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MASTERPIECE THEATER: THE POLITICS OF HAWTHORNE'S LITERARY REPUTATION

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THE CLASSIC DEFINITION OF A CLASSIC, AS A WORK THAT HAS WITHSTOOD THE TEST of time, was formulated by Samuel Johnson in his *Preface to Shakespeare*. Where productions of genius are concerned, wrote Johnson, "of which the excellence is not absolute and definite but gradual and comparative, . . no other test can be applied than length of duration and continuance of esteem." Once a great author has outlived his century, he continues,

> whatever advantages he might once derive from personal allusions, local customs, or temporary opinions, have for many years been lost. . . . The effects of favor and competition are at an end; the tradition of his friendships and enmities has perished . . . . His works . . . thus unassisted by interest or passion, have past [sic] through variations of taste and changes of manners, and, as they devolved from one generation to another, have received new honors at every transmission.[1]

The notion that literary greatness consists in the power of a work to transcend historical circumstances repeats itself in the nineteenth century, particularly in the work of Arnold and Shelley, and has been a commonplace of twentieth-century criticism.[2] T.S. Eliot and Frank Kermode, for instance, take it for granted that a classic does not depend for its appeal on any particular historical context and devote themselves to defining the criteria we should use to determine which works are classic, or to describing the characteristics of works already designated as

[1]Samuel Johnson, *Preface to Shakespeare*, rpt. in *The Great Critics*, ed. James Harry Smith and Edd Winfield Parks, 3d ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1951), 444–45.
[2]Matthew Arnold, "The Study of Poetry," *Essays in Criticism, Second Series* (London: MacMillan, 1958), 2–3; Matthew Arnold, "Sweetness and Light," ch. 1 of *Culture and Anarchy*, rpt. in *Lectures and Essays in Criticism*, ed. R.H. Super (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1962), 13; Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defense of Poetry*, rpt. in Smith and Parks, eds., *The Great Critics*, 563–64, 575.

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such.[3] I propose here to question the accepted view that a classic work does not depend for its status upon the circumstances in which it is read and will argue exactly the reverse. that a literary classic is a product of all those circumstances of which it has traditionally been supposed to be independent. My purpose is not to depreciate classic works but to reveal their mutability. In essence what I will be asserting is that the status of literary masterpieces depends on arguments just like the one I am making here and that therefore the canon not only can but will change along with the circumstances within which critics argue.

I have chosen as a case in point the literary reputation of Nathaniel Hawthorne, a reputation so luminous and enduring that it would seem to defy the suggestion that it was based on anything other than the essential greatness of his novels and stories. Indeed, that assumption is so powerful that what follows may at times sound like a conspiracy theory of the way literary classics are made. As Hawthorne's success comes to seem, in my account, more and more dependent upon the influence of his friends and associates, and then upon the influence of their successors, it may appear that this description of the politics of Hawthorne's rise to prominence is being opposed, implicitly, to an ideal scenario in which the emergence of a classic author has nothing to do with power relations. Yet to see an account of the political and social processes by which a classic author is put in place as the account of a conspiracy is only possible if one assumes that classic status could be achieved independent of political and social processes. The argument that follows is not critical of the way literary reputations come into being, or of Hawthorne's reputation in particular. Its object, rather, is to suggest that a literary reputation could never be anything but a political matter. My assumption is not that ''interest and passion'' should be eliminated from literary evaluation—this is neither possible nor desirable—but that works that have attained the status of classic, and are therefore believed to embody universal values, are in fact embodying only the interests of whatever parties or factions are responsible for maintaining them in their preeminent position. Identifying the partisan processes that lead to the establishment of a classic author is not to revoke his or her claim to greatness, but simply to point out that that claim is open to challenge from other quarters, by other groups, representing equally partisan interests. It is to point out that the literary works that now make up the canon do so because the groups that have an investment in them are culturally the most influential. Finally, it is to suggest in particular that the casualties of Hawthorne's literary reputation—the writers who, by virtue of the same processes that lead to his ascendancy, are now forgotten—need not remain forever obliterated by his success.

[3]T.S. Eliot, ''What Is Minor Poetry?'' ''What Is a Classic?'' *On Poets and Poetry* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Cudahy 1957), 34–51, 52–74. Frank Kermode devotes an entire chapter to Hawthorne's work without ever raising the question of why Hawthorne should be considered a classic author.

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To question the standard definition of the classic, and thus the canon as it is presently constituted, is also to question the way of thinking about literature on which the canon is based. For the idea of the classic is virtually inseparable from the idea of literature itself. The following attempt to describe the historically produced nature of a single author's reputation, therefore, is likely to arouse a host of objections because it challenges an entire range of assumptions on which literary criticism has traditionally operated. The strength of these assumptions does not stem from their being grounded in the truth about literature, however, but from the pervasiveness of one particular mode of constructing literature—namely, the one that assigns to literary greatness an ahistorical, transcendental ground. The overwhelming force of this conception lies in its seeming to have arisen not from any particular school of criticism or collection of interests, but naturally and inevitably, as a way of accounting for the ability of certain literary works to command the attention of educated readers generation after generation. That this theory is neither natural nor inevitable it will be the purpose of this essay to show. 'The effects of favor and competition, . . . the tradition of friendships,'' the ''advantages'' of ''local customs'' and ''temporary opinions,'' far from being the ephemeral factors Johnson considered them, are what originally created and subsequently sustained Hawthorne's reputation as a classic author. Hawthorne's work, from the very beginning, emerged into visibility, and was ignored or acclaimed, as a function of the circumstances in which it was read.

* * *

Between 1828 and 1836 Hawthorne published some of what are now regarded as his best short stories: ''The Gentle Boy,'' ''The Gray Champion,'' ''Young Goodman Brown,'' ''Roger Malvin's Burial,'' ''The Minister's Black Veil,'' and ''The Maypole of Merrymount.'' Yet although these are among the most frequently anthologized American short stories, to Hawthorne's contemporaries they were indistinguishable from the surrounding mass of magazine fiction. Until the *Token* of 1836 appeared, says Bertha Faust, author of the best study of Hawthorne's early reception, ''no one singled out one of Hawthorne's pieces by a single word.''[4] This indifference to what we now regard as Hawthorne's finest tales requires an explanation. If an author's reputation really does depend upon the power of his art to draw attention to itself regardless of circumstances, why then did Hawthorne's first readers fail utterly to recognize his genius as we understand it, or as his contemporaries would later understand it? The reason, Faust says, is that Hawthorne's tales would not have stood out on the basis

[4]Bertha Faust, *Hawthorne's Contemporaneous Reputation: A Study of Literary Opinion in America and England, 1828–1864* (New York: Octagon, 1968). A reprint of the 1939 Univ. of Pennsylvania dissertation, 16.

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of their subject matter, since tales involving American colonial history or depicting a person dominated by a single obsession had many parallels in contemporary fiction. Moreover, since Hawthorne's stories, like most of what appeared in the gift-book annuals, were published anonymously, there was no way of telling that they were the products of a single hand. Finally, since the annuals were rather lightly regarded at the time, critics had no expectation of finding anything of merit in them.[5]

This account of why Hawthorne's greatness went unrecognized initially argues that Hawthorne's readers could not have judged his tales accurately because of the misleading circumstances in which they were embedded. In this account, the context acts as a kind of camouflage, making Hawthorne's tales look exactly like those of lesser writers, and it implicitly assumes that under other circumstances, the tales would have been seen for what they "really" are. Yet what sorts of circumstances could these have been? If Hawthorne's tales had not appeared in the *Token,* they would have appeared in *Graham's Magazine* or *Godey's Lady's Book* or the *Southern Literary Messenger;* in each case the context supplied by the periodical would have altered readers' perceptions of the tales themselves.[6] If the tales had not appeared anonymously, but under Hawthorne's name, then whatever associations readers attached to that name would have influenced their responses. Of course, it could be argued that while some circumstances get in the way of accurate perception, others merely reinforce qualities already present in the work, and so do not distort readers' perceptions of the work itself. Yet the difficulty with this argument is that since there is no way of knowing what a work is like exempted from all circumstances whatsoever, we can never know which circumstances distort and which reinforce the work "as it really is." Since pure perception is a practical impossibility, given that a text must always be perceived under some circumstances or other, one cannot use the notion of "misleading" vs. "reinforcing" circumstances to explain why Hawthorne's first readers did not see his tales the way we do.

