A New Look At Hawthorne

1130

A NEW LOOK AT HAWTHORNE

"As Sophia's carriage left the cemetery it passed, with their heads uncovered, Emerson, Longfellow, Holmes, Whittier, Lowell, Agassiz, Alcott, Hillard, and Pierce. ... ...Emerson went on : 'I have found in his death a surprise and disappointment. I thought him a greater man than any of his works betray, that there was still a great deal of work in him, and that he might some day show a purer power.'" In this way Mark Van Doren closes his book "Nathaniel Hawthorne." Van Wyck Brooks writes of the closing years of his life...."Hawthorne built a tower over the house, a reminisence of the Italian villa in which he had stayed in Florence. There he had his study, reached by a trap-door, with a standing desk fastened to the wall... ...a sudden change seemed to have come upon him with his return to America, a blight as of winter, a deadly estrangement even from his own imagination... ...He made a few half-hearted efforts to gather up the threads of his former life. He appeared at the Saturday Club for a few of the dinners; but even Alcott and Emerson seldom saw him. Once, at Emerson's house, he picked up some photographs of Concord, the common, the court-house and the Mill-dam, which he passed in his walks every day, and asked what the pictures represented. The sight of a friend or a stranger approaching his house drove him up the hill into the woods. Along the top of the ridge, among the pines, between the huckleberry and sweetfern bushes, he walked to and fro, brooding over the novel he could not finish. He fancied that the grass and the little shrubs shrank away as he passed them because there was something in his broddings that was alien to nature. Seventy-five years later, one could still trace the path that Hawthorne's footsteps wore on the tree-covered ridge. He had wasted away and the glow in his eyes had vanished; and, hard as he tried to write, pulling down the blinds and locking his door, he could not bring his mind into focus... ...Then, one day in 1864, the news reached Concord from Plymouth, New Hampshire, that he had died in his sleep at the village inn. For years, he had been in the habit, while idly scribbling, of writing the number 64, which had, he felt, some fatal meaning for him. He had not disappeared, like Septimius Felton, crushed by the failure of his dream, but he had wandered away with as little purpose, knowing, perhaps, that he would not return."

This was the strange man who on graduation from Bowdoin in 1825 had determined on literature as a profession. He gave himself to that profession and yet for the greater part of his life felt that he was an unknown - a failure. Nevertheless he kept writing because of this feeling of "vocation." I suppose he would have called it "destiny." In 1853 he wrote to Richard H. Stoddard: "It was my fortune or misfortune...to have some slender means of supporting myself; and so, on leaving college in 1825 instead of immediately studying a profession I sat myself down to consider what pursuit in life I was best fit for... ...And year after year I kept on considering what I was fit for and time and my destiny decided that I was to be the writer that I am."

There is an entry in his "English Note-Books" on December 25, 1854 which is rather illuminating: "I think I have been happier this Christmas than ever before,—by my own fireside, and with my wife and children about me,—more content to enjoy what I have,—less anxious for anything beyond it, in this life. My early life was perhaps a good preparation for the declining half of life; it having been such a blank that any thereafter would compare favorably with it. For a long, long while, I have occasionally been visited with a singular dream; and I have an impression that I have dreamed it ever since I have been in England. It is, that I am still at college, or, sometimes, even at school,—and there is a sense that I have been there unconscionably long, and have quite failed to make such progress as my contemporaries have done; and I seem to meet some of them with a feeling of shame and depression that broods over me as I think of it, even when awake. This dream, recurring all through these twenty or thirty years, must be one of the effects of that heavy seclusion in which I shut myself up for twelve years after leaving college, when everybody moved onward, and left me behind. How strange that it should come now, when I may call myself famous and prosperous!—when I am happy, too!"

