Art and Substance
Art
and
Belief

... And the Poet himself comes out of his millennial rooms. With the digger wasp and the occult Guest of his nights...

Blur yourself, clear eye, in which the man of reason placed his trust....

—St.-John Perse, Winds

Hawthorne thought of himself as a poet, though he wrote only prose, and as a Christian, though after a Unitarian upbringing he stayed away from all churches, including that one. He found Bunyan's understanding of life truer than Emerson's, but preferred not to commit himself, except in the most general terms, on the degree of historicity in Bunyan's myth. Paradox lies at the center of both Hawthorne's art and his belief.

His natural inclination, both in print and out, was to skirt
matters of aesthetic and religious belief, or, when unable to do so, to treat them lightly, with a touch of whimsy or self-directed irony, not because they meant little to him, but just because they were close to his heart. He had a large emotional investment in them, but he had not thought them through in any systematic way and did not believe it profitable to try to do so. The light tone was defensive. He was no philosopher or theologian, and he knew it; but he had to write and live in terms of an assumed aesthetic and an assumed theology, and he knew that, too. He found any situation calling for clear commitment in these matters a little embarrassing.

The relationship between art and belief in Hawthorne’s work is, therefore, a subject harder to come to terms with and reduce to clarity than it is in the work of most artists. With Emerson, for example, one comes to his poetry knowing pretty well what his beliefs are. Despite his dictum about a foolish consistency, there is a consistency here. The problem becomes more difficult only when we try to square some of Emerson’s beliefs with others, or the moods and insights of the private man with the statements of the public philosopher. Or Thoreau: we find the beliefs clearly enough set forth in the Journals, and we may follow the process by which they are worked up into the mythopoetic form of Walden. But Hawthorne’s Notebooks record, with very few exceptions, either experiences which might later prove useful or bare subjects for possible stories—a week in Maine with his friend Bridge, a visit to a ruined castle in England, the diary of a coroner, life seen as a procession. They do not normally provide us with statements of general belief. Both Emerson and Thoreau, in contrast, sought commitment as strongly as Hawthorne avoided it; and the art of both carries over from their journals a large amount of plain statement of the general truths to which they were firmly committed.

As a writer of fiction, Hawthorne was not free to express
his opinions directly, even if he had wanted to. When he spoke out as intrusive author in his concluding morals, in the fashion of the day, he often undercut his generalizations as he was presenting them. When he had one of his characters say he could not separate the symbol from the idea it symbolized, he might have been, and probably was, thinking of himself. As a "thinker," Hawthorne was, from one point of view, indolent, from another, an artist rather than a philosopher: he followed the implications of images, dwelt on paradox, and was content not to resolve certain mysteries. Ambiguity, far from offending him, seemed to him necessary in any fully honest and complete treatment of experience. Irony, the double mood, was the response of both man and artist to most situations.

He went to the heart of the matter once in Our Old Home, commenting on his consular duty to advise Americans in trouble:

For myself, I had never been in the habit of feeling that I could sufficiently comprehend any particular conjunction of circumstances with human character, to justify me in thrusting in my awkward agency among the intricate and unintelligible machinery of Providence. I have always hated to give advice, especially when there is a prospect of its being taken. It is only one-eyed people who love to advise, or have any spontaneous promptitude of action.

Typically, he attributes his failure to understand the "machinery" of Providence to a personal deficiency, at the same time implying that those who think they have a clearer understanding than he are deluded. At this point the lines of his skepticism and those of his romantic heritage cross to produce an almost total lack of confidence in the vision produced by the clear eye of the man of reason.

Since he felt this way about matters of ordinary experience, it is not surprising that he was even more reticent about his
But he almost never spoke about religious matters as such even to his family.

Those who knew him best are unanimous in their testimony that he thought of himself, and inspired others to think of him, as a deeply religious man. But on Sunday mornings in England when Sophia and Una went to church, he and Julian would usually go for a walk. When he thought of himself as a Christian, it was in no light or merely honorific sense; and he imbued in his children a lasting religious concern, but they never were able to say later just what he believed. When, after his death, both his daughters became nuns, one Anglican, one Roman Catholic, they were fulfilling what their father might have seen, with no doubt his usual mixed feelings, as a kind of family destiny. Were they, we can imagine his asking himself, the products of their past, fated to move on from where he had left off in his, and New England's, religious history?

He would not have known, for sure, the answer to this question, or at least would not have wanted to say. But the subject might have appealed to him for a romance. If he had written it, we should have had to look in it for the evidence of what he thought; and even after we had made due allowance for the dramatic character of the work, interpretation of the evidence would not be simple. For there were several Haw-
thornes, among them one he tended to be and one he wanted to be. The one he wanted to be often gave assent to the leading ideas of the age, but neither Hawthorne was much interested in—or, as he felt, equipped to deal with—ideas as such, the abstract propositions that engage us as men of reason. This is the burden of his meaning when he defined himself as a writer of “psychological” romance: a probing of the psyche, the secret inner and most real self as it experiences belief in action. Not the idea of man’s total depravity as a theological doctrine, but how one might come to believe it and what the existential consequences would be, this is what really interested him. What would it be like to be a young Goodman Brown? Not what is the “psychology” of Brown in any purely naturalistic, reductive, or behavioristic, modern sense, but what would it be like to live a theology? Insofar as a lived theology is expressible only in the terms Hawthorne chose, the dilemma of the would-be analyst of the relations of art and belief in Hawthorne is complete.

