Afterword
Our Hawthorne

Henry James's monograph on Hawthorne must always have a special place in American letters, if only because, as Edmund Wilson observed, it is the first extended study ever to be made of an American writer. But of course it is kept in the forefront of our interest by more things than its priority. We respond to its lively sense of the American cultural existence and the American cultural destiny, to James's happy certitude that, in describing the career of the first fully-developed
American artist, he celebrates the founder of a line in which he himself is to stand pre-eminent. And we can scarcely fail to be captivated by the tone of James's critical discourse, of a mind informed and enlightened, delighting in itself and in all comely and civilized things; it is the tone of the center, far removed from the parochialism which (together with strength) James imputes to Poe as a critic. For the student of American literature in general, the little book is indispensable.

But the student of American literature for whom Hawthorne is a particular concern must experience some degree of discomfort as he reads James on his author. He will be aware that through James's high and gracious praise there runs a vein of reserve, even of condescension. In an attempt to account for this, the student will perhaps reflect that Hawthorne made himself susceptible to condescension, for he was often at pains to avow the harmlessness of his temperament, to dissociate himself from the fierce aggressions and self-assertions of the literary life; he seems to ask from his readers a tender and cherishing affection rather than the stern regard which we give to the more violent or demonic personalities—or, simply, to the personalities more overtly masculine—whose assault upon us we learn to forgive. Then too, it is not hard to understand that James, in the full pride of his still youthful powers, might have been tempted to slight a predecessor, no matter how truly admired—a predecessor who, although he did indeed show how much could be accomplished in the way of art, did not achieve a body of work which, in bulk and fierce affronting power, equals that which his successor planned for himself in sublime confidence.

But when our student of Hawthorne has canvassed the reasons to be found in the personal circumstances of either man, he is bound to see that something beyond the personal is at work to produce James's reserve or condescension. He will understand that his explanation must ultimately refer to a
cultural assumption to which James has given expression. And this assumption, when he examines it, will force upon him the awareness that, in the degree that he feels close to Hawthorne, the breach between his own contemporary culture and that of Henry James is very great. James's little book appeared (in the "English Men of Letters Series") in 1879, and in the time between then and now there has taken place a revision of critical sensibility the extent of which can scarcely be overestimated.

In his third chapter, which deals with *Mosses from an Old Manse* and *Twice-Told Tales*, James sets forth his view of the nature of Hawthorne's artistic enterprise by taking issue with the opinion of Emile Montégut, an able French critic, notable to us for his special and informed interest in American literature. In 1860, in an essay called "Un Romancier Pessimiste," Montégut had dealt extensively with Hawthorne, representing him as a writer of dark and, indeed, misanthropic mind. He spoke at length of Hawthorne's concern with conscience, sin, and hell, and "the tortures of a heart closed before man and open to God," subjects for which the descendant of a long line of Puritans would naturally show a predilection. Montégut has but little sympathy to give to the Puritan mentality, and he speaks in harsh terms of what he takes to be Hawthorne's exemplification of it; yet it is clear that he understands Hawthorne's dark preoccupation to constitute his chief interest, the very substance of his seriousness. To this view James responds with extreme and satiric impatience. He denies the darkness of Hawthorne's mind and in the course of doing so actually seems to deny that it is a serious mind. For he tells us that we must understand Hawthorne's concern with conscience to be largely "ironical." He does not use the adjective in the sense which will occur most naturally to the reader of today, the sense which is cognate with "ambiguous" and suggests a source of emotional power. He intends a meaning of the word which is close to
whimsical playfulness. “He is to a considerable extent ironical—this is part of his charm—part even, one may say, of his brightness; but he is neither bitter nor cynical—he is rarely even what I should call tragical.” And James goes on: “There have certainly been story-tellers of a gayer and lighter spirit; there have been observers more humorous, more hilarious—though on the whole Hawthorne’s observation has a smile in it oftener than may at first appear; but there has rarely been an observer more serene, less agitated by what he sees and less disposed to call things deeply into question.”

To the religious elements of the stories, James gives no credence beyond an aesthetic one. Hawthorne, he says, used religion for his own artistic purposes; from the moral life of Puritanism his imagination “borrowed” a “color” and “reflected” a “hue,” but he experienced no conviction whatever. James certainly abates nothing in his description of the terrors of Puritanism, of how the “shadow of the sense of sin” could darken the individual life and lead it either to despair or to a catastrophic rebellion. But he is quite certain that Hawthorne was not adversely affected by his Puritan heritage—he did not “groan and sweat and suffer” under it, nor did he throw it off in anger. “... He contrived, by an exquisite process, best known to himself, to transmute this heavy moral burden into the very substance of the imagination, to make it evaporate in the light and charming fumes of artistic production.”

James is unequivocal and emphatic in his belief that Hawthorne’s interest in Puritanism was nothing but artistic. He tells us that our author gave his imagination license to “amuse” itself with the faith of his ancestors, to make their morality its “playground”; what for his forebears was the principle of existence, he made into one of his “toys.” “The old Puritan moral sense, the consciousness of sin and hell, of the fearful nature of our
responsibilities and the savage character of our Taskmaster—
these things had been lodged in the mind of a man of Fancy,
whose fancy had straightway begun to take liberties and play
tricks with them—to judge them (Heaven forgive him!) from
the poetic and aesthetic point of view, the point of view of
entertainment and irony.”