His literary income was never enough to support him or his family so that it was necessary for him to find some sort of work to meet this need. Although he was a dreamer he could also be intensely practical when the occasion demanded. It is another mark of his singular genius that he chose politics or as VanDoren has it "the shadow of politics," in order to earn a living. His main income for much of his life came from government service—at the port in Boston, in the Customs House at Salem, as consul at Liverpool and Manchester. While in college he had become friendly with Franklyn Pierce who was

later to become President. It was through his efforts that some of these appointments were realized. He was never happy in any of them. An entry in "The English Notebooks" reads: "For the last week or two I have passed my time between the hotel and the Consulate, and a weary life it is, and one that leaves little of profit behind it. I am sick to death of my office,—brutal captains and brutal sailors; continual complaints of mutual wrong which I have no power to set right, and which, indeed seem to have no right on either side; calls of idleness or ceremony from my travelling countrymen, who seldom know what they are in search of at the commencement of their tour, and never have attained any desirable end at the close of it; beggars, cheats, simpletons, unfortunates, so mixed up that it is impossible to distinguish one from another, and so, in self-defence, the Consul distrusts them all...."

Louise Hall Tharp in "The Peabody Sisters" says: "The Hawthornes felt like landed gentry and plain ordinary hard work hurt their pride." Whittier said of Hawthorne: "He never seemed to be doing anything, and yet he did not like to be disturbed at it." His quiet life was wholly detached from the major activities of the times and he gave himself largely to brodding in solitude. There was a sense of aloofness, a strong pride, an alienation from the common interests and almost a hostility toward a world that ignored his rather timid advances.

At one time he invested his meager savings in "The Brook Farm" venture and I suppose he thought that he could support himself and his family here. It did not work out. This passage from "The Hlithedale Romance" gives a hint of his feeling: He is talking about the opposition of neighboring farmers: "But this was pure envy and malice on the part of the neighboring farmers. The peril of our new way of life was not lest we should fail in becoming practical agriculturists, but that we should probably cease to be anything else. While our enterprise lay all in theory, we had pleased ourselves with delectable visions of the spiritualization of labor. It was to be our form of prayer and ceremonial worship. Each stroke of the hoe was to uncover some aromatic root of wisdom, heretofore hidden from the sun. Pausing in the field, to let the wind exhale the moisture from our foreheads, we were to look upward, and catch glimpses into the far-off soul of truth. In this point of view, matters did not turn out quite so well as we anticipated. It is very true that, sometimes, gazing casually around me, out of the midst of my toil, I used to discern a richer picturesqueness in

the visible scene of earth and sky. There was, at such moments, a novely, an unwonted aspect, on the face of Nature, as if she had been taken by surprise and seen at unawares, with no opportunity to put off her real look and assume the mask with which she mysteriously hides herself from mortals. But this was all. The clods of earth, which we so constantly belabored and turned over and over, were never etheralized into thought. Our thoughts on the contrary, were fast becoming cloddish. Our labor symbolized nothing, and left us mentally sluggish in the dusk of the evening. Intellectual activity is incompatible with any large amount of bodily exercise. The yeoman and the scholar—the yeoman and the man of finest moral culture, though not the man of sturdiest sense and integrity—are two distinct individuals, and can never be melted or welded into one substance."

In the American Notebooks there are some references to Brook Farm: He writes, "I Have not yet taken my first lesson in agriculture, except that I went to see our cows foddered yesterday afternoon. We have eight of our own; and the number is now increased by a transcendental heifer belonging to Miss Margaret Fuller. She is very fractious, I believe, and apt to kick over the milk-pail....I intend to convert myself into a milkmaid this evening, but I pray Heaven that Mr. Ripley may be moved to assign me the kindliest cow in the herd...." A week later he writes: "It is an endless surprise to me how much work there is to be done in the world."

A month later we being to see how things are going by this entry: "My cold has almost entirely departed. Were it a sunny day, I should consider myself quite fit for labor out of doors; but as the ground is so damp, and the atmosphere so chill, and the sky so sullen, I intend to keep myself on the sick-list this one day longer, more especially as I wish to read Carlyle on Heroes." By August he is writing in this vein: "And joyful thought! in a little more than a fortnight I shall be free from my bondage....free to enjoy Nature,—free to think and feel!...Even my Custom House experience was not such a thraldom and weariness; my mind and heart were free. O, labor is the curse of the world, and nobody can meddle with it without becoming proportionably brutified! Is it a praiseworthy matter that I have spent five golden months in providing food for cows and horses? It is not so... ...of all hateful place that is the worst, and I shall never comfort myself for having spent so many days of blessed sunshine there. It is my opinion that a man's soul may be buried and

perish under the dung-heap, or in a furrow of the field, just as well as under a pile of money."