Another way to explain the indifference to Hawthorne's work in the 1830s is to consider the possibility that the circumstances in which a text is read, far from *preventing* readers from seeing it "as it really is," are what make the text available to them in the first place. That is, circumstances define the work "as it really is"—under those circumstances. They do this by giving readers the means of classifying a text in relation to what they already know. Thus, Hawthorne's first critics did not single out his tales for special commendation for the simple reason that they did not know anything about them beforehand. That is why the stories

[5]Ibid., 16–17.

[6]For characterizations of these periodicals, see Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1841–1850* (New York: D. Appleton, 1930): *Graham's,* 544–55; *Godey's Lady's,* 580–94; *Southern Literary Messenger,* 629–57.

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they did single out—stories by John Neal, N. P. Willis, and Catharine Sedgwick—were written by well-published, widely praised authors of whom they had already heard a great deal. In praising *their* work, Hawthorne's contemporaries stood in exactly the same relation to it as modern critics stand in relation to Hawthorne's; that is, they were able to identify its merits because they already knew that it was good and were looking at it with certain expectations in mind. Thus, when Samuel Goodrich, the editor of the *Token,* began telling other editors about Hawthorne's work, they began to pay attention to it for the first time;[8] once the editors had a reason for seeing Hawthorne's work as exceptional, they began to see it that way. I am not suggesting that Goodrich had an especially keen eye for literary genius and so was able to point out to others what they had not been able to see for themselves, but that, as editor of the most prominent of the annuals, he was in a position to create a favorable climate for the reception of Hawthorne's work. Until 1836 Hawthorne's tales not only seemed but *were* completely ordinary because the conditions necessary to their being perceived in any other way had not yet come into being.

I have been suggesting that "external circumstances," far from being irrelevant to the way a literary work is perceived, are what make it visible to its readers in the first place. Yet, one might ask, once "circumstances" had alerted readers to the existence of Hawthorne's fiction, from that point on wouldn't it stand or fall on its own merits? This would seem to be a plausible suggestion, but the particulars of Hawthorne's early reception point in a different direction. What they show is that circumstances not only brought Hawthorne's tales to the attention of critics; they also shaped critics' reactions to the tales themselves.

The first notice of any length to appear following the publication of *Twice-told Tales* in 1837 was an extremely laudatory piece by the editor of the *Salem Gazette.* This man, according to Faust, "was indebted to Hawthorne for a number of early contributions, all presumably unpaid, and . . . was about to increase his debt by reprinting . . . pieces from the volume in question."[9] Any one of a number of factors—local pride, a sense of financial obligation, personal gratitude, or an eye to future self-interest—positioned the editor of the *Salem Gazette* in relation to what he read. Circumstances, one might say, weighed heavily on this editor, and he found the *Twice-told Tales* quite spectacular as a result. What is important to note here is not that the laudatory review was the product of circumstances favorable to Hawthorne but that this editor—like any reader—was *in a situation* when he read Hawthorne's work, and that that situation mediated his reading of it.

The other most laudatory review of the *Twice-told Tales,* the one that played the most decisive role in establishing Hawthorne's literary reputation, was a piece by

[7]Faust, *Hawthorne's Contemporaneous Reputation,* 12, 15, 17.
[8]Ibid., 16, 24, 25.
[9]Ibid., 27.

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Henry Wadsworth Longfellow published in the *North American Review.* Longfellow was no more neutral or disinterested a reader of *Twice-told Tales* than the editor of the *Salem Gazette.* He had been a classmate of Hawthorne's at Bowdoin College; they shared a common background and a common vocation. In the months preceding the publication of *Twice-told Tales* (which Hawthorne sent to Longfellow as soon as it appeared), Hawthorne had written Longfellow a series of letters suggesting that they collaborate on a volume of children's stories; shortly before the review in question came out, he had written to Longfellow speaking of his reclusive existence, nocturnal habits, and unavailing efforts to "get back" into "the main current of life."[10] While none of these circumstances could guarantee that Longfellow would admire Hawthorne's collection of stories, they constituted a situation in which a negative response would have been embarrassing and difficult.

It is possible, of course, that Longfellow and the editor of the *Gazette* may have felt pressured into admiring Hawthorne's work for what we could call, broadly speaking, "political" reasons, and that their true opinion of Hawthorne may have been quite different from what they publically expressed. Longfellow, for instance, might have harbored a secret dislike for Hawthorne because of some prank he had played in college, or he might have thought the tale an inferior literary genre, or been bored by stories that used a historical setting, and therefore might have found Hawthorne's tales dull and trivial. Yet even if that had been the case, *that* set of circumstances would have been no more neutral or disinterested than any other. If it seems that I have chosen to discuss only "special cases" in the reception of Hawthorne's early work—in other words, cases where special interests were involved—and have omitted examples in which the reviewer had no prior interests at stake, that is because readers are always situated, or circumstanced, in relation to a work—if not by their prior knowledge of it, then, as we have seen, by their ignorance. There is never a case in which circumstances do not affect the way people read and hence *what* they read—the text itself.

In the case of Longfellow's review, the circumstances in question had an extremely positive effect on Hawthorne's literary career. Longfellow was someone whose opinion carried weight in critical circles; he had just been appointed Smith Professor of Modern Languages at Harvard and was at the beginning of a long and distinguished career of his own. He wrote for a weighty and influential journal whose editors, contributors, and subscribers constituted New England's cultural elite in the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s. When Longfellow announced in the pages of the *North American* that Hawthorne was a "man of genius" and that a new "star" had arisen in the heavens, a new set of circumstances was called into

[10] J. Donald Crowley, ed., *Hawthorne: The Critical Heritage* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1970), 55.

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being within which Hawthorne's fiction would, from then on, be read.[11] He began to receive more, and more favorable, critical attention; and his works began to assume a shape and to occupy a place in the literary scene that made him eligible, in time, for the role of American literary hero.

It is not my intention here to describe how that process took place step by step, but rather to show, in a series of instances, how the "circumstances" surrounding the emergence of Hawthorne's texts onto the literary scene defined those texts and positioned them, so that they became central and, so to speak, inescapable features of the cultural landscape.

* * *

Once Hawthorne's tales had been called to their attention, nineteenth-century critics did not single out what we now consider his great short stories—"The Minister's Black Veil," "Young Goodman Brown," and "The Maypole of Merrymount"—but sketches now considered peripheral and thin. Their favorites, with virtually no exceptions, were "A Rill from the Town Pump," "Sunday at Home," "Sights from a Steeple," and "Little Annie's Ramble." Not only did these critics devote their attention almost exclusively to sketches that moralize on domestic topics and fail to appreciate what we now consider classic examples of the American short story, they "overlooked" completely those qualities in Hawthorne's writing that twentieth-century critics have consistently admired: his symbolic complexity, psychological depth, moral subtlety, and density of composition. Instead, what almost every critic who wrote on Hawthorne's tales in the 1830s found particularly impressive were his combination of "sunshine" and "shadow," the transparency of his style, and his ability to invest the common elements of life with spiritual significance.[12] It is these qualities that made Hawthorne a critical success among literary men in the 1830s and 1840s and it is on this foundation that his reputation as a classic author was built. Even the laudatory reviews by Poe and Melville, which critics take as proof of their "discernment" because in certain passages they seem to anticipate modern views, arise out of tastes and sympathies that are in many respects foreign to present-day critical concerns.[13] Thus, the texts on which Hawthorne's claim to

[11]Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, from a review in the *North American Review*, 45 (1837), 59–73; rpt. in Crowley, *Hawthorne*, 55, 56.

[12]See, for example, Charles Fenno Hoffman, in the *American Monthly Magazine*, 5, March 1838, 281–83, rpt. in ibid., 61; Longfellow, rpt. in ibid., 58–59; and Peabody, rpt. in ibid., 64–65.