James has no quarrel with fancy,
but he adheres to the Coleridgean doctrine that it is a lesser
faculty than the imagination; and although he does not doubt
that it is within Hawthorne’s capacity to command the imagina-
tion, he understands the tales to be chiefly under the control of
fancy. “... As a general thing,” he says, “I should character-
ize the more metaphysical of our author’s short stories as
graceful and felicitous conceits.”

What are we to do with a judgment of this sort—how are we
to escape its embarrassments? It is one of our great masters who
speaks, and we hold him to be great not only in the practice
of his art but also in its theory. From him many of us learned
how high, even sacred, is the mission of the artist, and from him
we derived many of the tenets by which we judge success in
art. Yet it is he who makes this estimate of another of our
masters, the one who, of all Americans, was the master of Henry
James himself.

I need scarcely detail the ways in which, by our modern
judgment, James goes wrong. Yet it will be well to have the
prevailing present view explicitly before us, and it could not
be more exactly defined than by the existence of the useful
volume called *A Casebook on the Hawthorne Question*. The
editor of the Casebook, Professor Agnes Donohue, has gathered
together ten of Hawthorne’s best known stories; to each of six
of these she has appended two interpretative essays of more or
less recent date; following this is a selection of famous critical
estimates of our author; and in a series of appendices which

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includes lists of critical topics for student papers, there is a bibliography which, although it is intended to be minimal, runs to thirty-two books and the same number of articles. Why it is that Hawthorne makes a "question" for us and how our literary community has gone about answering what has been posited to us is very clearly explained by the editor in her Preface.

The ten stories and sketches in the Casebook disclose a signal ambiguity in Hawthorne—his attitude toward man's moral nature. Sometimes he seems to assert the depravity of man while at the same time he dreams of an Adamic hero guileless in his prelapsarian Eden. He vacillates between trusting the human heart's intuitions as good and advancing his conviction that the heart is a "foul cavern" which must be destroyed to be purified.

Hawthorne's ambivalence about guilt and innocence can be seen as a lodestone that draws into its magnetic field other problems of human life. He writes of innocents initiated into shrewdness; secret sin and isolation; compulsive rituals of atonement and sacrifices; self-righteousness becoming fanaticism; science confronting original sin; witch-craft and devil worship; carnal knowledge and guiltless love; the search for a home, a father, a self—in short, man's dark odyssey in an alien world.

The ambiguity in Hawthorne's stories is at once his triumph and, for some literalistic critics, his failure. The tension it creates is a dramatic asset. Many of the tales, or romances as he thought of them, are multi-leveled, ironic explorations of the human psyche—capable of endless extensions of meaning and of stimulating repeated analysis and interpretation.10

Comparing the two views of Hawthorne, that of James and the established modern view which Professor Donohue summarizes, we must, in all humility, feel that ours is the right one. It recommends itself on its face. No doubt James's ironical entertainer makes a graceful and charming figure as he amuses himself with the toys strewn over the playground of a disused
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morality. But how can any member of the literary community fail to conclude that there is an intrinsic superiority in the grave, complex, and difficult Hawthorne we have learned to possess, the Hawthorne who represents "man's dark odyssey in an alien world?"

It is, of course, fair to remember that Hawthorne's view of himself was ostensibly more in accord with James's view of him than with ours. "The sketches are not, it is hardly necessary to say, profound; it is rather more remarkable that they so seldom, if ever, show any design on the writer's part to make them so. They have none of the abstruseness of idea, or obscurity of expression, which mark the written communications of a solitary mind with itself. They never need translation. . . . Every sentence, so far as it embodies thought and sensibility, may be understood and felt by anybody who will give himself the trouble to read it, and will take up the book in a proper mood."11

To which the modern student of Hawthorne will say that his author is a foxy fellow indeed, and go on to explain what "read" really means, what is the extent of the necessary "trouble" that the reader will have to give himself, and what constitutes the "proper mood" in which the book is to be taken up. It is no secret how we achieved our modern Hawthorne, our dark poet, charged with chthonic knowledge, whose utterances are as ambiguous as those of any ancient riddling oracle, multi-leveled and hidden and "capable of endless extensions of meaning and of stimulating repeated analysis and interpretation"—it is plain that the Hawthorne of our day came into being at the behest of the famous movement of criticism that began some forty years ago, that movement of criticism which James could know nothing of, although he was to be one of its pre-eminent subjects.

If we undertake to say how the critical movement put us in possession of our Hawthorne, we will probably not be content
to describe the process only in terms of the good effects of "close reading." The techniques of investigation and pedagogy which were employed by the critical movement are of manifest importance, but an understanding of modern criticism in its historical actuality requires that we be aware of an intention which is anterior to every technique. That intention was to give literature a new force and authority. Or perhaps we should say that the intention was to support the new degree of force and authority that literature was claiming for itself. The technical methods of modern criticism are summed up for us in the famous footnote in which Mr. Eliot told us that the spirit killeth but the letter giveth life. But by this statement Mr. Eliot said something more than that it is necessary to pay strict attention to the minute details of literary art, or that criticism is not to be thought of as the adventures of a soul among masterpieces. He was making a statement about the nature of literature. We may understand him to have been saying that literature is of a primitive nature. For although the allegiance to "the letter" which he urged upon us will at first glance suggest intellectuality, and an intellectuality of a rather haughty sort, and something like a scientistic glorification of precision, qualities which the critical movement in general does indeed often seem to claim for itself, it is actually an expression of belief in the magical force and authority of words and their arrangement, as in a charm or spell, an expression of belief that literature characteristically makes its appeal to archaic human faculties which have been overlaid by civilization and deeply hidden.