VanWyck Brooks has put it as well as anyone: "Hawthorne had lived too long in this border-region, these polar solitudes where the spirit shivered, so that the substance of the world about him hung before his eyes like a thing of vapour. He felt as if he had not lived at all, as if he were an ineffectual shadow, as if, having stepped aside from the highway of human affairs, he had lost his place forever... ... Luckily, Hawthorne had another self... ...This other Hawthorne, this prosaic Hawthorne, the son of a Salem skipper, was interested in his own self-preservation... ...Eleven years were enough in a haunted chamber, filled with thoughts of suicide and madness... having broken the spell and gone to Boston, this mater-of-fact, substantial, physical Hawthorne accepted a position at the custom house. To the end of his life these separate personalities dominated his destiny in turn. The story teller scarcely knew the practical man of business who worked on the steaming docks, amid the coal-dust....Which was the true Hawthorne, which the phantom? The story-teller lived in a trance as long as the automaton was packed away, in the box where he belonged, when custom-houses, ships and offices lay like dreams behind him."

His literary work does not stem from his own experiences for he seemed to have difficulty in relating his ordinary life to the people and problems about which he writes. "The Blithedale Romance" is probably most closely related to his own experiences and at the same time is generally regarded as one of the worst novels that has ever been written. When he wrote he could use his imagination but not his life. It is not true that he could not use things which he saw. Anyone who read the Selections from the Notebooks discovers that Hawthorne had a remarkable ability to observe details and to report those details. One example from the English Notebooks may be sufficient: "We watch all arrivals and other events from our parlor window,— a stage coach driving up four times in the twenty-four hours, with its forlorn outsiders, all saturated with rain; the steamer, from the head of the lake, landing a crowd of passengers, who stroll up to the hotel, drink a glass of ale, lean over the parapet of the bridge, gaze at the flat stones which pave the bottom of the river, and then hurry back to the steamer again; car, horsemen, all damped and disconsolate. There are a number of young men staying at the hotel, some of whom go forth in all the rain,

fishing, and come back at nightfall, trudging heavily, but with creels on their backs that do not seem very heavy. Yesterday was fair and enlivened us a good deal. Returning from a walk in the forenoon, I found a trop of yeomanry cavalry in the stable-yard of the hotel. They were the North Lancashire Regiment, and were on their way to Liverpool for the purpose of drill. Not being old campaigners, their uniforms and accouttrements were in so much the finer order, all bright, and looking span-new, and they themselves were a body of handsome and stalwart young men; and it was pleasant to look at their helmets, and red jackets and carbines, and steel scabbarded swords, and gallant steeds,—all so martial in aspect,—and to know that they were only play-soldiers, after all, and were never likely to do nor suffer any warlike mischief. By and by their bugles sounded, and they trotted away, wheeling over the ivy-grown stone bridge, and disappearing behind the trees on the Milnethorpe road. Our host comes forth from the bar with a bill, which he presents to an orderly-sergeant. He the host, then tells me that he himself once roade many years, a trooper in this regiment, and that all his comrades were larger men than himself. Yet Mr. Thomas White is a good-sized man, and now, at all events, rather overweight for a dragoon."

But Mr. Hawthorne does not take part in any of this. He observes. He asks questions. He writes it all down with meticulous detail. In the end he becomes bored and goes to another place where the same things happen all over again. His greatest tales are not rooted in these experience but in the sometimes wild imagination that takes over his solitude. Van Doren says rightly that his seven years in Europe did him no good. They could not. His life was quiet and wholly detached from the events of his day. He could never lose himself in a great cause but sceptical and critical he observed others making fools of themselves. He rather enjoyed mankind as mankind so long as he did not have to associate with individualmen.