[13]In a headnote to Poe's second review of *Twice-Told Tales*, Richard Wilbur comments: "Poe proves his discernment by recognizing the merits of his contemporary." (See *Major Writers of America*, General Editor, Perry Miller [New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962], I, 465.) Yet while Poe's reviews seem to confirm modern assessments of Hawthorne by pointing to his "invention, creation, imagination, originality," the chief merit Poe recognized in Hawthorne's tales was one that few modern

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classic status rested were not the same texts we read today in two senses. In the first and relatively trivial sense, they were not the same because the stories that made Hawthorne great in the eyes of his contemporaries were literally not the ones we read today: they preferred "Little Annie's Ramble" to "Young Goodman Brown." In the second and more important sense, they were not the same because even texts bearing the same title became intelligible within a different framework of assumptions. It is not that critics in the 1830s admired different *aspects* of Hawthorne's work from the ones we admire now, but that the work itself was different. Whatever claims one may or may not wish to make for the ontological sameness of these texts, all of the historical evidence suggests that what Hawthorne's contemporaries saw when they read his work is not what we see now. What I mean can be illustrated by juxtaposing a piece of Hawthorne criticism written in 1837 with one written 120 years later.

In praising Hawthorne's brilliance as a stylist, Andrew Peabody made the following comment on a phrase from "The Gentle Boy":

> These Tales abound with beautiful imagery, sparkling metaphors, novel and brilliant comparisons. . . . Thus, for instance, an adopted child is spoken of as "a domesticated sunbeam" in the family. . . . How full of meaning is that simple phrase! How

commentators have seen: their repose. "A painter," Poe writes, "would at once note their leading or predominant feature, and style it *repose* . . . . We are soothed as we read." (See *Graham's Magazine*, May 1892, reprinted in *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. James A. Harrison [New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1902], XI, 105.) Hawthorne's current status as a major writer rests on exactly the opposite claim, namely that his vision is dark and troubled, the very reverse of that "hearty, genial, but still Indian-summer sunshine of his Wakefields and Little Annie's Rambles" which Poe admires so much and contrasts favorably to the "mysticism" of "Young Goodman Brown," of which he wishes Hawthorne would rid himself. "He has done *well* as a mystic. But . . . let him mend his pen, get a bottle of visible ink, come out from the Old Manse, cut Mr. Alcott, hang (if possible) the editor of the *Dial*, and throw out of the window to the pigs all his odd numbers of the "North American Review" (See *Godey's Lady's Book*, Nov. 1847, reprinted in Harrison, ed., *Complete Works*, XIII, 154–55.)

Melville's wonderful encomium of Hawthorne in the *Literary World*, which sees Hawthorne's works as "deeper than the plummet of the mere critic," characterized above all by their "blackness," and possessed of a vision of truth as "terrific" and "madness to utter," comes much closer to modern criticism of Hawthorne (which quotes from it tirelessly) than Poe's reviews do. (See "Hawthorne and His Mosses," *The Works of Herman Melville*, ed. Raymond Weaver [London: Constable, 1922], XIII, 123–43.) Yet Melville's response to Hawthorne's "blackness" is not proof that he saw Hawthorne's tales as they really are, but rather of Melville's own preoccupation with the problem of innate depravity and original sin. He himself calls attention to the idiosyncracy of his views (for example, "the world is mistaken in this Nathaniel Hawthorne" and has an "absurd misconception of him"). Yet while Melville's reading of Hawthorne resembles modern interpretations in some respects, many of his critical observations—his pronouncements on "genius," his constant comparison of Hawthorne to natural phenomena (for example, "the smell of young beeches and hemlocks is upon him; your own broad prairies are in his soul"), his emphasis on the "repose" of Hawthorne's intellect, on his "Indian summer . . . softness," on the "spell" of "this wizard," testify to Melville's participation in the same romantic theories of art that dominate the mainstream reviews.

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> much does it imply, and conjure up of beauty, sweetness, gentleness and love! How comprehensive, yet how definite! Who, after reading it, can help recurring to it, whenever he sees the sunny, happy little face of a father's pride or a mother's joy?[14]

No wonder, then, Hawthorne's contempories missed the point of his great short stories: they could not possibly have understood him, given the attitudes that must inform effusions such as these. Yet before dismissing Peabody completely, it is worthwhile asking if there isn't a point of view from which his commentary made good critical sense.

For Peabody, whose critical assumptions privileged the spiritualization of the ordinary and especially of domestic life, the phrase "a domesticated sunbeam" leaped immediately into view. "The Gentle Boy" became visible for him from within a structure of norms that nineteenth-century social historians refer to as "the cult of domesticity" and fulfilled a definition of poeticity that values fanciful descriptions of commonplace things (Peabody admired Hawthorne's tales because they were "flower-garlands of poetic feeling wreathed around some everyday scene or object").[15] The forms of apprehension that concretized the tale for him flag the phrase as a brilliant embodiment of his critical principles and moral presuppositions.

In the same way, one can readily see how a changed set of cultural beliefs and critical presuppositions have given rise to a modern commentary on the story. For example, Richard Adams has written in *The New England Quarterly* (1957) that Ilbrahim, the title character to whom the phrase "domesticated sunbeam" applies, "does not succeed" because he "is too young and weak."[16] He fails to "surmount the crisis of adolescence" and illustrates the "common theme" of all the *Provincial Tales* which is "not basically a question of good versus evil but rather of boyish dependence and carelessness versus manly freedom and responsibility. . . . It is very much a question of the protagonist's passing from the one state to the other or of failing to do so—a question of time, change, and development."[17]

The modern critic typically does not pause to exclaim over the beauties of a single phrase but sees the tale as a whole as the illustration of a "theme." He understands the character of Ilbrahim in the light of a psychological paradigm of human development in which childhood represents a stage that must be overcome. The ideal of human life implicit in Adams's descriptions of the story privileges

[14]Peabody, in Crowley, *Hawthorne*, 66.

[15]For an excellent discussion of the cult of domesticity, see Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catherine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1973), 151–67; Peabody, in Crowley, *Hawthorne*, 64.

[16]Richard P. Adams, "Hawthorne's *Provincial Tales*," *New England Quarterly*, 30 (1957), 50.

[17]Ibid.

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individual self-realization, intellectual control, and a take-charge attitude toward experience. His beliefs about the nature of good fiction and the ideal shape of human life have interpreted "The Gentle Boy" for him as a story about "the protagonist's passing from one state to the other or failing to do so." He has not *imposed* this interpretation on the story; that is to say, he has not applied his convictions to "The Gentle Boy" in order to make its details conform to some predetermined outline. Rather, his convictions are what made the story intelligible to him in the first place.[18] This way of rendering stories intelligible means, among other things, that Adams would not have noticed the phrase "a domesticated sunbeam" at all, because there was nothing in his interpretive assumptions that would have made it noticeable. If someone were to call it to his attention, he would have had to read the phrase ironically—as Hawthorne's sneering comment on nineteenth-century prettifications of childhood—or as an unfortunate lapse, on Hawthorne's part, into the sentimental idiom of his age. In any case, the phrase is not the same phrase for him as it is for Peabody, except in a purely orthographic sense, because it becomes visible—if it is noticed at all—from within a completely different framework of assumptions from those that produced Peabody's reading of the tale.

The critical vocabulary, moreover, which each critic uses to formulate his comments, extends and elaborates his assumptions even as the text itself does. When Adams says that the protagonist's success or failure is a "question of time, change, and development," his vocabulary implicitly affirms the value of controlling experience through abstract categorization, an assumption not merely appropriate to but required by the institutional and professional situation within which he writes. In the same way, Peabody's rhetoric, full of exclamations and given to naming the tender emotions ("How full of meaning is that simple phrase! How much does it imply and conjure up of beauty, sweetness, gentleness, and love!"), embodies just the kind of excited representation of emotional experience that his critical stance privileges, and affirms the value of precisely those feelings which—to his mind—Hawthorne so splendidly evokes. The critic's rhetoric is not a secondary or detachable attribute of his enterprise but simultaneously its enabling assumption and final justification. When Peabody rhapsodizes over the domesticated sunbeam, when Longfellow exclaims "live ever, sweet, sweet book," when Charles Fenno Hoffman describes Hawthorne as "a rose, bathed and baptized in dew," their rhetorical performance embodies the same critical strategies that make Hawthorne's tales intelligible to them, and all three—rhetoric, critical strategies, and the tales themselves—are inseparable from a whole way of looking at life.[19]

[18]Of course, Adams's reading of "The Gentle Boy" may seem to *us* a willful imposition of his own ideas, and just as far off the mark, in its way, as Peabody's response. Yet what I am attempting to show is not that either critic is right or wrong, but that their readings of the tale flow naturally from their critical presuppositions.