My reference to its belief in the "primitive" nature of literature will tell us only a little about the very large and very complex intention of modern criticism. But it may serve to remind us that the critical movement, in its diverse groups and parties, set itself up in opposition to what a social psychologist
has called the "respect revolution" of our time. The phrase refers to the culture of democratic-capitalist industrialism and to that culture's devaluation of certain traditional ideas, modes of life, personnels, qualities of art, etc. The conception of art as "primitive," as taking its rise in an older mode of life, may be thought of as a way of challenging those aspects of the respect revolution which were rationalistic, positivistic, vulgar, and concerned with superficial and transitory rather than with deep and permanent things.

The phrase I have borrowed, awkward and jargonistic as it is, may serve to propose the thought that cultural impulses stand in the closest proximity to social impulses and are often scarcely to be distinguished from them—to speak of the respect revolution may remind us that a strong cultural preference has much in common with social antagonism. Thus, to take an example which is relevant to our occasion, Parrington represents Hawthorne as being virtually an enemy of the common people because of the delicacy of his art, his concern with the inner life and the problem of evil, and his coldness to the enthusiasms of transcendentalism, which Parrington calls "the revolutionary criticism that was eager to pull down the old temples to make room for nobler."12 This translation of modes of thought and of artistic imagination into social modes, or the other way around, is natural and inevitable in our day; and, of course, it was practiced by the members of the critical movement itself. Everyone is aware of how important in his thought about poetry Mr. Eliot's social and political ideas were; in America many practitioners of the New Criticism took positions more or less like Mr. Eliot's. The instance of Dr. Leavis reminds us that even within the movement itself there were sharp antagonisms of social preference, although at this distance in time the differences between one party and another are perhaps already of
less importance than the antagonism which all parties showed to the social values that had been established by the respect revolution. *

The social emotions which were involved in the critical movement do not in themselves immediately concern us, but I mention them in order to suggest how charged with will, how deeply implicated in the bitter moralities of choosing among social styles, was the intellectual tendency that gave us the Hawthorne we know.

But if we do indeed owe our Hawthorne to the movement of criticism, it may be that our new possession is a little compromised by the somewhat fatigued reputation of criticism in recent years. In 1956, in his University of Minnesota lecture, Mr. Eliot expressed what he was not alone in feeling—a degree of disenchantment with the enormous critical activity of our age. † He was ready to affirm that our criticism was very brilliant, but he felt it necessary to say that “it may even come to seem, in retrospect, too brilliant.” 13 By which he meant, I think, too busy, too eager to identify ironies, to point to ambiguities, and to make repeated analyses and interpretations.

Expectably enough, one objection that Mr. Eliot made to the hyperactivity of criticism is that it interferes with our private and personal relation to the literary work, that it prevents our freedom to respond to it in our own way. I should go further

* In the social-psychological view, Dr. Leavis is presumably no less “aristocratic” than Mr. Eliot. At any rate, I am—I picked up the phrase “respect revolution” from an essay in which it is said that my volume The Opposing Self “defends an aristocratic attitude toward the respect revolution in terms of an implicit romantic notion of inner direction” (Albert J. Brodbeck, “Values in The Lonely Crowd: Ascent or Descent of Man?” in Culture and Character, ed. Seymour Martin Lipset and Leo Lowenthal [1962], p. 59). The author may be right, but I sometimes think that my book might just as accurately be said to defend an inner-directed attitude toward the respect revolution in terms of an implicit aristocratic notion of romanticism.

† I should here take note of Mr. Eliot’s statement that the critical movement ought not to be thought of as deriving from him.
than this and say that the brilliant busyness of criticism has not only changed our relation to literature, to art in general, but has even changed our conception of the nature of art, and in a way that, when we stop to think of it, we cannot be entirely happy about.

The situation that I would describe is by way of being a paradox. Of this paradox the first term is our belief that the vulgar art-product, the art-product characteristic of the respect revolution, stands in a relation to the public that is radically different from the relation to the public which is maintained by the work that commands our best attention and admiration. The former, the "popular" or middlebrow work, consciously refers itself to the public and is shaped by its response to public prejudices and desires. The latter, the work of genius or disinterested talent, refers itself only to the inner life of its creator and is to be judged only by the truth of its representation of that innerness. Our commitment to this criterion constitutes, as M. H. Abrams tells us, the basis of our modern aesthetic. In his admirable The Mirror and the Lamp, after describing the "mimetic" theories of art of classical antiquity and the "pragmatic" theories of the Renaissance and the eighteenth century, Professor Abrams goes on to speak of the "expressive" theories of our own time: "The first test any poem must pass is no longer, 'Is it true to nature?' or 'Is it appropriate to the requirements either of the best judges or the generality of mankind?', but a criterion looking in a different direction; namely, 'Is it sincere? Is it genuine? Does it match the intention, the feeling, and the actual state of mind of the poet while composing?' The work ceases then to be regarded as primarily a reflection of nature . . . , the mirror held up to nature becomes transparent and yields the recorded insights into the mind and heart of the poet himself." This is surely true, yet an accurate account of the first criterion of modern judgment must not lead us to
believe that our response stops with our testing the congruity between the created work and its maker's inner life at the time of its creation. We must be aware that, once we have made our way into the artist's inner life in order to decide whether or not the created work is congruent with it, the artist's inner life ceases in some degree to be inner. It is on public view, available to general scrutiny.

