



*Editor's note: This is the sixth installment in our series of essays devoted to Nathaniel Hawthorne's stories about science, technology, and progress. To learn more about the series and to read the stories, please visit [TheNewAtlantis.com/Hawthorne](http://TheNewAtlantis.com/Hawthorne).*

## The Possibility of Progress

*Jeremy Kessler*

**A**t any moment, the imagination says *no* to the world as it is while saying *yes* to an alternative reality—to a world that never was or has yet to be. Behind every vision lies dissatisfaction. This holds true for the statesman as much as for the artist. Both say no to the world in which they find themselves, even as they say yes to its next incarnation, now disincarnate.

In his story “The Hall of Fantasy,” Nathaniel Hawthorne hints that every form of human activity verges on the unworldliness of fantasy, negating the present in favor of the future or imagined past. Yet it is the political use of the imagination that attracts Hawthorne’s most skeptical treatment. Political reformers and revolutionaries, Hawthorne argues, are uniquely unworldly, even anti-worldly, as they claim to care deeply for the same world that they work to destroy. Hawthorne’s story is a peculiarly American meditation on the relationship between art and politics and the purpose and power of human creativity.

**I**n “The Hall of Fantasy,” the world’s dreamers gather to dispute the merits of their envisioned futures. The story, first published in 1843, arises from a failure to write a story: the narrator, a dreamer himself, has drifted off while working on an “idle tale” and finds himself in a glistening hall. There reside “the statues or busts of men who in every age have

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been rulers and demigods in the realms of imagination.” Among the stony luminaries are Homer, Aesop, Dante, Milton, Cervantes, and Shakespeare. The hall itself is paved with white marble, capped by a “lofty dome,” supported by ornate pillars, decorated with a mixture of styles from around the world, and lit by stained glass.

The Hall’s residents are as varied as its fantastic ornamentation. As the narrator’s talkative, unnamed guide explains, “All who have affairs in that mystic region, which lies above, below, or beyond the actual, may here meet and talk over the business of their dreams.” It is a democratic institution: “most persons enter [the Hall] at some period or other of their lives,” if not during flights of waking fancy then through the dreams of sleep.

The first contemporaries encountered by the narrator and his guide are the poets, with whom the narrator feels a kinship, “as if the sympathy of feeling, if not of genius, had united me to their order.” His humility may have less to do with his estimation of his own capacities than with the fame already achieved by those assembled. When the narrator notes that “the world has...heard those names,” we are reminded that Hawthorne’s name had not yet been cemented in the literary hall of fame, however much he was destined to dwell in the halls of fantasy. Despite his professed fellow-feeling, upon moving away from the poets, the narrator tells his guide that he is happy to “have done with this techy, wayward, shy, proud, unreasonable set of laurel gatherers.” The guide accuses the narrator of “adopt[ing] an old prejudice,” and explains that in his experience, “men of genius are fairly gifted with the social qualities.”

To further debunk the narrator’s accusation of poetic eccentricity, the guide points to another group: the power-brokers and money men who haunt chambers of commerce and capital cities. At first it might seem as though they do not belong in the Hall of Fantasy. Yet the practical-sounding character of their conversation “concealed the extravagance of its purport, insomuch that the wildest schemes had the aspect of every-day realities. Thus the listener was not startled at the idea of cities to be built, as if by magic, in the heart of pathless forests; and of streets to be laid out where now the sea was tossing.” So convincing is this performance that it requires effort to remember that the leader of industry is as bound to fantasy as the poet; he is just better at making his fantasies seem real. As if echoing Socrates’ estimation of the poets, the narrator cries out, “it is dangerous to listen to such dreamers as these. Their madness is contagious.”

The narrator and his guide next notice, leaning against the pillars of the hall, some fruits of the technical prowess that is “peculiarly characteristic...of the genius of our country”: railroads running through

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the air and tunneled under the sea, contraptions for capturing the heat from moonlight and the colors of the sunset as a fabric dye, dozens of perpetual-motion machines, a way to convert ladies' smiles into sunshine, and more. The narrator dryly describes these creations as "good emblems of the result generally anticipated from an attempt to reduce daydreams to practice." Indeed, he seems as skeptical of the "Utopian" dreams of the inventors as he has been of the poets' and planners', though at one level this critique is belied by his reference to the "more imaginative collection...found in the patent office at Washington."

Hawthorne wrote these words at a pivotal moment in American history, when steel and steam had begun to unite the country, scant decades before they would tear it apart in a fratricidal war.