[19]Crowley, *Hawthorne*, 66, 60, 56.

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The reading of fiction and the writing of criticism in the 1830s were activities rooted in beliefs about the sanctity of the home, the spirituality of children, the purifying effects of nature, the moral influence of art, and relation of material to spiritual essences that determined what shape the *Twice-told Tales* would have for its readers at the level of the individual phrase, and at the level of the volume as a whole. Longfellow and his peers did not admire "A Rill from the Town Pump" out of bad taste; their judgment was an affirmation of their ideals no less than Adams's belief that Hawthorne "chronicles the crisis of adolescence" is an affirmation of his. We may think that the beliefs of Peabody and Longfellow are silly or outmoded but we cannot accuse them of having *overlooked* in Hawthorne's work what they couldn't possibly have seen. One might just as well criticize F.O. Matthiessen, who holds that Hawthorne's greatness lies in his "wholeness of imaginative composition," for failing to notice that Hawthorne's prose is "as clear as running waters are" and that "his words are like stepping-stones."[20] In short, it is useless to insist that critics of the 1830s couldn't see the true nature of Hawthorne's work because of their naïve literary and cultural assumptions, but that that true nature was there all along, waiting to be discovered by more discerning eyes. Rather, the "true nature" of a literary work is a function of the critical perspective that is brought to bear upon it.

What remains to be explained is why—if it is true that literary texts only become visible from within a particular framework of beliefs—it is always *Hawthorne's* texts that are the subject of these discussions rather than the texts of other writers. If there was nothing "in" the *Twice-told Tales* that commanded critical attention, why has Hawthorne's collection of stories and sketches come down to us, rather than Harriet Beecher Stowe's *The Mayflower?* Wasn't there, right from the beginning, something unique about Hawthorne's prose that marked it as different from and better than the prose of other writers?

One can answer these questions by turning to the contemporary reviews. What the reviews show is that the novels of sentimental writers like Susan Warner and Harriet Beecher Stowe were praised as extravagantly as Hawthorne's and in exactly the same terms. Critics who admired Hawthorne's fondness for "lowly . . . scenes and characters," which they took as a sign of his "sympathy with everything human," also admired Warner's "simple transcript of country life" and "homely circumstances," which portrayed "the ordinary joys and sorrows of our common humanity."[21] They found that Hawthorne's "tales are national while they are universal," and that Warner's novels "paint human nature in its American type" and "appeal to universal human

[20]F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1941), 274–75; Crowley, *Hawthorne*, 58.

[21]Samuel W. S. Dutton, "Nathaniel Hawthorne," *New Englander*, 5 Jan. 1847, 56–69, rpt. in Crowley, *Hawthorne*, 138; Carolyn Kirkland, "Novels and Novelists," *North American Review*, 76 (1853), 114. See also two reviews of *Queechy*, one from *Tait's Magazine*, the other from the *New York Evening Post*, rpt. in *Littel's Living Age*, 34 (July-Sept. 1852), 57–58.

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sympathy.''[22] Warner is commended for her remarkable grasp of religious truth, and Hawthorne for his depiction of ''spiritual laws'' and ''the eternal facts of morality.''[23] Both writers display an extraordinary understanding of the ''heart.''[24]

Thus it is not the case that Hawthorne's work from the very first set itself apart from the fiction of his contemporaries; on the contrary, his fiction did not distinguish itself at all clearly from that of the sentimental novelists—whose work we now see as occupying an entirely separate category. This is not because nineteenth-century critics couldn't tell the difference between serious and sentimental fiction but because their principles of sameness and difference had a different shape. In the 1850s the aesthetic and the didactic, the serious and the sentimental were not opposed but overlapping designations. Thus, the terms ''sentimental author'' and ''genius'' were not mutually exclusive but wholly compatible ways of describing literary excellence. Differences in the way literature is defined necessarily produce differences in the way literary works are classified and evaluated. Thus, if Evert Duyckinck, who was arguably the most powerful literary man in New York, regarded ''Little Annie's Ramble'' as the high-water mark of Hawthorne's achievement in 1841, it is no wonder that other critics should subsequently have admired Susan Warner's novel about the tribulations of an orphan girl, and seen both works—moralized pictures of innocent girlhood in a characteristically New England setting—as exemplifying the same virtues.[25] Nor is it strange that when Phoebe Pynchon appeared to brighten the old family mansion in Salem, critics praised *The House of the Seven Gables* because it was full of ''tenderness and delicacy of sentiment'' ''with a moral constantly in view.''[26] *The House of the Seven Gables* succeeded in 1851 because it was a sentimental novel; that is, it succeeded not because it escaped or transcended the standards of judgment that made critics admire Susan Warner's work but because it fulfilled them. To critics who took for granted the moral purity of children, the holiness of the heart's affections, the divinity of nature, and the sanctity of the home, and who conceived of the poet as a prophet who could elevate the soul by ''revealing the hidden harmonies of common things,'' sketches like ''Sunday at Home,'' ''Sights from a Steeple,'' ''A Rill from the Town Pump,''

[22]Henry F. Chorley, in a review of *The Blithedale Romance*, in the *Athenaeum*, 10 (July 1852), 741–43, rpt. in Crowley, *Hawthorne*, 247. Chorley's remark is typical. Kirkland, ''Novels and Novelists,'' 121.

[23]Kirkland, ''Novels and Novelists,'' 121; *The Literary World*, 7 (1850), 525; Amory Dwight Mayo, ''The Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne,'' *Universalist Quarterly*, 8 (1851), 272–93, rpt. in Crowley, *Hawthorne*, 219, 221, 223.

[24]Kirkland, ''Novels and Novelists,'' 221. Most of Hawthorne's reviewers make this point in one way or another.

[25]E.A. Duyckinck, *Arcturus*, 1 Jan. 1841, 125–26; as quoted in Faust, *Hawthorne's Contemporaneous Reputation*, 37–38.

[26]E.A. Duyckinck, *The Literary World*, 8 (1851) 334–35, rpt. in Crowley, *Hawthorne*, 194; an unsigned review in the *Christian Examiner*, 50 (1851), 508–09, rpt. in Crowley, *Hawthorne*, 194.

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and novels like *The House of the Seven Gables* and *The Wide, Wide, World* formed a perfect continuum; it is not that these critics couldn't *see* the difference between Warner's work and Hawthorne's, but that, given their way of seeing, there *was* no difference.