The artist, of course, makes no objection to his innerness being thus publicized. If we consider the situation of the arts in general in Paris between 1885 and 1914, which is the definitive period of the modern epoch, we can say that it was characterized by the passionate devotion of the artists to their inner lives, to their personal and peculiar visions. But in all the history of art was there ever a movement which was so conscious of a public, even though in its deficiencies rather than in its legitimate expectations, and so determined to impose itself upon the public? The artist himself often led the enterprise of making his work prevail, but this was not necessary—when once its sincerity and genuineness were agreed upon by a faithful few, there gathered around the work a band of fighting men to carry it on to the field in force, like the Ark of the Covenant, each member of the band deriving strength from the sacred object, becoming ever more confirmed in his own sincerity and genuineness while bringing into ultimate question the authenticity of the heathen public.

Hence our paradox. Never, in a secular culture, has the inner life seemed of such moment as it does in our culture. And never has the inner life been lived so publicly, so much in terms of significant associations and allegiances, of admirations and rejections that make plain how things stand within.

As a result, it becomes ever more difficult for a work of art to be thought of as existing in itself or in our private and personal experience of it—its existence becomes the elaborate respect
systems that grow up around it, that huge penumbra of the public effort to understand it and to be in a right relation to it, and to make known to the world the completeness of the understanding and the rightness of the relation that has been achieved. The work exists less in itself than in the purview of one or another of the public agencies we have set up for the service of the inner life; of these one of the most notable is surely literary criticism, which, as it has established itself in the universities, constitutes a great new profession, ever growing in its personnel and in its influence.*

The extent of our author's public existence will not seem irrelevant to the Hawthorne Question (since there is such a thing), for Hawthorne's relation to the public of his own day was a matter of great moment in his thought about himself. Hawthorne seems never to have been sure whether to be ashamed or proud of his lack of success with the mass of his countrymen. And, of course, this was not merely a question of his career but of his moral life, feeling as he did that to be removed from one's fellow-beings was to commit a mortal sin. His ambivalence is expressed in the Preface to *Twice-Told Tales*. He tells us—it is touching to hear him say it—that the stories are written in "the style of a man of society," that they are "his attempt to open an intercourse with the world." Yet Hawthorne's impulse to privacy is definitive of his genius. We think so and he thought so. The delicate, the fragile, the

* For an interesting account of the part played by public agencies—"museums, university art departments, professional publications"—in the establishment of new painting, see Harold Rosenberg's column in *The New Yorker*, September 7, 1963, pp. 136-46. Mr. Rosenberg's estimate of the power—one might say the fury—of criticism is worth noting: "The future does not come about of itself; it is the result of choices and actions in the present. Criticism, including art criticism, is a form of conflict about what shall be. If history can make into art what is now not art, it can also unmake what is now art. It is conceivable that Michelangelo, Vermeer, Goya, Cezanne will someday cease to be art; it is only necessary that, as in the past, an extreme ideology shall seize power and cast out existing masterpieces as creatures of darkness."
evanescent, all that could not survive the public touch or gaze, made his conception of success in art. Of his tales, he says that "they have the blue tint of flowers that blossomed in too retired a shade,—the coolness of meditative habit which diffuses itself through the feeling and observation of every sketch." The flower was for him the perfect symbol of the created work: he was at pains to revise his ancient family name so that it would be more precisely that of a beautiful flower-bearing tree, its blossoms delicate and brief, its integrity and isolation enforced by its thorns or spines.

It is all too possible that in having made Hawthorne public, in having busied ourselves to discover that he is a Question, which then we must bestir ourselves to answer, we have lost much of the charm and fragrance which may well be his essence. James was much engaged by the beauty of Hawthorne's work, by its textures and hues, of which he speaks not so much with critical admiration as with personal delight. Of this surface aesthetic, the modern critics of Professor Donohue's volume say little. Their concern is with an aesthetic of depth, an aesthetic of the arrangement of quasi-doctrinal significances. One cannot have everything, but whoever has first read Hawthorne in childhood—James makes a point of his having done so—will be inclined to feel that something he once knew is missing, something that spoke to him, and very movingly, before ever ambiguity was a word, some magic that had its abode in the forests and haunted The Notch and played around the Great Stone Face, and that bound together the dark forest and the dark recesses of the moral life and the dark backward and abysm of the national past.

It is a loss, but no doubt we must teach ourselves to sustain it cheerfully. For how else are we to deal with Hawthorne than in the public way we do deal with him? He belongs in the canon of our spiritual heritage, and how else is one to impart
that heritage, how else is one to be a serious critic or a university teacher, if he is not as active as he may be in response to his subject? And if one perhaps goes on to think of his profession as having a more than pedagogic function, as being charged to make some contribution to the effort of spiritual discovery of our time, one may not surrender one's right to press each work as hard as one can in order to make it yield the full of its possible meaning.

Henry James's Hawthorne will not suit the purposes of the teacher or critic, neither his strictly professional nor his larger cultural and spiritual purposes. What can we do with a Hawthorne who, in dealing with the heavy moral burden which was his ancestral heritage, not only refused to accept it as his own but contrived to make it "evaporate in the light and charming fumes of artistic production," a sort of ethical prestidigitator?

I confess to being of the opinion that in establishing our Hawthorne as against Henry James's Hawthorne we have lost something of considerable value. But I am constrained to heed the contention that we have gained more than we have lost. I must even be aware that we have even acquired an augmented canon. For us today, none of Hawthorne's stories surpasses in interest "My Kinsman, Major Molineux." James does not mention this great story. And, indeed, it is only in relatively recent years that it presents itself as demanding inclusion in any selection of Hawthorne's work—when Austen Warren in 1938 and Newton Arvin in 1946 prepared selected editions of the tales, neither of the two editors, whose literary intelligence is of a very high order, included the story we have come especially to prize. Its Dionysian darkness, its brilliant, bitter, ambivalent humor, were not yet available to them, not yet available to us.