In the most revealing statement of his conception of his role as artist, Hawthorne spoke of himself as one dedicated to “burrowing” into the “depths”—of the cavern of the heart, we might have expected him to say, in one of his favorite images; but into the depths of “our common nature,” he actually said. The paradox of the dual, or multiple, Hawthorne is here revealed: “common” brings the essences back into the picture. In general, and for the most part, Hawthorne thought we could not know anything about essence: he concentrated on existence, which he did know, in the most compelling way. But his anti-rationalism was not complete or his skepticism absolute. The darkness in which man found himself was almost, but not quite, total. Some beliefs are warranted and necessary, but not many, and the more precise they are, the less certain.

The rationalist aspect of Hawthorne produced the works
closest to traditional allegory, complete with their implied systems of moral and religious belief. Meanwhile the Hawthorne of "the deeper mind" was creating an existential art concerned not with perfectly controlled but with haunted minds, not with abstract sin but with personal guilt, not with ideas but with felt thought, not with things as they are, objectively considered, in themselves, but things as seen with the mind's eye, preferably from a distance great enough to blur all but the most significant details.

It is not really surprising, therefore, that the religious significance of Hawthorne's work and the personally held beliefs of the man himself have been so variously described. He has been labeled a transcendentalist, a Puritan, an essentially orthodox Christian, a skeptical heir of the Enlightenment, and a naturalist. With the exception perhaps of the last, each of these descriptions represents a valid response to some part of the evidence, to that part that seems to the interpreter, with his special interest and bias, the crucial part. But bias alone is not sufficient to account for the variety of the descriptions of Hawthorne's religious position. Emerson's interpreters presumably have their biases, too, but no one has ever labeled him religiously orthodox or denied his individualism in spiritual matters or questioned his Platonism. Surely, there must be something about Hawthorne and his works which permits, or even encourages, such disagreements.

The description of him as a transcendentalist is ambiguous and, at best, not very helpful. Does it mean he was a transcendentalist in Plato's sense, or in Kant's, or in Emerson's? If it is taken to mean that he believed in a transcendent reality, the description is true but does not distinguish him from most others...
of his age; but if it means that he shared the outlook of the Concord transcendentalist group, its truth is so partial that it need not detain us for long. To be sure, he created Hester, but he also disapproved of her views. (He created Ethan Brand, too, that notably self-reliant character.) He thought Emerson saintly, but he almost never agreed with his wife in her enthusiasm for the new philosophy. He was “transcendental” in his aesthetic theory, so far as he had thought it out, as “Drowne’s Wooden Image” and “The Artist of the Beautiful” will show us, and thought of nature as a symbolic language capable, when responded to imaginatively, of revealing a truth and reality perceived through, but lying beyond, the senses. But such matters as these did not occupy much of his attention: again, as he knew, he was no philosopher, and he thought he had no questions to ask of Emerson as a philosopher. From this distance, we may discern a number of ideas and attitudes they held in common, some of them potentially very important. But for both of them, they were operationally less important than the ideas they distinctly did not share. Both would have been shocked by having their views equated.

The description in naturalistic terms is even more misleading. True, he thought the ways of Providence “unintelligible,” but it has often occurred to believers that God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform. The term Providence signified a reality to Hawthorne, but a reality man could not hope to understand. “I am that I am”: Tillich’s and Buber’s refusal to specify a propositional content for the concept of God has a long history, not simply among existentialists, and, one may well hold, has good reasons behind it. It is essentially the same position as Hawthorne’s on Providence. He could differ with his Puritan forebears here without ceasing to be religious, or even biblical, in his thinking. For Job, too, God’s ways remained, even at the end, “unintelligible” in any strictly rational sense.
From Hawthorne’s own point of view, he was too much the Christian to be a naturalist, even if he did not look, with Cotton Mather, for the signs of Special Providences. If he constantly naturalized and psychologized leading Christian ideas, especially the Fall, it was not because he was interested in denying Christian dogmas but precisely because he was interested in penetrating to their existential truth and thus re-establishing and preserving them. Father Ficke’s conclusions in his careful and thorough study of Hawthorne’s religion are too well documented to be questioned. The Light Beyond: Hawthorne’s Theology leaves many problems unsolved, some of them very important to the literary critic, but not this one: Hawthorne was not, in any significant sense of the word, a naturalist.

Much more plausibly, Hawthorne is often, especially in the older literary histories, called a latter-day Puritan. If one comes to this description fresh from those that take the transcendentalist or naturalist tack, it is likely to seem refreshingly apt. It acknowledges his religious concern and differentiates his religious attitudes from those of his more transcendental neighbors. His strong imaginative identification with his region’s past, his constant concern with problems of conscience, his relative conservatism in religious matters in an age and region of Unitarian liberalism, his anti-Utopian tendencies in a time of great confidence in progress, his tendency to stress man’s finitude and innate sinfulness—all these traits and others seem to justify the old label.