This does not mean that antebellum critics made no distinction between various kinds of work, but that their principles of classification produced different groupings from the ones we are use to. *The House of the Seven Gables* and *The Wide, Wide World,* for example, were published in the same year as *Moby-Dick,* but whereas today Hawthorne and Melville are constantly seen in terms of one another, contemporary reviews of Hawthorne never even mention Melville's name. While in the 1850s there was no monolithic view of either Hawthorne or Melville, one can easily construct characterizations of their works, based on comments from contemporary reviews, that would place them at opposite ends of the critical spectrum. According to contemporary critics, Hawthorne, like the sentimental novelists, wrote a clear, intelligible prose accessible to everyone (a style suitable for artists in a self-consciously democratic nation); he told stories about recognizable people in humble settings and thus, like the writers of domestic fiction, illuminated the spiritual dimensions of ordinary life; his works, like theirs, firmly rooted in Christian precept, served as reliable guides to the truths of the human heart.[27] Melville, on the other hand, whose work was described as being full of stylistic extravagances, bizarre neologisms, and recondite allusions, emerges as a mad obscurantist; his characters inhabited exotic locales and ranted incomprehensibly about esoteric philosophical issues; and their ravings verged dangerously and irresponsibly on blasphemy.[28] Although many critics admired Melville's daring and considered his work powerful and brilliant, they nevertheless did not describe it in the terms they used to characterize Hawthorne. In their own day, Hawthorne and Melville were admired, when they were admired, for opposite reasons: Hawthorne for his insight into the domestic situation, Melville for his love of the wild and the remote.[29]

It is easy enough to see that Hawthorne's relation to Melville in the nineteenth-century wasn't the same as it is now; and it is easy enough to see that it wasn't the

[27]These characterizations of Hawthorne are drawn from reviews by Edgar Allan Poe, Anne Abbot, Rufus Griswold, Henry Tuckerman, E.P. Whipple, R.H. Stoddard, Samuel S.W. Dutton, Evert Duyckinck, Charles William Webber, Amory Dwight Mayo, and George Loring. All are reprinted in Crowley, *Hawthorne.*

[28]These characterizations of Melville come from reviews in *The Spectator,* the Boston *Post,* the *Literary World,* the *Democratic Review,* the London *New Monthly Magazine,* the *Southern Quarterly,* the *Albion,* the *Atlas,* the *Athenaeum, Today,* and *Peterson's Magazine,* as cited by Hugh Hetherington, "Early Reviews of *Moby-Dick,*" *Moby-Dick Centennial Essays,* ed. with an introduction by Tyrus Hillway and Luther S. Mansfield (Dallas: Southern Methodist Univ. Press, 1953).

[29]Though critics used the terms "original" and "deep" to praise both writers, Hawthorne's reviewers liked to characterize him as "gentle," "tasteful," "quiet," "delicate," "subtle," "graceful," and "exquisite," while Melville's admirers constantly used words like "racy," "wild," "extravagant," "brilliant," "eccentric," "outrageous," and "thrilling."

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same because the criteria according to which their works were described and evaluated were different and that therefore the works themselves took on a different shape. Not only is Hawthorne in the 1850s not easily distinguishable from the sentimental novelists, and in most respects quite distinguishable from Melville; not only did antebellum critics have different notions about the nature and function of good literature, prize the domestic affections, and think children were spiritually endowed; more important, once one has accepted the notion that a literary text exists only within a framework of assumptions that are historically produced, it then becomes clear that the "complex" Hawthorne that we study, the Melville we know as Hawthorne's co-conspirator against the pieties of the age, the sentimental novelists we regard as having pandered to a debased popular taste, are not the novelists nineteenth-century readers read and that nineteenth-century critics wrote about. Even when nineteenth- and twentieth-century critics use the same or similar words to describe some element in Hawthorne's work, one can see that what they mean by what they say is not the same thing.

When a Unitarian clergyman writes that "the character of Chillingworth" illustrates "the danger of cherishing a merely intellectual interest in the human soul," he seems to be describing the same phenomenon that Donald Ringe describes when he writes that Chillingworth is a "cold, speculative, intellectual man who commits a sin of isolation which must ultimately destroy him."[30] Both writers clearly agree that Hawthorne, through the character of Chillingworth, is suggesting that the intellect alone is a dangerous guide. Yet what the modern critic means by Chillingworth's sin is isolation from the community, the separation of the head from the heart, and something he calls "dehumanization"; for him, Chillingworth sins by cutting himself off from "human sympathy and love."[31] The minister writing for the *Universalist Quarterly,* on the other hand, admires Hawthorne's treatment of character because it demonstrates "spiritual laws" and is "sternly true to the eternal facts of morality."[32] Those facts are not the same for him as they are for Ringe. Chillingworth is damned in the minister's eyes not because he is cut off from human sympathy and love, but from "God . . . the all-good and the all-beautiful."[33] These critics may use the same words to describe Hawthorne's character, but the Chillingworth of *PMLA* transgresses the social and psychological norms of a secular humanism, while the Chillingworth of Hawthorne's era dramatizes liberal Protestant convictions about the soul's relation to God. These accounts of what Hawthorne meant to convey are not interchangeable and do not testify to the existence of some central truth in Hawthorne's text

[30]Amory Dwight Mayo, "The Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne," *Universalist Quarterly,* 8 (1851), 272–93; rpt. in Crowley, *Hawthorne,* 223; Donald A. Ringe, "Hawthorne's Psychology of the Head and Heart," *PMLA,* 65 (1950), 120.

[31]Ringe, "Hawthorne's Psychology," 212, 122, 125.

[32]Mayo, as reprinted in Crowley, *Hawthorne,* 223.

[33]Ibid., 221.

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that both critics have grasped. What they show is that the critic, the context within which the critic reads, and the text that is interpreted are simultaneous features of a single historical moment. As the concept of sin changes from theological fact to metaphor for a psychological state, as the critic changes from Unitarian clergyman to Professor of English, as the *Universalist Quarterly* gives way to *PMLA,* the text of *The Scarlet Letter* changes accordingly.

Because modern commentators have tended to ignore the context within which nineteenth-century authors and critics worked, their view of the criticism that was written on *The Scarlet Letter* in the nineteenth century has failed to take account of the cultural circumstances that shaped Hawthorne's novel for his contemporaries. They evaluate this criticism as if it had been written about the same text that they read, and so produce accounts of it that are unrelated to the issues with which that criticism was actually engaged.

This is not simply because each critic looks at the text from a different point of view or with different purposes in mind, but because *looking* is not an activity that is performed outside of political struggles and institutional structure but arises *from* them.

* * *

One such structure is the machinery of publishing and reviewing by means of which an author is brought to the attention of his audience. The social and economic processes that govern the dissemination of a literary work are no more accidental to its reputation, and indeed to its very nature (as that will be perceived by an audience), than are the cultural conceptions (of the nature of poetry, of morality, of the human soul) within which the work is read. The conditions of dissemination interpret the work for its readers in exactly the same way as definitions of poetry, in that they flow from and support widely held—if unspoken—assumptions about the methods of distribution proper to a serious (or nonserious) work. The fact that an author makes his or her appearance in the context of a particular publishing practice rather than some other is a fact about the kind of claim he or she is making on an audience's attention and is *crucial* to the success of the claim. Hawthorne's debut as a novelist illustrates this proposition rather strikingly.

In 1970, C.E. Frazer Clark, Jr., published an article that revealed some little-known facts surrounding the publication of *The Scarlet Letter.*[34] Clark observed that despite Hawthorne's habit of referring to himself as "the most unpopular author in America," he was much better known than he himself was aware. His satires and sketches had been pirated liberally by newspapers up and down the eastern seaboard; notices, advertisements, and reviews of his work had regularly

[34]Clark, "Posthumous Papers of a Decapitated Surveyor: *The Scarlet Letter* in the Salem Press," *Studies in the Novel,* 2 (1970), 395–419.

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appeared in the periodical press. So when Hawthorne lost his job as Surveyor of Customs at Salem, it caused a furor in the local papers.[35] The press took up the case of political axing not because such events were so extraordinary—nothing could have been more common with a change of administration—but because Hawthorne was already newsworthy. This publicity attracted the attention of James T. Fields, shortly to become New England's most influential publisher, who until then had not printed a word of Hawthorne's, but whose business instincts now prompted him to visit Salem on the off-chance that Hawthorne might have something ready for the press. Hawthorne, as it happened, did have something on hand which, very reluctantly, he gave to Fields. It was a story that Fields encouraged him to turn into a novel—novels being more marketable than short fiction—which Hawthorne did, and prefaced it with an introductory essay on his stint in the Custom-House to help achieve the desired length. As Fields suspected, Hawthorne's first book to appear after the Custom-House fiasco sold remarkably well: the advance publicity had guaranteed that *The Scarlet Letter* would be a success.

Encouraged by the attention paid to his novel, and prodded by the ever-vigilant Fields, who saw an opportunity to capitalize on the reputation so recently enlarged, Hawthorne, who until then had not been a prolific writer, turned out two more novels in rapid succession. These received a great deal of favorable attention from well-placed reviewers, with the result that, two years after the publication of *The Scarlet Letter,* Hawthorne was being referred to as a classic American writer—and so has been identified ever since. Yet the success of *The Scarlet Letter* and of the subsequent novels becomes fully explicable only within a larger frame of reference than the one Clark's essay supplies.