The early 1840s were also an intensely creative period in Hawthorne's own life, as he tried to follow up on the success of his first volume of stories, *Twice-Told Tales* (1837). He and his new wife, Sophia Peabody Hawthorne, were renting the Old Manse, a house in Concord, Massachusetts built by the grandfather of Ralph Waldo Emerson. The home would provide the name for Hawthorne's 1846 *Mosses from an Old Manse*, a collection which included "The Hall of Fantasy." Henry David Thoreau lived nearby, and he and Hawthorne developed a friendship of sorts. Some critics have speculated that the narrator's guide is in fact a stand-in for Thoreau—who is notably absent from a long list of contemporary literary figures present in the Hall in the original version of the story—while the narrator is an obvious stand-in for Hawthorne himself. And the real-life Hall of Fantasy might be nothing other than the tree-choked paths near Walden Pond, peopled by apparitions drawn from newspaper reports, parlor-room debates, and personal acquaintance. Thoreau's longing to retreat from a fatally compromised society—he moved into his cabin at Walden Pond in 1845, two years after "The Hall of Fantasy" was published—is just the sort of negativity that the story's narrator associates with imaginative excess. In fact, as much as the story criticizes the unworldliness of bankers, inventors, and artists—Hawthorne's vocation—it condemns far more strongly political and social reformers.

In the first half of the story, Hawthorne remains ambivalent about the Hall of Fantasy and its source, the human imagination. On the one hand, the Hall is a catalogue of folly which records the excesses of the imagination when it becomes unbound from the everyday. On the other hand, the Hall is a necessary escape. While the first three types of fantasist observed by the narrator and his guide—poets, planners, and inventors—are professionals,

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licensed by society to dream and happy to do so, the second category they encounter are fantasists not by choice but by accident or external compulsion. These refugees, condemned by the outside world to unimagined grief, turn to the Hall for solace. First comes the prisoner, “escaping from his dark and narrow cell and cankerous chain, to breathe free air in this enchanted atmosphere.” Then follow the infirm and immobilized, the exiles, the faithful dreaming of the afterlife, and the mourners, who “here rejoin the lost ones whose faces would else be seen no more.” The Hall, then, is not merely a reflection of the folly of the real world, but also a reprieve from its more painful demands. Faced with this pain, the narrator’s earlier cynicism is tempered, for “It may be said, in truth, that there is but half a life—the meaner and earthlier half—for those who never find their way into the hall.” Only the power of the imagination can soothe the tragedy of the everyday.

It falls to a third category of fantasist, the reformers, to seek to overcome such tragedy entirely. Reformers are the “apostles and leaders” of those who “believe and rejoice in the progress of mankind.” The narrator notes that “the herd of real or self-styled reformers” in the Hall reflects a contemporary tumult beyond its dreamy walls—“an unquiet period, when mankind is seeking to cast off the whole tissue of ancient custom like a tattered garment.”

There is something paradoxical about these reformers that disturbs the narrator. While they apparently dedicate themselves to the progress of mankind on earth, they spend nearly all of their time in the Hall of Fantasy. The professional fantasist comes to the Hall when he works, and the refugee comes to the Hall in moments of release, when the pain of the world is not too pressing to forbid a few minutes of bittersweet daydreaming. But the reformer, who lives in furious anticipation of the future, has little home but the Hall. Mankind dwells on Earth, but its progress lies beyond the present world. As the guide explains, “If a man be in advance of his age [that is, ahead of his time], he must be content to make his abode in this hall until the lingering generations of his fellow-men come up with him. He can find no other shelter in the universe.” To live for progress means to continually say no to the world outside the hall. The reformer is an extreme synthesis of the professional fantasist and the refugee. Though not actually imprisoned, the reformer is so dissatisfied with the world that it becomes for him a dungeon. His only solace, and his only profession, is the future.\*

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\* It is worth noting that among the changes Hawthorne made to “The Hall of Fantasy” in preparing it for collection in *Mosses from an Old Manse* was the deletion of references to some two dozen figures in the Hall, including several reformers.

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The reason it is so easy, even so natural, for the reformer to give an exuberant *no* to the present world is his single-mindedness. The narrator explains that many of the reformers “had got possession of some crystal fragment of truth, the brightness of which so dazzled them that they could see nothing else in the wide universe.” His signal example of such a monomaniacal visionary is “the abolitionist, brandishing his one idea like an iron flail.” Hawthorne’s views on slavery look callous to the modern conscience—and were just as abhorrent to the consciences of many of his contemporaries. He frequently expressed impatience with his New England friends’ obsession with abolition, questioning in a letter to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow whether slavery was really the “great subject of the day” at all, and adding, “There are a hundred modes of philanthropy in which I could blaze with intenser zeal.” And he told his sister-in-law, Elizabeth Peabody, that “like every other Abolitionist, you look at matters with an awful squint, which distorts everything within your line of vision.”

As this last line suggests, Hawthorne’s fundamental problem with reform was its narrow view, in which the world is reduced to a single failing. Such an estimation of the world’s basic insufficiency, the narrator of “The Hall of Fantasy” suggests, inevitably leads to violence and chaos. If there is only one evil and it is pervasive, then anything and everything must be done to eradicate it. Not only does such absolutism lead to individual excess, it also creates irrevocable conflict, as different reformers hallucinate monolithic yet competing evils.