But the more one learns about the man and his work, the less adequate the description comes to seem. For one thing, it almost entirely overlooks the crucial matter of belief. Hawthorne was not a Calvinist, and a strict Calvinist might well have denied his right to be called a Christian. Hawthorne, in turn, thought his Puritan forefathers religiously misguided, morally insensitive to the demands of their faith, and personally unat-
tractive. He exposed their bigotry in "The Man of Adamant" and their defective theology in "Young Goodman Brown." Their biblical literalism seemed to him wholly mistaken and the fine-spun arguments of their theological tracts irrelevant. Thanking God that he had not been born in those "stern and gloomy" times, he honored the Puritans for their strength of purpose and moral earnestness and for the seriousness and depth of their grasp of human nature and destiny. He shared many of their concerns and characteristic attitudes without sharing many of their distinguishing beliefs.

His view of the Puritans was essentially that of his age. Despite his close acquaintance with their writings and his imaginative sympathy with them, he judged them, a modern historian would be likely to say, unfairly, betraying a typical nineteenth-century bias. Finding them bigoted, cruel, continuously gloomy, and far too anti-humanistic for his tastes, he condemned them in work after work. With his typical insight, he admitted that "strong traits of their nature have intertwined themselves with mine," but these were precisely those traits in himself that he did not like and tried to replace. He would surely have been greatly displeased to find himself called a Puritan by the scholars. In answer, he would have pointed to his sketch of the Puritans in "Main Street," or to his portrayal of them as among the damned because of their spiritual pride in "The Man of Adamant," or as sinners casting the first stone in the opening pages of The Scarlet Letter.

Much more to his liking than the American Puritans were what he called affectionately the "old-time" authors in a more centrally orthodox and less literalistic Christian tradition. His feelings on this matter are at least as important a clue to his religious orientation as is his kinship with his Puritan forefathers. Spenser was his favorite writer—and Spenser was a Christian humanist. Dante was another, and Bunyan, Milton,
and Samuel Johnson were others. In those areas of thought and attitude where the American Puritans agreed with such writers, Hawthorne, too, tended to agree. "The Canterbury Pilgrims" might almost have been written by Spenser, and its theme would certainly have been approved by him—though not, probably, by Dante, because of its anti-ascetic aspect. Dante would have understood "Rappaccini's Daughter," and Bunyan might have thought that everything essential in "The Celestial Railroad" came from him. What Hawthorne shared with the Puritans, on the level of belief, was their "orthodoxy," so far as they kept in touch with the central Christian tradition; what he chiefly disapproved in their outlook was their Calvinism and its after-effects, their "heresies," in short.

True to his time and place, Hawthorne thought religion both a private matter and a matter chiefly "of the heart," but insofar as his theological views were formulated and expressed with any clarity, they must be described in terms that will ally them with the traditional, the historic, and, broadly speaking, the orthodox. To press for clarification of these matters, to demand to know, for instance, precisely what ideas Hawthorne held about the Trinity, would result in no increase of understanding: Hawthorne himself resisted clarification in these areas. He held on as best he could to a faith he honored and, as he hoped, shared in its essentials, despite his doubts, a faith he saw everywhere being rejected, fragmented, or diluted—rejected by the transcendentalists, softened and moralized by the Unitarians, transformed into a legalistic code or a simple emotional formula for salvation by the fundamentalistic descendents of the Puritans. To hold on at all often meant reinterpretation of the historical in psychological terms.

From such a religious orientation, Hawthorne wrote "The Celestial Railroad," which shows us his reasons for believing that salvation is not easy or automatic or virtue a matter of...
simple self-trust. A highly effective defense of Bunyan's moral
and religious outlook as against that of the Unitarians and
Transcendentalists, it makes it unnecessary for us to wonder
why Emerson privately thought Hawthorne's works not worth
reading. "Earth's Holocaust" arrives at the same point by a
different approach. To those who might reply to "The Celestial
Rail-Road" by pointing to the reality of progress, Hawthorne
here declares that nothing outward can save a man, nothing less
difficult to produce than a change of heart can be really re-
demptive. Political, scientific, and technological progress is real,
he concedes, and important, too; but it does not solve the lasting
and fundamental problems. Man's basic existential condition
remains what it has always been. A creature aware of his guilt
and faced with the nothingness of death, he knows anxiety
and despair in any society, no matter how "advanced." And
though progress does seem to be real in some areas, man may
expect many of the old evils of society to return in new forms
unless he has a change of heart. Mere political or institutional
reforms are never enough: an evil will can find a way to corrupt
the best-arranged society. "The heart, the heart,—there was the
little yet boundless sphere wherein existed the original wrong of
which the crime and misery of this outward world were
merely types."

Such a view of evil and its origin may be called romantic,
subjective, psychologically oriented, or Christian. All these terms
fit Hawthorne and his works, and each of them points to a
characteristic which the others also illuminate. That each of the
terms has meanings that do not apply to Hawthorne is true but
not to the point. Hawthorne is not romantic in the sense of
having confidence in the innate goodness of unfallen man; or
subjective in the sense of tracing all reality back to the private
consciousness; or psychological in the sense of reducing moral
questions to the merely psychological, that is, to the conditioned;
or Christian in a sense that would be approved either by fundamentalists or by churchmen in a Catholic tradition. But his concern with inward, subjective experience and with "irrational man" was the gift to him of the romantic movement; and his understanding of man's moral and spiritual nature, the gift of the Puritans and the great Christian writers he loved so well. Unsatisfactory though they may be, we shall have to be content with such generalizations as these if we hope to clarify the relations of art and belief in Hawthorne.