By the 1840s Washington Irving's reputation had sagged and James Fenimore Cooper had alienated large portions of the reading public and the critical establishment with his attacks on American manners and unpopular political stands. America needed a living novelist whom it could regard as this country's answer to Dickens and Thackeray, a novelist who represented both what was essentially American and what was "best" by some universal criteria of literary value. Hawthorne seemed well suited for the role, since, as almost every critic emphasized, his work made use of characteristically American materials. Hawthorne's feel for the humbler aspects of the American scene made him attractive both as an interpreter of "spiritual laws" that knew no nationality and as a spokesman for the democratic way of life. These qualities, however, as I have suggested, were shared equally by novelists like Warner and Stowe who, if anything, outdid him in

[35]What happened was that Hawthorne, who had gotten the job through the influence of his old college friends and not through local connections or service to the party, lost his post when the Whigs took office. Because he was accused, in the process, of using his office for partisan ends, he became angry enough to stir up his friends on his behalf—hence the heated exchanges in the Salem and Boston papers. George Woodberry, *Nathaniel Hawthorne* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1902), 163–77; Arlin Turner. *Nathaniel Hawthorne: A Biography* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980), 177–87.

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this respect. What finally distinguished Hawthorne from his popular rivals was his relation to the social and institutional structures that shaped literary opinion; these associations ultimately determined the longevity of his reputation. The parallel but finally divergent careers of Hawthorne and Susan Warner illustrate dramatically how important belonging to the right network was as a precondition for long-standing critical success.

The circle of well-educated, well-connected men and women who controlled New England's cultural life at midcentury thought of themselves as spiritually and culturally suited to raise the level of popular taste and to civilize and refine the impulses of the multitude. Any writer whom they chose as a model of moral and aesthetic excellence, therefore, had to be someone whose work had not already been embraced by the nation at large, but had been initially admired only by the discerning few. Longfellow formulated the prevailing view of Hawthorne as a writer for a cultivated minority in his review of the second edition of *Twice-told Tales:*

> Mr. Hawthorne's . . . writings have now become so well known, and are so justly appreciated, by all discerning minds, that they do not need our commendation. He is not an author to create a sensation, or have a tumultuous popularity. His works are not stimulating or impassioned, and they minister nothing to a feverish love of excitement. Their tranquil beauty and softened tints, which do not win the notice of the restless many, only endear him to the thoughtful few.[36]

The "thoughtful few" to whom Longfellow refers are the people who controlled New England's cultural life before the Civil War. Once Hawthorne's work had been published by Ticknor and Fields, New England's most prominent publisher; once it had been reviewed by E.P. Whipple, a member of Fields's coterie and one of the most influential contemporary reviewers; and once it had become the subject of long discussions in the *Christian Examiner* and the *North American Review,* periodicals whose editors, in Sidney Ahlstrom's words, "alone constitute . . . a hall of fame of the New England flowering," he had gained a place in a socio-cultural network that assured his prominence because its own prominence was already an established and self-perpetuating fact.[37]

Lewis Simpson has characterized this group of literary and intellectual men who took the nation's spiritual welfare as their special charge as the "New England clerisy."[38] Simpson traces its beginnings in the passage from a theological to a literary clergy in the early years of the nineteenth century, using the career of Joseph Stevens Buckminster, a precocious young theology professor at Harvard, to

[36]Longfellow, in the *North American Review,* 56 (1842), 496–99, as reprinted in Crowley, *Hawthorne,* 83.

[37]Sidney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1972), 398. Ahlstrom's account of the emergence of Unitarianism is instructive for understanding the literary history of the period.

[38]Lewis P. Simpson, *The Man of Letters in New England and the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1973).

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exemplify the broadening of ecclesiastical authority to include general cultural matters and especially literature. Buckminster and his associates, who founded the *Monthly Anthology,* America's most serious literary journal at the time, spoke of literature as a "commonwealth" with its own "government," that along with Church and State fought for civilization against barbarism.[39] As a result of their activity, Simpson has written, "the image in the New England mind of the old theocratic polity begins to become the image of a literary polity. . . . The *Respublica Christiana* . . . becomes the *Respublica Litterarum*."[40] The metaphor of the state as a means of conceptualizing literary activity is important because it suggests the need for centralized leadership and control in cultural affairs: the choice of proper reading matter was not something that could be left to the "restless many," but rightly belonged to the "thoughtful few" whose training and authority qualified them as arbiters of public taste. The formation of a literary canon in the nineteenth century was not a haphazard affair but depended on the judgment of a small group of prominent men, the members of the Anthology Society—clergymen, professors, businessmen, judges, and statesmen—who conceived of their task as a civic and moral duty. The power they had to determine who would be read and who would not is dramatically illustrated by the career of Richard Henry Dana, Sr., whose ardent admiration for the English Romantic poets drew scathing criticism from the Boston literati. He failed to be elected to the editorship of the *North American* (the direct descendant of the *Monthly Anthology*), and thereafter refused to contribute to it. When his essays and tales, his long poem, and the collected edition of his poems and prose elicited only a cool response from reviewers, he simply withdrew from the world, devastated by its failure to recognize his genius.[41]

This fate did not befall Nathaniel Hawthorne because he had been taken up by the second generation of the New England clerisy, whose power to shape literary opinion had been inherited from the first through an interlocking network of social, familial, political, and professional connections. William Tudor, an active member of the Anthology Society, the *Monthly Anthology*'s editorial board, became the founding editor of the *North American Review.* John Kirkland, another of the Society's original members, became president of Harvard. Alexander Everett, another member, later a minister to Spain, also went on to edit the *North American,* as did Edward Everett, who had studied German at Göttingen with George Ticknor, both of them original members of the Anthology Society. Ticknor, who preceded Longfellow as Professor of Modern Languages at Harvard, was the cousin of William Ticknor, of Ticknor and Fields, who became one of Hawthorne's lifelong friends. William Emerson, pastor of the First Church of Boston, who

[39]Ibid., 22.

[40]Ibid.

[41]Robert E. Spiller, ed., *Literary History of the United States: History,* 3d ed. rev. (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 286–87.

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edited the *Monthly Anthology* for two years before the Society took over, was Ralph Waldo Emerson's father.[42]

Joseph Buckminster's father had strenuously opposed the liberal theological tendencies of his son, just as the Unitarians of Buckminster's era and beyond would oppose the radical theorizing of Emerson and his circle, but the authority to speak on spiritual and cultural issues passed smoothly down from father to son undiminished by doctrinal differences. The men who thus assumed the role of cultural spokesmen at midcentury—Longfellow, Holmes, Lowell, Whittier, and Emerson—were particularly powerful since by then Boston had become the literary center of the nation.[43] These were the men whom Caroline Ticknor recorded as gathering to socialize at the Old Corner Bookstore, as Ticknor and Fields was familiarly known.[44] These were the men who in 1857 "all agreed to write for the *Atlantic,* and . . . made it immediately . . . the most important magazine in America."[45] These were the men who, as Sophia Hawthorne left the cemetery after her husband's funeral, stood with bared heads as the carriage passed.[46]

It is hard to overestimate the importance of Hawthorne's connections with these men who outlived him by a score of years and who launched the periodical that would dominate literary activity in the United States for the rest of the nineteenth century. When William Dean Howells returned to Boston in 1866, he became assistant editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* under James T. Fields (Hawthorne's publisher), who had taken over the editorship from Lowell (Hawthorne's good friend). Howells, whom Hawthorne had helped get his start by introducing him to Emerson, took over the editorship from Fields in 1871 and George Parsons Lathrop, Hawthorne's son-in-law, became an assistant editor.[47] Lathrop would publish the first full-length study of Hawthorne, which Howell's close friend, Henry James, would challenge three years later in *his* full-length study. This touched off a critical controversy—notably in an essay by Howells—over whether Hawthorne was an idealist or a realist, so that it was Hawthorne whose texts critics used to argue the merits of literary realism in the 1880s and 1890s.[48] Meanwhile, several friends published poems commemorating Hawthorne's death; relatives, friends, and associates printed their reminiscences; Sophia published excerpts from Hawthorne's journals; and other admirers wrote pieces with titles like "The Homes and Haunts of Hawthorne." Yet most important in assuring Hawthorne's continuing presence in the cultural foreground was James T. Fields.