The exception was his wife. His greatest happiness came from his family and perhaps it is significant that this family never really enters any of his wirtings. He married Sophia Peabody in 1842 when he was 38 years old. Their courship and their marriage contradicts all that we have written thus far. This represents really a third compartment of his life. Louise Hall Tharp in "The Peabody Sisters of Salem", published four years ago gives a most delightful picture of Hawthorne's wife and his relationship with his wife's family. At the same time we have revealing glimpses of Nathaniel. "For once, Elizabeth had not exaggerated, Sophia was thinking: Nathaniel Hawthorne was ex-

traordinarily handsome. Those eyes with their heavy brows and deep shadows would make the dominant characteristic of any portrait. Sophia looked again to see exactly what color the eyes were. They were a deep blue, so dark as to seem almost black. Above them, Hawthorne's forehead, with its already slightly retreating hairline, seemed unusually high and white. It was well balanced by a prominent chin, however, while his nose and mouth were as perfect as the profiles Sophia had so often copied from Miss Burley's book of Greek gems. Sophia caught her breath and her heart seemed to skip a beat as she studied Hawthorne's mouth. It was full, sensitive, and so beautiful as to be almost womanish. At the same time, a slightly undershot lower lip suggested not only will power but a high temper. Here was a man who could be tender, passionate—but who was not to be trifiled with. Sophia's cheecks grewed faintly, becomingly pink as she told herself that she was thinking of Hawthorne only in terms of painting. His hair, for example, was a dark chestnut which would be very interesting in the high lights but difficult to attempt. Months spent indoors at his desk had given Hawthorne a pallor which Sophia found intriguing."

Elizabeth was aware of the first long look which Hawthorne and Sophia exchanged. She saw Hawthorne lose his shyness and become at ease. He seemed to put on charm like a garment, for there was more than a touch of the actor in him as in most writers." Yes, under the spell of Sophia Hawthorne became a different person. He could be a delightful companion and with her he was. She was an abolitionist, a transcendentalist, and assistant to Bronson Alcott in the Temple School, and a sympathetic friend to every Utopian dreamer of the times. He abhorred all causes and distrusted all reformers. Yet his love for Sophia Peabody was the one great contentment of his life. This strange man! Normally he never liked to be caught in the act of feeling intensely about anthing - but listen to what he writes in 1855..."I read all the preceeding numbers of The Newcomes to my wife, but happened not to have an opportunity to read this last, and was glad of it,—knowing that my eyes would fill, and my voice quiver... ... ...Speaking of Thackeray, I cannot but wonder at his coolness in respect to his own pathos, and compare it with my emotions, when I read the last scene of The Scarlet Letter to my wife, just after writing it,—tried to read it rather, for my voice swelled and heaved, as if I were tossed up and down on an ocean as it subsides after a storm. But

But I was in a very nervous state then, having gone through a great diversity of emotion, while writing it, for many months. I think I have never overcome my own adamant in any other instance."

He had very little to do with religion. Lloyd Morris wrote a book about him with the title: "The Rebellious Puritan." The conscience ridden Puritan mind was almost an obsession with him. He apparently disliked the clergy once writing: "I find that my respect for clerical people, as such, and my faith in the utility of their office, decreases daily." In England, although he took a pew in the Unitarian church at Liverpool and sent his son Julian every Sunday, he never went himself. Whenever he describes a cathedral or a church it is always in terms of a building or legend or historical background never in terms of any religious significance. In the English Notebooks he says: " In the morning before breakfast we had prayers, read by Mr.----- in the oak dining-room, all the servants coming in, and everybody kneeling down. I should like to know how much true religious feeling is indicated by this regular observance of religious rites in English families. In America, if people kneel down to pray, it is pretty certain that they feel a geniune interest in the matter, and their daily life is supposed to be in accordance with their devotions. If an American is an infidel, he knows it; but an Englishman is often so without suspecting it,—being kept from that knowledge by this formality of family prayer, and his other regularities of external worship." In this passage he is more interested in taking a swipe at the English than in the religion concerned. It has been said that there was something about religion he understood but did not believe.

In the Old Manse he wrote: "Books of religion, however, cannot be considered a fair test of the enduring and vivacious properties of human thought, because such books so seldom really touch upon their ostensible subject, and have, therefore, so little business to be written at all. So long as an unlettered soul can attain to saving grace there would seem to be no deadly error in holding theological libraries to be accumulations of, for the most part, stupendous impertinence.