For he deliberately blurred his eye on some matters, did so as a matter of principle; and for the critic to achieve definitional clarity in areas of belief where Hawthorne resisted clarity would not be helpful. Hawthorne thought truth was to be glimpsed, not grasped, glimpsed under the proper conditions only, not, in any of its aspects that really interested him, to be deduced by cold abstract reasoning or arrived at by any amount of experimentation. Humanly significant truth, he thought, was "of the heart." And it was more given than achieved, given in the epiphanies and revelations of symbols. To the discovery of the kind of truth he was interested in, the wide-awake mind and the clear eye might indeed be obstacles: his truth seemed more likely to come to what he called "the passive sensibility" in a state halfway between waking and dreaming than to yield to the purposeful grasp of directed thinking. It was to be found by the responsible imagination, the intuitions, and the heart, in the fullness of personal experience. No wonder he believed he could do his best thinking by following the implications of images. He was right. There is more to be learned about his operative beliefs from even minor sketches like "Fancy's Show-box" or "The Haunted Mind" than from the Notebooks, despite the occasional revealing statements of the latter. Hawthorne's art reflects and expresses his belief; and to a degree greater than with most artists, we can find the belief only in the art.
"Night Sketches: Beneath an Umbrella" takes us to the center of Hawthorne's religious sensibility and reveals much about the qualitative aspect of his beliefs. Though it is one of his best sketches, it has never, I believe, received any comment. Its subject is nothing less philosophical than the relations of dream and reality, and the light and the dark in the world, including false lights and true; nothing less, finally, than being and nothingness. The vehicle is a brief walk out into a rainy winter night after a day spent in a warmly cheerful and lighted room, and then an implied return to the fireside.

Hawthorne's control of his material is perfect. Raising the deepest metaphysical questions, he manages to commit himself, in the propositional terms of the philosopher and theologian, on none. Exploring the questions Melville confronted in *Moby-Dick*, exploring them by following the implications of images, he followed a different route to a different answer, as befitted a different temperament and a different outlook; but we can see from the sketch why Melville hailed Hawthorne as a kindred spirit. Nothing could be more typically Hawthornesque than the mixture of seriousness and self-mockery, commitment and ambiguity, doubt and faith we find here. "Onward, still onward, I plunge into the night. . . . " Yes, truly, into a very dark night indeed; but the speaker never ceases to be aware that the greatest risk he really runs is getting his feet wet. He explores the power of darkness to the very limits of the town (there is more beyond, but he already knows its nature from what he has encountered), but does so without the least suggestion that he shares Melville's self-image as Prometheus. One thinks rather of Coverdale, similarly challenged and similarly enticed by his fire, his cigars, and his wine.

The title states the major theme, which will get all the neccs-
sary qualifications in what follows but will never be denied or taken back: it is a dark, cold, and rainy world we live in, a world whose characteristics are in the sharpest kind of contrast with the warmth, comfort, safety, and light—especially the light—of our firesides; a “stormy and dismal” world in which we are truly “night wanderers.” The speaker’s night walk in the rain and the scenes he notes are emblematic of man’s journey through life, as the speaker makes increasingly clear throughout and states at the end. He moves from light into darkness and back into light. But why go into the darkness at all? Why test one’s courage?

The first sentence tells us, implicitly, why, as it introduces the long paragraph devoted to stating the counter theme: the world inside the chamber, safe from the storm. There is no immediate necessity to explore the discomforts outside. “Pleasant is a rainy winter’s day, within doors!” Shut in on such a day, one travels in imagination, visiting strange and exotic places as unlike the world outside the window as possible. The rain beating on the glass makes the imaginative escape all the more pleasant. Dream and reality are in perfect opposition, and dream is easier and more delightful for being unchecked.

But as the day wears on toward evening, the rain makes itself heard more insistently and the daydreaming becomes less and less satisfactory. The “visions” vanish and cannot be reinvoked. “A gloomy sense of unreality” takes their place: the speaker is impelled to venture out to satisfy himself “that the world is not entirely made up of such shadowy materials.” After a day of dreaming, he must explore the night. The dreaming has been enjoyable, the night walk will be unpleasant, and he has no desire to punish himself unnecessarily; but he really has no other choice but to go out, for the dreams “will not appear again” at his bidding. Reality will not be permanently shut off. If the sketch ended here, it would suggest that Hawthorne’s
STANCE was considerably more like Melville’s than it actually was.

But this is only the beginning. After returning us briefly to the literal in the next paragraph—it was after all just a rainy night, requiring, fortunately, no great courage to explore it—the speaker ventures out and looks up at the night sky. What he sees there is appalling—or would be if he let it be. He is plunged immediately into that reality that is the counterpart of his daydreams:

I look upward, and discern no sky, not even an unfathomable void, but only a black, impenetrable nothingness, as though heaven and all its lights were blotted from the system of the universe. It is as if Nature were dead, and the world had put on black, and the clouds were weeping for her.

“As if Nature were dead”: precisely. The charnel house Melville stared at in fascinated horror, an unfathomable void, an impenetrable nothingness, a world of total darkness. Contact with the literal has restored the speaker’s sense of reality, but at what cost! Nature has spoken in its symbolic language and what it seems to say might well test the courage of braver men than the speaker lays any claim to being. The sky, the heavens, Heaven—all gone. Or rather, it looks as if they were gone. The last two clauses of the sentence following the awful revelation progressively qualify it: the world, we know, is not really in mourning for a dead nature, and we cannot picture the raindrops as the tears of the weeping clouds except humorously.