[42]Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1957), I 253–55.

[43]Ibid., II, 32.

[44]Caroline Ticknor, *Hawthorne and His Publisher* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913), 7.

[45]Mott, *History of American Magazines,* II, 33, 494. 496.

[46]Turner, *Nathaniel Hawthorne* 392–93.

[47]*Literary History of the United States,* 888; Mott, *History of American Magazines,* II, 493ff.

[48]Edwin Cady, "'The Wizard Hand': Hawthorne, 1864–1900," in *Hawthorne Centenary Essays,* ed. Roy Harvey Pearce (Ohio State Univ. Press, 1964), 324ff.

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Fields, wanting to make good on his investment, followed his former practice of putting out anything he thought would pique the public's interest in his author and managed to produce eleven posthumous editions of Hawthorne's work between 1864 and 1883. This meant, twenty years after he was dead, that Hawthorne was still being reviewed as a live author. Osgood, the successor to Fields, pushed this strategy further by adding Hawthorne to his "Little Classics" series, and in 1884, Houghton Mifflin, the successor to Osgood, capped it off by publishing *The Complete Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne* in twelve volumes, edited by his son-in-law. Finally, Houghton Mifflin reinforced the image by including Hawthorne in two more series: "Modern Classics" and "American Classics for the Schools." In 1883 the academic establishment put its *imprimatur* on what the publishers had done. In that year, Yale allowed English literature students for the first time to write their junior essays on "Hawthorne's Imagination"—the only topic on the list that concerned an American author. Consequently, Hawthorne's texts were "there" to be drawn upon for ammunition in the debates over the question of realism that raged during the 1880s. By the end of the century, as Edwin Cady observes in his survey of Hawthorne criticism, "a minor critic might well have doubted his respectability if he failed to cite Hawthorne whether in praise of or attack against any writing in question."[49]

The prominence of Hawthorne's texts in the post-Civil War era is a natural consequence of his relation to the mechanisms that produced literary and cultural opinion. Hawthorne's initial connections with the Boston literati—his acquaintance with Longfellow at college, his residence next door to Alcott and a half mile from Emerson (his son and Emerson's nephew roomed together at Harvard), his marrying a Peabody, becoming fast friends with Ticknor and Lowell, being published by the indefatigable Fields, and socializing with Duyckinck and Whipple—these circumstances positioned Hawthorne's literary production so that it became the property of a dynastic cultural elite that came to identify itself with him.[50] The members of this elite could not fail to keep Hawthorne's reputation alive since it stood for everything they themselves stood for. American's literary establishment, no less than James T. Fields (who was part of it), had an investment in Hawthorne. In short, the friends and associates who outlived Hawthorne kept his fiction up-to-date by writing about it, and then *their* friends took over. Consequently, when the next generation of critics, Howells, James, and their contemporaries, came of age, they redefined his work according to the critical tastes of the new era. When the century turned, it seemed appropriate that a volume of Hawthorne criticism should appear in 1904 celebrating the hundredth anniversary of his birth. "By then," writes Edwin Cady, "figures like George Woodberry, William Peterfield Trent, and Paul Elmer More had come to maturity,"

[49]Ibid., 331.

[50]Much of this interesting social information is contained in *The Memoirs of Julian Hawthorne*, ed. Edith Garrigue Hawthorne (New York: Macmillan, 1938).

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who, with their "Arnoldian . . . neo-humanism" would "project Hawthorne toward the present century's Age of Criticism."[51]

During the same period, Susan Warner's critical reputation dwindled to nothing. Whereas critics writing before the Civil War had discussed her work alongside that of Hawthorne, Brockden Brown, Cooper, Irving, Longfellow, and Stowe, by the 1870s they had ceased to take her novels seriously as literature and finally stopped reviewing them altogether. Under the pressure of new conditions, Warner's work, like Hawthorne's, came to be redefined. The circumstances that create an author's literary reputation were of the same *kind* in either case—that is, they consisted of the writer's relation to centers of cultural domination, social and professional connections, blood relations, friendships, publishing history, and so on—but in Warner's case the circumstances were negative rather than positive.

Warner's connections—such as they were—sprang from New York rather than Boston, which at this particular period put her at a geographical disadvantage. Not having lived in Concord, she did not know Emerson and his circle, was not published by Fields, had not known Longfellow at college, had not roomed with a former president of the United States whose campaign biography she would write and who would get her a consulship when she needed money. Rather, she had been forced by her father's financial failure in the 1830s to retire to an island in the Hudson River where the family owned property, and where, along with her maiden sister, she wrote novels to earn a living. The Warners' poverty and their resulting social isolation affected both what they wrote and the way their work was perceived by contemporary audiences. As a consequence of their social isolation the Warners threw themselves into church-centered activities and became extremely devout followers of the Reverend Thomas Skinner—a New Light Presbyterian who preached the importance of faith over doctrine in religious conversion. They considered the novels and stories they wrote their best means of doing the Lord's work and—since they had to—of supporting themselves. These conditions (at one point their house was in receivership and creditors took their furniture away) determined not only what they wrote, but how much, how fast, for what kind of audience, and for which publishers.[52] Though they had started out with G.P. Putnam, a large commercial publisher in New York who had been a friend of their father's, in the 1860s they gave most of what they wrote to Robert Carter, a highly respected religious publisher who could guarantee a certain number of sales. The audience for religious books was large, stable, and provided an outlet for the Warners that answered their need both to win souls and to have bread on the table. Thus, at a time when changes in the economic and social environment created the context within which literary realism flourished, the Warner sisters guaranteed that their novels would be read a religious rather than literary discourse, labelling them with Carter's imprint and with titles—"Stories on the Lord's Prayer,"

[51]Cady, "'The Wizard Hand.'" 334.
[52]Anna Warner, *Susan Warner* (New York, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1909).

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"A Story of Small Beginnings," "The Word"—more reminiscent of tract society pamphlets than of high art.

Given a different cultural milieu, these conditions of production might have guaranteed the Warner sisters lasting fame. If the religious views that characterized the attacks on *The Scarlet Letter* in the 1850s had dominated literary criticism after the war, Hawthorne would have done well to experience a religious conversion and switch to Carter, too. However, the moral impulse behind American criticism, which had been evangelical and religious in the antebellum years, evolved during the 1870s and 1880s into a concern for the material conditions of social life. Novels that had previously appeared to contain superb renditions of American character and homely scenes imbued with universal human truths, now seemed to be full of idealized characters, authorial didacticism, and an overt religiosity that marked them as morally false and artistically naïve. Warner's work had become identified with an outmoded piety and a discredited Romanticism that assured its swift disappearance from the critical scene. It is not that critics suddenly discovered limitations they had previously failed to notice, but that the context within which the work appeared had changed the nature of the work itself. If Warner had had the kinds of connections that kept Hawthorne's works in the public eye, had commanded the attention of influential publishers, editors, and reviewers, her early novels might have remained critically viable as they came to be recast according to the prevailing standards. In that case *The Wide, Wide World* might have been passed down to us as one of the benchmarks of American literary realism.[53] Yet when she died in 1885 there were no famous men at her funeral who would write poems in her memory for the *Atlantic Monthly* to print or for Harvard Phi Beta Kappas to hear. She had no publisher whose commercial interests lay in bringing out posthumous editions of her work, whose friends would write retrospective evaluations of her career. There were no surviving relatives whose connections would allow them to publish excerpts from her journals in prestigious places, no son to write three volumes of reminiscences, no son-in-law to write a full-length critical study and then go on to edit her complete works in twelve volumes.

