



A new series

Nathaniel Hawthorne and the Spirit of Science

introduced by the Editors

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born in Salem, Massachusetts on the Fourth of July, 1804 to Elizabeth Manning and Nathaniel Hathorne. (Haunted by an ancestor who was complicit in the Salem witch trials, he added the *w* later in life.) His father, a captain, died at sea when he was only four; his mother raised him and his two sisters in the home of her relatives, doting aunts and uncles all. Due to a foot injury in 1813, he was confined to his bed for over a year, and spent long hours in the company of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and Spenser's *Faerie Queene*—one of several times in his life when he would have little to do but reflect and consult his imagination.

Young Nathaniel's maternal uncle Robert Manning became his particular patron, sending him to boarding school and then to Bowdoin College in 1821. At Bowdoin, he became fast friends with future president Franklin Pierce, whose campaign biography he would later write; future commodore Horatio Bridge, whose encouragement he credited with his literary career; and future congressman Jonathan Cilley, who would later die in a duel in which Hawthorne was indirectly involved. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was also a classmate, and, though not as close, he and Hawthorne were mutual admirers.

After college, Hawthorne sequestered himself in the upper quarters of his mother's house in Salem. There he scribbled and pondered for over a decade. "If ever I should have a biographer," he wrote, "he ought to make great mention of this chamber in my memoirs, because so much of my lonely youth was wasted here, and here my mind and character were

formed.” During this incubation, he began to publish. His novel *Fanshawe*, based on his experience at Bowdoin, was printed anonymously in 1828. Though he would disown this early effort and try his whole life to keep it secret, it did forward his career by catching the attention of an editor, who began to publish his sketches and tales in the literary journal *The Token*, where they attracted the attention of still other publishers and editors. But these writings did not appear under his own name, and for twelve years he continued his ghostly existence, unsocial and unknown.

The most dramatic thing he ever did was to challenge someone to a duel. At the behest of Mary Silsbee, a Salem *femme fatale*, he flung down the gauntlet at his friend John O’Sullivan, editor of the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*. The genial O’Sullivan talked him out of it, and Silsbee’s honor was left to fend for itself. Hawthorne, who in college thought that he would never marry, was confused and excited by Silsbee’s antics, but he soon after fell in love with her perfect opposite, Sophia Peabody—a quiet and ethereal invalid. Struck senseless in each other’s presence on their first encounter, Sophia’s malady mysteriously disappeared, and they enjoyed—after a long, secret engagement—a fairy-tale marriage, with three children who survived into adulthood.

Hawthorne was never able to support his family by his pen; what little he was promised for his publications too often went unpaid. He subsisted on a variety of political appointments, from stints in the custom houses of Boston and Salem to a consulship in Liverpool with the election of his friend Franklin Pierce. Hawthorne spun stories when he could afford to, and published the collections *Twice-Told Tales* in 1837 and *Mosses from an Old Manse* in 1846. These garnered him some regional acclaim, but his first and greatest taste of success came with the publication of *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850. An immediate bestseller, he followed it with *The House of the Seven Gables* the next year and *The Blithedale Romance* the year after that.

While pulling off this trifecta, Hawthorne became acquainted with a neighbor, another up-and-coming writer who had also lost his father as a child. Though fifteen years younger, Herman Melville was already a successful author, having fictionalized his memories as a runaway sailor into several bestselling shipside adventure yarns. Introduced to Hawthorne at a picnic, Melville instantly took to him as muse, replacement father, and soul-mate. “A man of deep and noble nature has seized me,” Melville declared. His open-hearted adoration resulted in a preposterously lavish pseudonymous review of *Mosses from an Old Manse*. Inspired by Hawthorne’s study

in shadows, Melville reconceived his next project, turning the rollicking whale-hunt he had been sketching into the spiritual masterpiece *Moby-Dick*. He dedicated it to Hawthorne “in token of my admiration for his genius.”