The speaker stares briefly into the night and moves on. He will not rest in total negation. Not that Hawthorne is afraid to follow the implications of his symbols all the way, as some would charge, but, as the rest of the sketch makes clear, he does not think the first glimpse of outer darkness has revealed all there is to be known, even of the night outside; and there is
always the lighted chamber to return to when he has had enough of the dark. Meanwhile he will search out any lights there may be beyond the Slough of Despond through which he has floundered just beyond his doorstep.

As he had anticipated, even at the time of his initial shock, the darkness turns out not to be total. Many kinds of light pierce the gloom, but some of them would lead the walker astray, and some of them have the effect of exaggerating the darkness. The most dangerous of the false lights, though, are those that create the effect of dispelling the darkness entirely:

Methinks the scene is an emblem of the deceptive glare which mortals throw around their footsteps in the moral world, thus bedazzling themselves till they forget the impenetrable obscurity that hems them in, and that can be dispelled only by radiance from above.

The speaker moves on, generally letting the images speak for themselves. The darkness is everywhere, the lights intermittent. He passes a lingering snowbank and is reminded that winter is sometimes colder even than this night. He thinks of floods and shipwrecks and decides that only experienced seamen know how to interpret storms: “The blast will . . . be understood by all of them.” (No wonder Melville felt a kinship with Hawthorne. He would have understood Hawthorne’s reference here to the “Marine Insurance Office.”) He thinks, too, of water nymphs and river deities, as he sees what appear to be their modern counterparts. Myth and fact, dream and reality blend. Gleams from lighted windows alternate with intervals of total darkness in Manichean opposition, but the speaker is gaining confidence as he proceeds: he will not accept the unresolved patchwork as final. He is not, he says, “altogether a chameleon spirit, with no hue of its own.” He will search out light.

But before he finds it, he encounters once more, for the last
time, a darkness that seems total, like the nothingness that met his gaze as he first stepped out his door:

Now I have reached the utmost limits of the town, where the last lamp struggles feebly with the darkness, like the farthest star that stands sentinel on the borders of uncreated space.

Hawthorne might have anticipated Frost in claiming to be one acquainted with the night. But the speaker does not choose, like the one in the poem, to outwalk the farthest city light. He stops at the limits of the town to watch a coach full of passengers move out into the darkness. The passengers will dream, he thinks, as they journey through the night to their destinations. Finally he sees a solitary figure lighting his way with a tin lantern that casts a mottled “circular pattern” of brightness around him. This figure, he notes, “passes fearlessly into the unknown gloom, whither I will not follow him.”

It would be easy at this point to miss Hawthorne’s meaning, to see him as compromising, drawing back from the final implications of his symbols, playing Starbuck to Melville’s Ahab. But it is not only the final darkness he is not ready yet to test, it is the light of the stranger’s lantern as well. Only death could provide the decisive test of the opposing powers, could reveal certainly which would prevail, the light or the dark. The speaker has explored the darkness as far as human knowledge can take him. Beyond the limits of the town there is no light but that supplied by faith. Not to follow the stranger, then, is, first, the final example of that constant return to the literal which we have noted throughout as Hawthorne’s way of controlling his implications; second, an expression of the speaker’s awareness of the limitations of his own faith—he is not ready to walk by faith alone; third, evidence that his search for light has been successful—he does not need to make the final test,
for he has found that a true light does shine in the darkness and that its radiance is from above. The stranger's light is no stronger than that a candle can shed through the holes in an antique metal lantern, but it is sufficient: he

fears not to tread the dreary path before him, because his lantern, which was kindled at the fireside of his home, will light him back to that same fireside again. And thus we, night wanderers through a stormy and dismal world, if we bear the lamp of Faith, enkindled at a celestial fire, it will surely lead us home to that heaven whence its radiance was borrowed.

The sketch is built on a set of polar oppositions: light, dream, wish, imagination, true knowledge, love, the fireside, faith; darkness, fact, the literal, ignorance, isolation, cold, windy spaces, doubt. Lights may be from below or from above; if from below, they may be true or false. If true, they are analogous with, and perhaps the vehicle of, the radiance from above. Dreams may be false, mere escapes from reality into imaginary travel, or they may be true lights in the darkness. The darkness is almost complete at the start and really total at the end—except for the light carried by the stranger.

Like Kierkegaard, Hawthorne believed all the more firmly because he had explored the depths of doubt. He understood and valued the light because he knew so well the degree and extent of the darkness. As he put it earlier in the sketch in imagistic terms, "the black night hangs overhead like a canopy, and thus keeps the splendor from diffusing itself away." Here for once, at what I suppose is the deepest level of meaning of the sketch, there is no ambiguity, no qualification, no doubleness of attitude or mood. Hawthorne's religious faith was inseparable from, and in a sense dependent upon, his tragic vision. He expressed the same point of view years later in Our Old Home. Commenting on English poverty, and particu-
larly on the diseased, dirty, crippled and deformed, and starving children he saw in the streets, he continued,

It might almost make a man doubt the existence of his own soul, to observe how Nature has flung these little wretches into the street and left them there, so evidently regarding them as nothing worth, and how all mankind acquiesce in the great mother's estimate of her offspring. For, if they are to have no immortality, what superior claim can I assert for mine? And how difficult to believe that anything so precious as a germ of immortal growth can have been buried under this dirt-heap, plunged into this cesspool of misery and vice! . . . Ah, what a mystery! Slowly, slowly, as after groping at the bottom of a deep, noisome, stagnant pool, my hope struggles upward to the surface, bearing the half-drowned body of a child along with it, and heaving it aloft for its life, and my own life, and all our lives.