Let us, then, stay confirmed in our belief that the Hawthorne we now have is the right one. But it may be worth asking why
it is that James's Hawthorne is so different from ours. I said earlier that James's view was not merely personal, that it was controlled by a cultural assumption. Remembering the year of the monograph, 1879, at the apogee of Victorianism, we are tempted to say that this assumption is part of the ideology of Philistinism which always hovered over even the best thought of the Victorian era. What we mean by Philistinism surely accommodates James's almost angry insistence that our author is not dark or bitter or pessimistic, is not to be called “tragical,” virtually not serious, that he is childlike in the indulgence of his fancy, that his only concern is to amuse himself and entertain us; and this is not to mention James’s dislike of “symbols and correspondences,” of “seeing a story told as if it were another and a very different story.”

James, of course, figures in our minds exactly as an avowed enemy of Philistinism, yet an ideology works in mysterious ways, no one can be sure of being immune from all its effects, and it may be that we have to admit that James was in accord with some of the questionable aspects of his epoch.

This possibility might be sustained by the recollection of a famous passage from The Ambassadors, the speech that Lambert Strether makes to Little Bilsom. “Live all you can,” Strether says to his young friend, “it’s a mistake not to. It doesn’t so much matter what you do in particular, so long as you have your life. If you haven’t had that, what have you had? . . .” When, in the 1940's, James was in the full tide of the great revival of interest in him, this speech was frequently quoted. Twenty years ago the little homily seemed to touch the American consciousness in a very intimate way. Live all you can; it’s a mistake not to. How much that seemed to say about America—our nation gave us much, but it was ever reluctant to grant us the right to have our lives. No one thought that the implied doctrine was the whole of James, yet it seemed very much at
the center of his work, and it validated him for many readers who might otherwise have been put off by him, just as now, in a different cultural moment, it accounts, as I think, for much of that diminution of interest in James which is to be observed.

What did James mean by having one's life? He meant something really quite simple and actual and tangible. He meant Paris—surely he meant that first. He meant all that was possible to do and enjoy in Paris and not in Woollett, Massachusetts—he meant having intense erotic relationships; and breaking the code of respectability without pain of conscience; and Gloriani's garden; and sunny days on the river; and Mme de Vionnet's beauty and charm, and her manners and place in society. "To live" meant to know and to have the pleasures of the world.

James gave perfect credence to the pleasures of the world. He believed them to be real even at those moments when he was most intensely aware that they might be involved with vulgarity and even cruelty. He gave an equal credence to the sanctions which control and limit the ways in which the pleasures of the world may be seized, and to the moral sensibilities which propose the circumstances in which the pleasures of the world—perhaps the world itself—must be surrendered. The credence he gave to pleasure and the credence he gave to moral sanction together define James's certitude that the world is there: the unquestionable, inescapable world; the world so beautifully and so disastrously solid, physical, material, "natural."

And I think that it is because the world is so very much there for James that our interest in his work has receded from the high point it reached two decades ago. It does not move us now as it once did to hear him say, "Live as much as you can; it's a mistake not to." Whatever Paris and Gloriani's garden and a free and happy sexuality may mean to our practical con-
sciousness (perhaps everything!), to our literary or spiritual consciousness they now mean but little. If we can imagine a novelist of our own moment who matched James in genius, we cannot easily suppose that he would give anything like James’s credence to the good “thereness” of the world, to the necessity of having one’s life. By the same token, we cannot easily suppose that he would give anything like James’s credence to the moral sanctions which control and limit the ways in which the pleasures of the world may be grasped. These two credences, as I say, are the ground of James’s art, constituting as they do his acceptance of the world’s reality. They make the element of his work that tends to alienate it from the contemporary consciousness, that allows us to wonder whether we must not judge James to have been touched with the Philistinism of his epoch and therefore misled in his judgment of Hawthorne.

Our contemporary feeling about the world, alien from that of James, is much in accord with that of Franz Kafka. Everything about Kafka is still in dispute, perhaps even more than it formerly was, now that our response to him has become more precise and discriminating. But almost everyone will agree that Kafka’s work gives very little recognition, if any at all, to the world in its ordinary actuality, as it is the object of our desires and wills, as we know it socially, politically, erotically, domestically; or, if it recognizes the world at all, it does so only through what it perceives of the radical incompatibility of world and mankind. Of all studies of Kafka, that by Günther Anders seems to me most satisfying, if only because it responds so fully to Kafka as a force, speaking of him as a “dangerous” writer and questioning whether it is “wise” to admire him. Anders tells us that Kafka “provided exactly the mixture of sensation a certain class and generation of readers . . . most desired, pandering to their self-conscious sense of having reached the last phase of individualist sensibility. For here indeed were stories about
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the individual in his purest, most isolated role—yet told in a
tone which showed how pointless was his position in the world.
The hero was still the center, but the center of complete
indifference.”19 In another passage, Anders speaks of Kafka's
tone as transforming “men and things into a kind of nature
morte.”20 The “class and generation of readers” which was given
what it wanted by Kafka is said by Anders to be that which
flourished in 1925. If this dating is accurate for Europe, it is
not accurate for America, where Kafka, like James, made his
strongest impression upon our literary culture in the forties
and continues to stand well to the fore of our interest while
James recedes into the background.