Sadly, their friendship didn’t last. Hawthorne was supportive but unprepared for Melville’s ardor. Content within his small sphere of domestic bliss and frightened by the younger man’s intensity, Hawthorne shrunk away, leaving Melville’s roaming spirit once more without anchor.

As brief as their communion was, it marked something extraordinary. *The Scarlet Letter* and *Moby-Dick* were the first great novels of a young nation striving to establish its own cultural identity. Hawthorne, who died in 1864, apparently did not recognize his achievement; he wrote in the preface to his final work *The Marble Faun* (1860), which he set in Italy, that “no author, without a trial, can conceive of the difficulty of writing a romance about a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a commonplace prosperity, in broad and simple daylight, as is happily the case with my dear native land.” (This, as Cornell professor Dan McCall has noted, is a curious assertion mere months before the Civil War.) But Hawthorne found his shadows not in history but at their point of origin: the human heart.

New England in Hawthorne’s time was home to various reform movements and pastoral utopias, one of which Hawthorne himself participated in. He was, for a few months in his thirties, a founding member of the Transcendentalist commune Brook Farm—an experience he fictionalized in *The Blithedale Romance*.

His relationship to Transcendentalism more generally was both close and critical. The major figures of the movement, including Emerson, Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller, were his friends, neighbors, and lifelong interlocutors, and he was not unsympathetic to their ideals. But Hawthorne could never embrace efforts to wholly remake the world; he possessed too keen a sense of how it was bound by darkness in the first place.

In this psychology-soaked age, it might seem odd to claim that Hawthorne’s obsession with original sin did not flow from an intense awareness of temptation and internal riving conflict. But, as Henry James observed in his biography of Hawthorne, it seemed to be

no essential part of the nature of the individual; it stood fixed in the general moral heaven under which he grew up and looked at life. It projected from above, from outside, a black patch on his spirit, and it was for him to do what he could with the black patch....Nothing

is more curious and interesting than this almost exclusively *imported* character of the sense of sin in Hawthorne's mind; it seems to exist there merely for an artistic or literary purpose. . . . He was not discomposed, disturbed, haunted by it, in the manner of its usual and regular victims, who had not the little postern door of fancy to slip through, to the other side of the wall. It was, indeed, to his imaginative vision, the great fact of man's nature.

Hawthorne's fiction is laid out, not on realist terrain, but on the romantic landscape of human desires and their issue, drawn from the vast interior of his moral imagination.

In some of his best short stories, Hawthorne brought that moral imagination to bear on the modern scientific enterprise—its ends, its means, its animating impulses. With the Industrial Revolution well underway, science and technology seemed to have near-limitless potential. While some of his contemporaries worried about soulless mechanization, Hawthorne detected that science had not entirely escaped the clouds of sorcery that had clung to it in dreamier and less efficient ages.

Hawthorne was not himself acquainted with active scientists and inventors and did not closely follow their work as it unfolded, and so his stories have only an indirect connection to the specific discoveries and advances of his day. His interest instead was scientific technique as a means of power, and what people might *want* to do with it. Words such as “symbol,” “type,” and “emblem” appear throughout his work, suggesting connections to eternal temptations. Several of his most famous stories depict fantastical potions that even now do not exist—but the aspirations driving their creation are as old as man; these stories envision powers we have always wanted but might not wisely know how to wield. Others among his tales reveal the sphere in which technology has no dominion, and how forgetful we are that it cannot help us there.

Beginning with the essay on the facing page, *The New Atlantis* inaugurates a series devoted to Hawthorne's thinking about science, technology, and progress. Over the course of the next several issues, we will take up his short fiction one story at a time, offering close readings and thoughtful commentary. The selections will range from familiar favorites to buried treasures. Each essay will be accompanied by an illustration by the marvelous Elliott Banfield. And with the publication of each essay, we will simultaneously publish a critical edition of the corresponding story on our website, TheNewAtlantis.com/Hawthorne. Please join us in recognizing and learning from the wisdom of this giant of American letters.