For Hawthorne, in short, faith arises out of doubt and hope out of despair. Emerson, by contrast, just because he minimized, explained away, or would not for long face the dark ("I have never been able to make evil seem real to me"), found less reason to cherish either the radiance from above or the gleams from the hearth. He thought, or at least publicly proclaimed, that he had sufficient light within to make any such aids unnecessary. The mysteries Hawthorne pondered Emerson seemed never seriously to have considered. No wonder Hawthorne felt he had no questions to ask of him.

Though it is both possible and profitable to explore the outlines of Hawthorne's theology in the way in which Father Ficke has done it, noting Hawthorne's implied or stated commitments to historic Christian dogmas, a different approach is suggested by "Night Sketches," and, indeed, by most of the best of Hawthorne's art. His "theology" (the word is too rationalistic to be wholly appropriate) is very much like that of the
religious existentialists of his own time and ours. With Kierkegaard, he moves from doubt and despair to faith; with Marcel, from alienation to reunion. Like Tillich, he “psychologizes” the faith, not in the sense of explaining it away, but in making it inward and personal, in refusing to externalize or objectify it. Like Buber, he thinks religiously by exploring the implications of symbolic images, moving always in the opposite direction from that in which Bunyan moved, moving from existential experience to the transcendent. Though they would deplore the way he “compromised” by suggesting the availability of a light from above, a revelation from beyond our experience, even the atheist existentialists could find in Hawthorne a kindred spirit: he explored the depths of existential anxiety, then countered Kierkegaard’s “Dread” and Heidegger’s “Nothingness” with “Commitment.”

“Night Sketches” begins in a way Sartre ought to approve, by contrasting bright subjective daydreams with dark external reality, but it ends by rejecting the dichotomy it began with. The hearth is as real as the storm, and not all dreams are false. Implying an equation between human love and divine revelation (the “family circle” is responsible for gleams not unlike those cast in a “circular pattern” by the lantern of the stranger), its answer at once to the sense of unreality produced by daydreaming and the feeling of despair produced by the first glimpse of the outer darkness is the true dream. The man beneath the umbrella has not discovered the truth of doctrines but experienced a movement of the heart. There is nothing demonstrable here; unaided reason will never discover this answer. At the center of Hawthorne’s religious belief, there is a recognition of myth as myth, without any tendency to dismiss it as lie. The darkness of the world is more and not less “real” to the speaker at the end of his walk, but it is not unrelieved: he has discovered some real light, too. If the darkness were not so real, the light
would not be so needed. "How difficult to believe . . . my hope struggles upward."

iv

No wonder Hawthorne wrote allegory, but allegory so fluid and subjective that Bunyan might have recognized it only in those tales and sketches that today we like the least, and would not have recognized it at all in such things as "Roger Malvin's Burial." If Bunyan had read Hawthorne, he might have put him in one of his own allegories and called him Mr. Shaky-faith. We can imagine him recognizing the outlines of historic belief, presented in types and emblems and reinforced by biblical allusions (Bunyan would surely catch more of these than we do, and understand them better), but also noting the hovering "as if" and disapproving of it.

Hawthorne wrote "allegories of the heart," as he himself once called them, but the heart took its cue from the historic faith. Over and over again, he retold the story of the Fall; and now and then he managed to imagine its sequel, the redemption effected by the second Adam. Loss of innocence compelled his imagination. That man lived in darkness and separation seemed too obvious to be questioned. The light, whether from the heart or from above, had to be searched out and affirmed as real, just because it was not immediately "given," like the darkness. Retreat into fantasy would not do, cherishing dreams because while they lasted they had been delightful would not do: the man under the umbrella had to leave the snug comfort of his brightly lighted chamber and brave the discomforts of a dark, cold, and rainy world, to see the world at its worst, before he could affirm that a proper faith could be trusted to lead us home through the encompassing darkness. Mr. Shaky-faith: the doubt is real and the faith genuine. The two together, varying in their
proportions but never ceasing to be in some sort of creative conflict, do more than anything else to give Hawthorne's work its distinctive shape and quality.

The faith of Bunyan and Spenser was less "reasonable," but their work was more "rational." There were more elements in their religious belief that modern man would have to label untrue, or not true in the way they took them to be, or even positively false. Hawthorne's faith was pared down, more skeptical: he was indeed, in a sense, the child of the Enlightenment, as all who are aware of history are. Knowing myth to be myth, he could not confuse faith and knowledge. If Genesis was shaky history but his deepest experience made its meaning seem to him in some sense still true, there was nothing he could do but reinterpret the Fall in terms the heart could understand. Man falls whether Adam ever lived or not.

But if his way of presenting the faith was more reasonable, less offensive to modern reason, than Bunyan's and Spenser's, it was also less rationalistic. Their faith may have been "false" in some of its elements, but it was a public, shared faith assumed to be objectively true, not needing to be validated, except in some ultimate and strictly personal sense, by the heart. Unlike Hawthorne, they did not see heart and head as in inevitable and unceasing conflict. (Hawthorne thought redemption, wholeness, would come only when the conflict ceased, when the two co-operated; but this was a wished for, not an experienced, state of affairs.) They could write more objectively because the dream that shaped their works did not seem like a dream; they were quite sure, indeed, that much of it was fact, not dream at all. Their symbols could have the kind of objectivity that is provided by known, public referents. They could be, in their own eyes and those of their contemporaries who shared their beliefs, men of reason without committing treason to the heart.