The name of Kafka had to turn up sooner or later in any
discussion of Hawthorne, for our awareness of Kafka has done
much to license our way of reading our author. Everyone per­
ceives certain likenesses between Hawthorne and Kafka. They
were similarly, although not equally, remote from the public;
and to the public view, they presented temperaments of which
a defining element was a quality of personal gentleness at
variance with the subversive nature of their work. There is a
very considerable degree of similarity in their preoccupations—
“man's dark odyssey in an alien world” may serve to describe
Kafka's as well as Hawthorne's. They stood in equivalent
relations to religion: unbelievers both, their imaginations were
captivated by the faiths with which they were connected by
family tradition, and from these unavowed faiths they derived
the license for the mythic genre which constitutes so much of
their appeal, for the representation of agencies of human destiny
which are not of the actual world. Then, too, having in mind
Kafka's negation of the world of actuality, I think it can fairly
be said that there is something comparable in the way that
Hawthorne deals with the world. He encourages the com­
parison when he tells us that he does not write novels but
"romances," by which he means that his fiction does not make a very determined reference to the concrete substantialities of life, the observation and imitation of which is the definitive business of novels. We may surmise that his "simple" and "thinly-composed" society, as James called it, was congenial to his creative disposition, for it facilitated the enterprise that is characteristic of him, the representation of the world as being susceptible to penetration and suffusion by agencies not material and mundane. And it was exactly Hawthorne's happy acceptance of a thinly composed society that James jibed at. He himself craved thickness; that famous list he drew up of the solid interesting actualities that were not at the disposal of Hawthorne's art, or the art of any American—"no Epsom nor Ascot!"—tells us, of course, what he was claiming for his own use when he transplanted himself to England, finding there, in its unassailable Britannic citadel, the Philistine solidity of world that he needed. And needed, one is inclined to say, not only as an artist but as a person—one has the sense that Hawthorne's art, because it represents a world which is only thinly composed, made James nervous.

What most troubled James in Hawthorne's work is not likely to trouble the reader who exercises the characteristic highly developed literary sensibility of our time. Indeed, as I have suggested, that modern reader is likely to find a measure of security in the very circumstance that made James anxious: in the degree that the world can be thought of as thinly composed, the autonomy of spirit is the more easily imagined.

But it is just here that we are likely to go astray in our perception of Hawthorne. For if it is true that Hawthorne's world is thinly composed, whatever its composition lacks in thickness is supplied by an iron hardness. Among the similarities to be observed between Kafka and Hawthorne, there is—after all, and despite first appearances—this decisive difference between them,
that for Hawthorne the world is always and ineluctably there and in a very stubborn and uncompromising way. A passage in *The Marble Faun* tells us how perdurably Hawthorne understood it to be there. Kenyon, Hilda, and Miriam have been talking at length and fancifully about Count Donatello's resemblance to the antique statue of the dancing faun. "The foregoing conversation," we are told in that shameless explicit way that was once possible, "had been carried on in a mood in which all imaginative people, whether artists or poets, love to indulge. In this frame of mind, they sometimes find their profoundest truths side by side with the idlest jest, and utter one or the other, apparently without distinguishing which is the most valuable, or assigning any considerable value to either. The resemblance between the marble Faun and their living companion had made a deep, half-serious, half-mirthful impression on these three friends, and had taken them into a certain airy region, lifting up, as it is so pleasant to feel them lifted, their heavy earthly feet from the actual soil of life. The world had been set afloat, as it were, for a moment, and relieved them for just so long of all customary responsibility for what they thought and said." It is merely the conversation of "creative" persons that Hawthorne says he is describing, but we surmise that he would wish us to have in mind as well the works of art which they create, that he means to define the relation in which the artist stands to the world. If that is so, we will not fail to observe that what Hawthorne emphasizes in his account of this relation is not the power of the artistic imagination but the intractable weight and actuality of the world. For a brief moment the artist takes flight, and sometimes he can even set the world afloat; but only for so long as his words are being uttered; when again he falls silent, the world is no longer a balloon and his feet walk again on earth, on "the actual soil of life."
Of possible conceptions of the artist's relation to the world, this is indeed a very modest one. And if at any time in our judgment of Hawthorne we become aware, as indeed we must, of moments when his power as an artist seems insufficient to the occasion, we might reasonably attribute what weakness we discern to a conception of the artist's manner of dealing with the world which is less bold and intransigent than it might be.

When it comes to power—to, as we say, sheer power—Hawthorne is manifestly inferior to Kafka. Of Kafka's power an impressive index is the fact that his version of man's dark odyssey proceeds without touching upon cases of conscience. What an intransigence of imagination is needed to conceive man's spiritual life as having no discernible connection with morality! In such relations between man and man as are represented in Kafka's work, it is never a possibility that one man can help or injure another. The idea "I did him wrong" is foreign to Kafka's mind. The idea "I did wrong" is, of course, omnipresent, but this means only "I did not do the required thing, that which the Law demands; and therefore I shall be punished." Many readers of Kafka cannot endure the necessity of supposing that a punishment does not refer to an act that is bad in a moral sense; they are made acutely uncomfortable by the conception of an ordained suffering that is not to be understood in moral terms, or at least, and almost as good, in characterological terms. They feel it necessary (like Job's friends) to adduce moral explanations; and when they can discover no actual transgressions to sustain their argument, they fall back upon traits of temperament—Gregor Samsa becomes a cockroach because he is an insufficiently developed or positive person, really a cockroach at heart; Joseph K. is accused and condemned by the Court because he did not have a rich and "related" emotional life. Those who are appeased by such
explanations can only with difficulty be made aware that, for what they take to be the cruel injustice which Kafka describes, they substitute an injustice still more cruel. Such readers are scarcely to be praised for their literary competence, but more than the readers who respond more appropriately, they, by their resistance to Kafka's imagination, best suggest its power.