What these facts demonstrate is that an author's relation to the mechanisms by which his or her work is brought before the public determine the status of that work in the world's eyes. Hawthorne's canonization was the result of a network of

[53]Henry James, writing in the *Nation* in 1865, says that in its depiction of rural scenes *The Wide, Wide World* is superior to the realism of Flaubert. Yet later in the review he expresses exactly that critical doctrine that would eventually disqualify Warner's fiction from serious consideration as art. "They [novels written for both parents and children] frequently contain, as in the present case [James is reviewing *The Schönberg-Cotta Family*], an infusion of religious and historical information, and they in all cases embody a moral lesson. This latter fact is held to render them incompetent as novels; and doubtless, after all, it does, for of a genuine novel the meaning and the lesson are infinite; and here they are carefully narrowed down to a special precept" (See the *Nation,* 14 Sept. 1865 344–45). It is interesting to compare James's comment with Brownson's review of *The Scarlet Letter* attacking the novel for failing to be Christian and moral enough.

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common interests—familial, social, professional, commercial, and national—that, combined, made Hawthorne a literary and cultural artifact, a national possession; the same combination of circumstances in reverse reconstituted Warner's bestselling novels as ephemera that catered to the taste of a bygone age. Nor was there a conspiracy involved in keeping Hawthorne's reputation green while Warner's withered. By attributing the canonical status of Hawthorne's work to factors other than its "intrinsic" merit, I do not mean to suggest that the merits that critics and editors discerned in that work were not real, that they promoted work they believed was worthless or mediocre, or that they deliberately ignored work they believed was good. On the contrary, although a mixture of motives was bound to be present in any individual decision to publish or write about Hawthorne's work—friendship, family feeling, commercial gain, professional advancement—these motives are not distinguishable from a belief in Hawthorne's genius and the conviction that his novels were great works of art. For that conviction is itself a contextual matter; that is, it does not spring from a pure, unmediated perception of an author's work on the part of his admirers and supporters, but is determined by the situation in which they encounter it. To put it another way, the fact that an author's reputation depends upon the context within which it is read does not empty the work of value; it is the context—which eventually includes the work itself—that creates the value its readers "discover" there. Their reading is an activity arising within a particular cultural setting (of which the author's reputation is a part) that reflects and elaborates the features of that setting simultaneously.

* * *

The idea that great literary works are those that stand the test of time might seem at first to have a persuasive force that no amount of argument can dispel. Yet the moment one starts to investigate the critical history of even a single work, the notion that a classic is a book that outlasts its age becomes extremely problematic. What does it mean to say that *The Scarlet Letter* stood the test of time and *The Wide, Wide World* did not? Which test? Or rather, whose? It was the Custom-House essay and not Hester's story that drew the most unstinting praise from contemporary reviewers of *The Scarlet Letter;* and it was *The Marble Faun,* that, on the whole, Hawthorne's contemporaries deemed his finest work.[54] The reason for this, as I have shown, is that the criteria by which those critics judged Hawthorne were different from ours. Whose criteria then shall constitute the test? Certainly not Longfellow's: his standards belong to the "prose-like-running-waters" school. Henry James's admiration of Hawthorne was highly qualified: he believed *The*

[54]Crowley, *Hawthorne,* 21; Faust, *Hawthorne's Contemporaneous Reputation,* 72, 141.

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Scarlet Letter inferior to John Lockhart's *Adam Blair*.[55] The transcendental defense of Hawthorne is not, as I have indicated, one that twentieth-century critics could make. Yet if we use only modern critical criteria—assuming they could be agreed upon—then *The Scarlet Letter* would have passed *a* test but not the "test of time," since that presumably would have to include the critical judgments of more than one generation. The trouble with the notion that a classic work transcends the limitations of its age and appeals to critics and readers across the centuries is that one discovers, upon investigation, that the grounds of critical approval are always shifting. *The Scarlet Letter* is a great novel in 1850, in 1876, in 1904, in 1942, and in 1966, but each time it is great for different reasons. In the light of this evidence, it begins to appear that what we have been accustomed to think of as the most enduring work of American literature is not a stable object possessing features of enduring value, but an object that—because of its place within institutional and cultural history—has come to embody successive concepts of literary excellence. This is not to say that *The Scarlet Letter* is simply an "empty space" or that there is "nothing there"; to put it another way, it is not to assert that no matter what Hawthorne had written, his work would have succeeded because he had the right connections. The novel Hawthorne produced in 1850 had a specificity and a force within its own context that a different work would not have had. Yet as the context changed, so did the work embedded in it.

Yet that very description of *The Scarlet Letter* as a text that invited constant redefinition might be put forward, finally, as the one true basis on which to found its claim to immortality. For the hallmark of the classic work is precisely that it rewards the scrutiny of successive generations of readers, speaking with equal power to people of various persuasions. It is on just this basis, in fact, that one of Hawthorne's critics has explained his critical prominence in recent years. Reviewing Hawthorne criticism for *American Literary Scholarship* in 1970, Roy Male comments "on the way Hawthorne's work has responded to shifting expectations during the last two decades."

> In the fifties it rewarded the explicatory and mythic analyses of the New Critics; in the mid-sixties it survived, at the cost of some diminution, the rigorous inquest of the new historicists and the neo-Freudians; and now his fiction seems more vital than ever for readers aware of new developments in psychology and related fields.[56]

In a sense, what Roy Male describes here is a capsule version of what I have been describing throughout this essay; namely, the various ways in which Hawthorne's texts have been reinterpreted by critics of various persuasions. What is at issue is how to account for this phenomenon. In Male's view, these successive reinterpretations show that Hawthorne's work is "more vital than ever" be-

[55]Henry James, *Hawthorne* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press. 1956), 90–92.
[56]Roy R. Male, in *American Literary Scholarship: An Annual, 1969* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1970). 19–20.

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cause they testify to its capacity to reward a variety of critical approaches, each of which produces only a partial reading of it; the text itself must be deeper and broader than any of its individual concretizations, for there is no other way to explain how the same text could give rise to them all. The notion that the classic text escapes or outlasts history *must* hold that various attempts to capture it from within history (i.e., from within a particular perspective) are incomplete, for if one of them did succeed completely, not only would interpretation have to stop, it would mean that the classic was not universal but limited, could not speak to people in all times and places, was not, in short, a classic.

Yet as I have been suggesting, there is no need to account for the succession of interpretations by positing an ahistorical, transcendental text that calls them forth. History—the succession of cultural formations, social networks, institutional priorities, and critical perspectives—does that, and the readings thus produced are not partial approximations of an ungraspable, transhistorical entity, but a series of completions, wholly adequate to the text that each interpretive framework makes available. In each case, the reading can be accounted for by a series of quite specific documentable circumstances having to do with publishing practices, pedagogical and critical traditions, economic structures, social networks, and national needs which constitutes the text within the framework of a particular disciplinary hermeneutic. The "durability" of the text is not a function of its unique resistance to intellectual obsolescence; for the text, in any describable, documentable sense, is not durable at all. What endures is the literary and cultural tradition that believes in the idea of the classic, and which perpetuates that belief from day to day and from year to year by reading and rereading, publishing and republishing, teaching and recommending for teaching, and writing books and articles about a small group of works whose "durability" is thereby assured.

The fact is that literary classics do not *withstand* change; rather, they are always registering, or promoting, or retarding alterations in historical conditions as these affect their readers and, especially, the members of the literary establishment. For classic texts, while they may or may not have originally been written by geniuses, have certainly been written and rewritten by the generations of professors and critics who make their living by them. They are the mirrors of culture as culture is interpreted by those who control the literary establishment. Rather than being the repository of eternal truths, they embody the changing interests and beliefs of those people whose place in the cultural hierarchy empowers them to decide which works deserve the name of classic and which do not. For the idea of "the classic" itself is no more universal or interest-free than the situation of those whose business it is to interpret literary works for the general public. It underwrites their claim to be the servants—and not the arbiters—of truth, and disguises the historically conditioned, contingent, and partisan nature of the texts which their modes of construction make visible. The recognition that literary texts, like everything else, are humanly created, historically produced objects, whose value has been created and re-created by men and women out of their particular needs, suggests a

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need to study the interests, institutional practices, and social arrangements that sustain the canon of classic works. It also opens the way for a retrieval of the values and interests embodied in other, noncanonical texts, which the literary establishment responsible for the canon in its present form has—for a variety of reasons—suppressed.*

*This essay will appear in slightly altered form as the first chapter of my book, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985).

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