In Hawthorne's work at its best, on the other hand, the
meanings of the images are partly determined by their analogy with historic myth, mostly Christian, and partly determined, internally, by context. And always, again when he is writing at his best, they are to some degree ambiguous. That is why it remains possible for commentators so inclined to give narrowly, even reductively, psychological interpretations to some of his works, and for other commentators to give strictly theological interpretations to the same works. Often, both types of interpretation are “valid,” but neither is complete alone. What the “right” interpretation is cannot be settled for Hawthorne’s work in the same way it can for Bunyan’s. Symbols that often begin by being ambiguous and end by being almost wholly contextually determined are not “rational” in the sense that Spenser’s political allegory is.

Of course Hawthorne’s practice varied all the way from the almost perfectly traditional (and “rationalistic”) to the almost mythic and archetypal in the modern sense. He wrote “The Great Carbuncle” and also “Roger Malvin’s Burial,” “Lady Eleanor’s Mantle” and also “My Kinsman, Major Molineux.” In “Young Goodman Brown,” he called Brown’s wife Faith, as Bunyan might have done; but he also treated the revelations in the forest more ambiguously than Bunyan would have found aesthetically possible or religiously desirable. In “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” he exercises his privilege as intrusive author to remind us of the parallels between his story and the story of the expulsion from an earlier garden, but he so manipulates his archetype that in the end it becomes impossible to draw any point-by-point allegorical analogy. Critics are likely to continue to differ on just where to locate the center of Hawthorne’s practice; but that his special quality as a writer is a function of his unique relationship to both the form and the content of traditional Christian allegory, on the one hand, and to modern symbolism, on the other, seems hardly open to question.
One thing seems certain in this whole difficult area. Where Hawthorne’s beliefs are surest, he writes most traditionally. In effect, this means that when his subjects have the strongest theological implications, they are treated the most ambiguously, mythically, and subjectively; and when they are moral in the most limited sense, they are clearest, most rational, and most traditional. Of course, the theological is never without moral implication in Hawthorne, or the moral without implied theological sanction and result. The distinction I am using is by no means absolute, or even clear-cut. But it is useful for the purpose at hand, which is to comment on the reason why so many of Hawthorne’s most traditionally allegorical tales, like “Lady Eleanore’s Mantle,” are concerned with relatively simple moral problems—simple in the sense of not necessarily directly involving any ultimate religious beliefs.

Hawthorne thought he knew the moral meaning of pride. It was a sin, in some sense deadly—about this he had no doubt at all. He wrote “Lady Eleanore’s Mantle” in a way that Bunyan would have understood and approved. He had clear and firm convictions about materialists and cynics, and produced “The Great Carbuncle.” He had no doubt about where bigotry led—though he could see that it might have its origin in mixed motives, some of them good—and he wrote “The Man of Adamant.” He disapproved of any monkish withdrawal from the world into ascetic purity: his disapproval is clearly and allegorically recorded in “The Canterbury Pilgrims.”

On the other hand, how was he to take the atonement, Unitarian that he was by family tradition if not by any sympathy with what seemed to him its greater follies? That man could not save himself by his own unaided efforts he felt rather sure; but clear orthodox Trinitarian, he was not. “Roger Malvin’s Burial” makes a sacrificial death the means of redemption, echoing, as it does so, both the Abraham and Isaac story and the
story of Christ; but the rational clarity of allegory is wholly
lacking in the tale, and it would be unwise to claim orthodoxy
for Hawthorne on the basis of it. A better claim could be based
on the much more allegorical episode of the birch cup filled
with clear water offered to and refused by the man of adamant.
Since the offer is made in terms that echo the liturgy, it seems
impossible to rule out a reference to the Holy Communion
here, however surprising the allusion may seem in a child of
the Puritans who almost never went to church. But if this is a
part of the meaning, it is only one part; and another emphasis
is possible: nature (the water from the spring) and scripture
(the cup) co-operate and agree in offering redemption here as
elsewhere in Hawthorne.

Clarity and ambiguity, allegory and myth, clear conviction
and tentative belief. *The Scarlet Letter* is not, it seems to me,
an allegory in the traditional mode, though it has often been so
called and has many allegorical elements. But the deterioration
of Chillingworth, his becoming a fiend and creeping along the
ground like a snake, is allegorically handled. Hawthorne was
perfectly clear in his mind about the moral status of revenge,
or, more relevantly to Chillingworth, about the results of treating
other people as though they were objects, using them to
satisfy our curiosity, performing experiments on them, as Chillingworth did on Dimmesdale. But he was not sure about the
mechanism of forgiveness or the machinery of redemption, any
more than he was about the “machinery of Providence” into
which he hesitated to thrust his awkward agency: the ultimate
fate of Hester and Dimmesdale contains a certain ambiguity
that is never dispelled, even by Hester’s apparent halo or the
minister’s dying gestures and words, which are so recorded as
to remind us of Christ on the cross. Indeed, the ambiguity is
reinforced by the closing words of the novel, with their images
of black, which counters the hope suggested by the Christ allu-
sions of the last scaffold scene, and red, which is by this time thoroughly ambiguous.

