale years after the event, and deservedly failed. We are not allowed to see that failure: how it was and what it meant. Coverdale's remark has a factual bearing only; it is not the statement of a novelist.¹

In his fine essay on The Blithedale Romance, Irving Howe speaks of the temptation to write about the book it might have been rather than the book it is.² I am conscious of having succumbed to that temptation—an arrogant procedure perhaps, but not entirely gratuitous. Hawthorne chose to write a romance, which in this instance entailed "phantasmagoric antics," "Sybiline attributes," satanic stigmata. Such materials, with their vague intimations of allegorical significance, could not have been of great interest even to a receptive nineteenth-century audience; they are of no possible interest today. Hawthorne also chose his setting which for historical reasons was inevitably interesting; perhaps inadvertently he found himself in the dilemma of the historical novelist, where "background" takes on independent life and moves to the fore, disrupting the normal relation of figure to ground. In any event, his setting could be successfully rendered only in proportion as he was willing to introduce "reality" into its presentation—the kind of reality that
Miles Coverdale discovers in a picture in a Boston saloon, and rejects.

Coverdale, we recall, once toyed with the fancy that he might figure as a hero in the future epic poem celebrating Blithedale. It would never have occurred to him that he might write that poem. Zenobia, who sees the whole affair as a tragedy, accuses him of trivializing it, of turning it into a ballad. When she suggests a moral for his poem, he wants to soften it. The ballad, one fears, will be sentimental.

Hawthorne's situation once again runs parallel to that of the poet he created. He was by no means the man by conviction or temperament to write the epic of Brook Farm. Nor was he prepared to write a novel (to say nothing of a satirical novel) grounded in range and depth in his own experience; to do this would have required that he commit himself, that he judge what he had lived in a way that he was unwilling to undertake. His choice of romance as the form to incorporate his material gave him at least superficial justification for evading these issues. The aesthetic choice was at the same time a moral choice. It is impossible not to wish that he had chosen differently.