He was profoundly preoccupied with the problem of evil, with sin and confession and retribution. "The most powerful theme in his stories is public confession. A familiar pattern in his novels is the borken law, the hidden guilt, the hunger for confession, the studious, cold heart that watches and does not feel. He had some of

the feeling and genius of the writers of the old Greek Tragedies. He was convinced of human depravity and devoted one of his best stories to that theme. "Young Goodman Brown" is one of the stories in Mosses From An Old Manse and VanDoren thinks it is one of the world's grat tales, just as a story. Critics have called him the most distinguished craftsman of the New England school of letters and his craftsmanship is evident in this short story. One evening the hero of this story left his young wife to walk by himself in the primitive New England woods. He meets an older man who looks something like his father with "an indescribable air of one who knew the world." of course he is the Devil and he is to waken in Goodman Brown's soul the consciousness of sin, his own and every other person's. He is horrified to find that all the finest people in the community are going to the Devil's meeting in the forest. Most tragic of all he sees his wife Faith there. Van Doren says: "Brown, waking from his dream, if it was a dream, goes home to Salem in the morning and finds Faith, her head still gay with ribbons, so overjoyed at his return that she skips down the street and almost kisses him before the whole village. But he looks 'sternly and sadly' into her face, passes on without a word, and is never the same again. He has become a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man who sees evil even where it is not and suspects it when he is not sure. His very dying hour was gloom. He had stumbled upon that mystery of sin which, rightly understood, provides the only sane and cheerful view of life there is. Understood in Brown's fashion, it darkens and sours the world, withering hope and charity, and pervertin whatever is truly good until it looks like evil at its worst: like blasphemy and hypocrisy." But you must read the story to feel its impact and sense its artistry.

Of course "The Scarlet Letter" is his greatest book. He was forty-five years old when he wrote it. Perhpas he himself did not realize what he did. One sure thing, he never repeated the triumph. "The House of the Seven Gables" and "The Marble Faun" among his novels are the only ones that come near to his triumph. In addition to the novels he wrote short stories, tales for children, sketches of life and travel and other miscellaneous pieces of biography and description. The short stories are most valuable and can be classified in five groups (1) sketches of current life or history; (2) stories of old New England (3) stories based upon some idea, for example "Ethan Brand"--the unpardonable sin or "The Ministers Blak Veil--the separation of each soul

from its fellows, or Young Goodman Brown--the power of doubt in good and evil; then (4) the allegories such as The Great Stone Face, Rappaciniis Daughter, The Great Carbuncle and incidentally in no story is the allegory consistent and then (5) the purely fantastic developments of some idea such as The New Adam and Eve, the Christmas Banquet, and the Celestial Railroad. All of his books are filled with symbolism. Sometimes it is fantastic symbolism. We find some of the ideas in his American Note-books. For example he notes: "A snake, taken into a man's stomach and nourished there from fifteen years to thirty-five tormenting him most horribly. A type of envy or some other evil passion." And again: What were the contents of the burden of Christianin the Pilgrim's Progress?" or "Two lovers to plan the building of a pleasure-house on a certain spot of ground, but various seeming accidents prevent it. Once they find a group of miserable children there; once it is the scene where crime is plotted; at last the dead body of one of the lovers or of a dear friend is found there; and in-stead of a pleasure-house they build a marble tomb. The moral,--that there is no place on earth fit for the site of a pleasure-house, because there is no spot that may not have been saddened by human grief, stained by crime, or hallowed by death. It might be three friends who plan it, instead of two lovers; and the dearest one dies."

He did possess a tremendous ability to picture life so that we are made aware of the dominating influence of the moral law - a law about which he is never quite clear. He was a distinguished craftsman. He had this great power to present the truth implicit in life. He was a mster of details of circumstance and surroundings. If his interest in the observation of life and his power of description of scenes and manners and character had been his dominant interest we might have had in him a much greater novelist. But too often the fanciful development of an idea had no relation to fact. But worst of all he had no message--he was an observer always. I think of him as a sort of Puritan Ahimaaz who insisted on running although he had no tidings.

REFERENCES

"The Flowering of New England" --Van Wyck Brooks

"Hawthorne"--Mark Van Doren

"The Peabody Sisters of Salem"--Louise Hall Tharp

"A History of American Literature"-- Percy Boynton

American Literature--Long

Encyclopedia Britannica

The Encyclopedia Americana

Hawthorne's Works--Illustrated Library Edition

"Rebellious Puritan--A Portrait of Mr. Hawthorne"--Lloyd Morris