And not only its power is to be attributed to the intransigence of his imagination but also the extraordinary aesthetic success which Kafka consistently achieves. Aesthetically, it seems, it is impossible for him to fail. There is never a fault of conception or execution, never an error of taste, or logic, or emphasis. As why should there be? An imagination so boldly autonomous, once it has brought itself into being, conceives of nothing that can throw it off its stride. Like the dream, it confronts subjective fact only, and there are no aesthetically unsuccessful dreams, no failed nightmares.

The dream, it need scarcely be said, plays its part in the imagination of Hawthorne too, and most markedly in those of his works which touch us most deeply. But it is obvious that the "spontaneous, peremptory, and obligatory nature of dreaming" manifests itself far less in Hawthorne than in Kafka. Over Hawthorne's imagination, the literal actuality of the world always maintains its dominion. This must always be kept to the forefront of our understanding of Hawthorne even though we go on to say that he made it his characteristic enterprise to represent the moral life as existing beyond mere practicality, to show it to us as a mystery, as being hidden, dark, and dangerous, and as having some part of its existence in a world which is not that of ordinary knowledge. This other world, in which the presence of divinity is to be dimly apprehended, interpene-

trates the world of material circumstance, and, in doing so, provides the quotidian world with its most intense significances.

When Hawthorne is successful in suggesting the interpenetration of the two worlds, he affects us profoundly. But we cannot fail to be aware of how readily his belief in the other unseen world can be checked by his sense of this world’s actuality, how often it falls short of being spontaneous, peremptory, and obligatory. James’s extreme dislike of allegory and the use of emblematic devices make him unduly harsh in condemnation of the flaming celestial A in The Scarlet Letter; he judges the scene to be “not moral tragedy, but physical comedy.” But we all agree to the principle of his objection and recall how much too often Hawthorne gave occasion for its being made. “Roger Malvin’s Burial” may serve as our example of the characteristic weakness. The informing idea of this story is superb, and its execution is adequate to its conception up to the moment when we are asked to consider “whose guilt had blasted” the topmost bough of the oak, that withered bough which is to fall at the moment when Reuben Bourne has expiated his sin. Perhaps no other work of literature proposes so forcibly the idea that morality is not bounded by the practical, that it creates a habitation for itself which is not only of this world, that it moves, by some process of transcendence, from practicality into absoluteness, or at least to unreasoning piety. The morality that Hawthorne has been conceiving has, as it were, the power of the dream, for it is indeed spontaneous, peremptory, and obligatory; but the incident of the falling bough, which is intended to enforce upon us the belief that the moral law has just these qualities as its defining attributes, is itself merely gratuitous; it seems scarcely the work of the imagination at all, rather of the author’s will; so far from strengthening the credence we give to the preternatural world, it leads us to think that the author’s own belief is seeking support.
Eventually Hawthorne lost all power of belief in the other world, and with it all power of creation. The last years of his life are terrible to contemplate. His labor seems to have been as devoted as it ever was, but he confronted white paper with the knowledge that nothing he now might put on it could have value. We have Kafka at hand to suggest the dreadfulness of the doom: it was as if Hawthorne's gift had been confiscated in punishment for some indiscernible sin. "By 1860 he had worked himself dry," Edward H. Davidson tells us in the introduction to his edition of that one of the several gray chaotic efforts to which has been given the name of Dr. Grimshawe's Secret. "The 'present, the actual,' he confessed, was too pressing, and in Grimshawe he tried to write a sermon for his time without any of the moral insights which had been his special distinction in the years before he had gone to England." 

Yet if we set aside the misery of the decline—that fate which must sometimes seem all too peculiarly American!—and set aside, too, the instances of aesthetic failure in the great period, we have to say that Hawthorne, even when he was not intimidated by the "present, the actual," must be judged to lack the power of imagination which we expect him to have when we respond to the degree of power he actually does have. Despite the best efforts of the critics, the contemporary reader must always, I think, be disappointed by Hawthorne. With so much readiness to apprehend the dark, the unregenerate, and evil itself, why must he be so quick to modulate what he sees? He is capable of conceiving the terrible black veil which Mr. Hooper wears over his face, and of pointing to the guilt that we each incur and hide and long to reveal—why, having triumphed in the creation of the dread emblem, must he raise the question of whether the veil is not an egotism, an object of irony? His most famous single utterance loses its great potential force in its rhetoric of qualification: "Be true! Be true! Be true! Show
freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!” Why not, we ask, actually your worst? If it is correct to say with Professor Davidson that the “special distinction” of Hawthorne lies in his “moral insights,” we are in effect saying that he was concerned to look into something that is there to be looked into, and when we say this, we knew that an investigation of objective reality cannot have the same imaginative freedom and force as an affirmation or a negation, which has only a subjective obligation. Hawthorne’s vision of the moral life, although it does indeed reach in one direction to the transcendental or spiritual, reaches in the other direction to the psychological, leading the reader to ask, “Is this true to the fact as I know it?” To the readers of Hawthorne’s own time, the psychological observation of the novelist, especially when it discovered the dark and subversive elements of the mind, served as a liberation; but we have become inured to psychology—to the typical highly developed reader of our time, it does not bring the old liberation of surprise, and one may even detect in our literary opinion the belief that, insofar as it is a knowledge derived from observation and susceptible of being systematized, made into a science, it constricts rather than enlarges our imagination of man. Hawthorne was, F. O. Matthiessen has said, primarily concerned with questions of moral cause and effect—“not sin but its consequences for human lives is Hawthorne’s major theme.” I would demur a little from this judgment, for I think that sin itself held a fascination for Hawthorne. But there can be no doubt that his awareness of consequences was never far distant from his concern with sin itself. In short, he always consented to the power of his imagination being controlled by the power of the world.