The "ambiguity device," isolated and discussed so well years ago by Matthiessen, is thus no mere "device" but an expression in technical terms of the essential condition of Hawthorne's belief. It is a method of blurring the clear eye, of refusing to specify how literally something should be taken, of believing in Providence while not pretending to understand its machincry. It is a method, we may say, of avoiding clarity—but the kind of clarity that is avoided is the kind Hawthorne thought either specious or irrelevant. Something supernatural seemed to have occurred; a natural explanation, or several natural explanations, could be given. But would the explanation, even if we could be sure it were true, render void the religious significance of the strange event? It is easy to imagine Hawthorne writing—in fact, he should have written, though I cannot recall that he ever did—"Whether Adam lived or no. . . ."

If, as I have argued, the shaping force behind Hawthorne's art is the special character of his religious belief, it is not surprising that the so-called ambiguity device should be one of the most characteristic features of his writing and that a more generalized ambiguity should be so typical of it. For Hawthorne's religious belief was existentially oriented, not institutional or traditional. He found in his own experience reason for looking at life as the "old time" writers had, reason for believing the Scriptures would never be destroyed by the bonfires of reform. But religious experience—not doctrine or dogma, but experience—is always, and necessarily, ambiguous. Did the god speak or did we merely imagine his voice? If he did really speak, it is clear that only the prepared, the imaginative ear could receive the words. It is possible to argue that only the faithful saw the risen Christ without intending to impugn the reality of the Resurrection.
ART AND BELIEF

The decision as to which is the true dream and which the false must be made by the individual in the depths of his inwardness. Hawthorne was not without his commitments; and in some areas of thought he was willing to declare them, preferably in allegorical form. But on matters closest to his heart, he was either unable to attain commitment or reluctant to declare his commitments propositionally. His ambiguity, whether inseparable from the greatness of his finest writing or the mere idiosyncrasy it becomes in his poorest, is a translation of this aspect of his belief into art.

Hawthorne was an idealist who wrote in the age of philosophical idealism. He did not seriously question the general philosophical assumptions of his age. When he defined the special area occupied by his writing as lying between the real and the ideal—or, when implicitly apologizing for the furry ears of Donatello, between the real and the fantastic—he was using the words in a sense it is easy to misunderstand today. He did not mean between the real and the unreal, but between external and internal, between thing and idea, between meaningless fact and ungrounded meaning. The perennial battle between realism and idealism as philosophical positions is relevant to his meaning. Idealism locates reality in the nature of the knowing mind, realism in the nature of the thing known. One reason why philosophers today often do not feel required to take a stand for one position or the other is that, even if they do not see such problems as insoluble, mere verbal problems, they are inclined to see the dichotomy as a false one, with both camps right and both wrong. Existentially, we cannot separate knower and known so clearly.

It would certainly be essentially misleading to try to make a case for Hawthorne as a philosopher, and I have no intention
of doing so. But one of the implications of his work is that he anticipated contemporary philosophy (without thinking the issues through philosophically, needless to say) in refusing the ideal-real choice. Between Emerson, who in his youth, at least, tended to think the world plastic to mind and recommended the theory of the ideal because it fitted our needs and desires, and later realists, who stressed nature's intractible and even alien aspects, Hawthorne took his stand. Fact, he implied, was of no use until interpreted by mind; but mind must always return to fact to keep in touch with reality. Less the idealist (to drop a strictly philosophical sense and turn to a more popular one) than Emerson, he thought he knew some unpleasant facts we must take account of whether we liked them or not. Any theory which ignored them could not be true. But he did not think we were bound to take the apparent meaninglessness of nature at face value: if some dreams were mere figments, others were true.

He invented an art form about half way, at its center, between pure interpretation, or mind triumphant, and uncreative recording, or mind in abdication—between allegory and the naturalistic record. (Both these extremes are mere whipping horses for critics, of course; neither, if pure, would be art at all; neither is, perhaps, even possible, whether we call the result art or not.) Unlike Bunyan, he would not write simply to teach, to convey meanings: he would render scenes, as James would say later. But he would render them clarified, purified of irrelevant detail. He would use facts, but meaningful facts, facts taken into heart and mind and seen humanly.

"Night Sketches" begins with mind triumphant in daydream, moves to the shock of the initial confrontation with the im penetrable void of meaningless nature, and ends with the darkness illuminated with the true light, meaninglessness shaped into sufficient meaning by the true dream. In religious terms,
Hawthorne seemed to find himself faced with a choice between Bunyan's faith and utter meaninglessness, which is what a completely naturalistic outlook would have meant to him. He refused the choice. The true faith, he seems to have thought, would be more like Bunyan's in general outline than like Emerson's, but it would take account of things Bunyan did not know. The faith could, perhaps, be preserved if its form were purified.

For the man, this meant validating the religious vision of his favorite Christian authors by expressing that vision in the language and concepts of a new age, without committing himself to their religious literalism, their confusion of history and myth. For the artist, it meant transforming traditional allegory into a mythopoetic art sometimes close to Bunyan and Spenser, sometimes close to Faulkner, but at its best in an area all its own. For both man and artist, it meant devising a way of distinguishing false lights from true by observing their effects in the night. It meant, ultimately, correcting the dream in order to conserve it. Both as man and as artist, Hawthorne knew how to value the little circle of light in the darkness of human life.