But the modern consciousness requires that an artist have an imagination which is more intransigent than this, more spon-
taneous, peremptory, and obligatory, which shall impose itself upon us with such unquestionable authority that "the actual" can have no power over us but shall seem the creation of some inferior imagination, that of mere convention and habit. Our modern piety—I use the word in its good sense—is of the autonomous self, or at least of the self as it approaches autonomy in its tortured dream of metaphysical freedom. Hawthorne could indeed conceive of our longed-for autonomy. But his own piety was committed elsewhere.

There is an episode in Daniel Cory’s recent book about Santayana which suggests the nature of Hawthorne’s piety as I understand it. Mr. Cory tells us how, as a young man, he could not understand why Santayana should have described *The Realm of Matter*, the first of the four volumes of *The Realms of Being*, as “essentially the work of a moralist,” and, with a touch of impatience, Santayana said to him, “Don’t you understand by now that the real object of piety is matter—or Nature, if you prefer. It is the idea of Might—the ineluctable Yahveh of the Hebrews, when this primitive notion has been freed of its local and superstitious accretions.” And Mr. Corey goes on to say that “all his life Santayana had been convinced that the religious attitude of *respect for God* is at bottom the same thing as our sense of dependence on an efficacious but largely unfathomed ‘background’ of human experience. . . . When our naive ideas of God or Naturc have been stripped of their pictorial and emotional accretions, what we are left with is the defiant core of both these ideas: the ineradicable conviction of primordial Might that impinges upon and ought to control the ambition of the distressed mind.”

Whose is the shout we hear, the bitter cry of protest at these words? Whose else could it be but the outraged spirit of William Blake, in whose existence we all participate? The great offended voice is raised to assert the power of the artist’s
imagination to deny the reality of the primordial Might, or to challenge and overcome it, or to interpose between it and us a dream, which, perhaps in the degree that it terrifies, commands our assent and holds out the promise of freedom.

If that is indeed what ideally we expect the imagination of the artist to do, Hawthorne does not satisfy our expectation. Again and again, in what we judge to be his too limited faith in the imagination, he admits, even insists, that the world is there, that we are dependent upon it. His quick response to the non-rational, his lively awareness of the primitive and chthonic, of the dark roots of life, does not deflect the naturalistic and humanistic tendency of his mind. At his very most powerful, he does not interpose his imagination between us and the world; however successfully he may project illusion, he must point beyond it to the irrefrangible solidity.

He feared "the ambition of the distressed mind" and before the primordial Might he maintained an attitude of almost studied modesty, we might say of childlikeness when we remember what irony and malice he was capable of attributing to a child. Like a child, he takes liberties and plays tricks; he amuses himself and entertains us; he takes somber moral principles and makes them into toys—we have but to give to the idea of play the consideration it deserves to see that Henry James's description of his activity is not so deficient in justice as at first it seems. Of his playfulness, the ambivalence and ambiguity which are so often noted of him are essential aspects. They do not, I think, bring him close to Kafka's mute, riddling power—through them, rather, he approaches to "Que sais-je?", the ironic childlike question, the question which conscious or calculated modesty asks, out of which all the questions come.

It is questions that Hawthorne leaves us with. It is, really, not at all clear why Young Goodman Brown must live out his life in sullenness because he refuses to sign the Devil's pact;
nor is it clear why Robin must join the violent mob in laughter at his kinsman before he is his own master, and indeed it is not clear why being his own master is a wholly admirable condition. To consult ourselves for answers is to become aware of our dependence upon that part of the "efficacious but largely unfathomed background of human experience" which lies very close at hand, within our very selves, and which reminds us of our dependence upon its further reaches.

And in the degree that he does not dominate us, Hawthorne cannot wholly gratify us, moderns that we are. Exquisite artist though he be, he yet suggests to us the limitations of art, and thus points to the stubborn core of actuality that is not to be overcome and seems to say that the transaction between it and us is, after all, an unmediated one; and by his ambiguities and ambivalences he seems to imply that we—each one of us alone—must make our investigations and our terms as best we may. He has no great tyrant-dream in which we can take refuge, he leaves us face to face with the ultimately unmodifiable world, of which our undifferentiated human nature is a part. He does not even permit us what seems a complete view of the desperateness of our situation—nothing complete, nothing ultimate.

No, it is not gratifying. Yet if we tell the truth about our experience of Hawthorne, some of us will say that as we read him—or at moments as we read him—we have a sensation of having been set at liberty. It is not an entirely comfortable condition. We find ourselves at a loss and uncertain in the charge of an artist so little concerned to impose upon us the structure of his imagination. We look for a more coercive will, and are insecure in its lack. Yet perhaps we feel, too, an impulse of exhilaration charged through our art-saturated minds, a new pleasure in being led carelessly or playfully to one or another dangerous place and being left alone to look at the danger in our own way. The pleasure cannot last long—probably more.
is needed in the life around us before such independent confrontations of our dependence will seem natural to us, and a kind of joy. Our judgment of Hawthorne may have to be that he is not for today, or perhaps not even tomorrow. He is, in Nietzsche's phrase, one of the spirits of yesterday—and the day after tomorrow.