The narrator is not, however, without sympathy for these monomaniacs: “the heart of the stanchest conservative, unless he abjured his fellowship with men, could hardly have helped throbbing in sympathy with the spirit that pervaded these innumerable theorists.” Although myopic, the bull’s-eye vision of the reformer is a deeply human flaw, and can even be a force for fellowship. What is a dream in solitude becomes civilization when shared, and “the fantasies of one day are the deepest realities of a future one.” Although the reformer at first must throw himself “into the current of a theory,” hurtling forward no matter where that current tends, eventually “what is good and true becomes gradually hardened into fact, while error melts away and vanishes among the shadows of the hall.” This hopeful suggestion is reminiscent of the utilitarian and empirical ethics of Hawthorne’s English contemporary, John Stuart Mill, and the American pragmatists who would follow him. These thinkers suggested that if all human possibilities are given their chance, a natural winnowing of error would occur.

There is a fine line, however, between a successful experiment and an explosion in the lab. The reformer’s gambit is that the world can be

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radically changed—even violently changed, as more and more abolitionists at this time were coming to believe—without being totally uprooted. Somewhat attracted by this gamble, the narrator gives voice to the reasoning behind the risk:

It could not be that the world should continue forever what it has been; a soil where Happiness is so rare a flower and Virtue so often a blighted fruit; a battle field where the good principle, with its shield flung above its head, can hardly save itself amid the rush of adverse influences.

At the heart of the reformer is such wishful thinking: the world surely can't remain so unjust, so immiserated, can it? This faith underlies the conviction that experimentation will save rather than spoil.

Although moved by such hope, the narrator finds that it underestimates the risk of reform. Because reformers fail to understand “the sphere in which their lot is cast,” their flailing attempts to plant happiness and reap virtue tear up the earth rather than cultivate it. Continually seduced by reform's violent energy, the narrator urges his guide to move on: “let us hasten hence or I shall be tempted to make a theory, after which there is little hope of any man.”

With the narrator's final judgment issued against reform, the guide introduces him to “one theory that swallows up and annihilates all others.” A crowd of people is listening, rapt, to a man who, “With an earnestness that betokened the sincerest faith in his own doctrine... announced that the destruction of the world was close at hand.” This man is Father William Miller, a real if larger-than-life figure from Hawthorne's day who toured the northeastern United States, prophesying to crowds of thousands that the Second Coming of Christ was imminent. His followers rushed to get their affairs in order by the day (supposed to come sometime in 1843 or 1844—soon after “The Hall of Fantasy” was first published) when flames would consume the earth and the New Jerusalem would tower above the abyss.

The theory that supposedly annihilates all others is millenarianism—the belief in the end of the world. In the apocalypse, all of the world's imperfections, and all of humanity's vain hopes for its man-made reform, are consumed in the greatest of all rejections of what is. The guide asks us to

observe how picturesque a contrast [there is] between his dogma and those of the reformers... They look for the earthly perfection of mankind and are forming schemes which imply that the immortal

spirit will be connected with a physical nature for innumerable ages of futurity. On the other hand, here comes good Father Miller, and with one puff of his relentless theory scatters all their dreams like so many withered leaves upon the blast.

Reformers say no to the present world as each of them (narrowly) understands it. But they plan to—long to—say yes to a future version. If only the world's one overriding failing could be rectified, they would be the loudest voices in the chorus of joyful yea-sayers. But for the eschatologically inclined, earthly failure is more comprehensive. Looking at the array of reformers, each with a separate vision of the world's single, insufferable flaw, the millenarian sees that these conflicting desires can only further rack the earth with pain. He sees that any version will breed reformers—because every version will breed novel misery and malice. The dream of the end of the world, the narrator concedes, “is, perhaps, the only method of getting mankind out of the various perplexities into which they have fallen.” Only a final, total *no* will end the cycle of partisan, partial *yeses*.

But the narrator resists the seeming pointlessness of such a conclusion:

I could wish that the world might be permitted to endure until some great moral shall have been evolved. A riddle is propounded. Where is the solution? The sphinx did not slay herself until her riddle had been guessed. Will it not be so with the world? Now, if it should be burned tomorrow morning, I am at a loss to know what purpose will have been accomplished, or how the universe will be wiser or better for our existence and destruction.

The narrator thus agrees with the various fantasists that, up until this point, the earth and our lives on its surface may not have divulged any decisive meaning or purpose. It is no wonder that the casual daydreamer, the poet, the politician, the prisoner all say no to such a looming insignificance, and roam the Hall in search of spiritual sustenance; yet recourse to the Hall, like reliance on a drug, only makes the sober moments that much more unbearable. And the reformer's dependence on fantasy risks making the outside world an increasingly dreary place, not only in his feelings but in actuality, as a result of his actions. The millenarian takes all of these discontents seriously and comes to a seemingly logical conclusion: if everyone says no to the world, then the world is the problem and ought to be eclipsed. The sphinx's suicide—the end of the world—is the answer we have been waiting for. Yet the narrator still longs for purpose

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and intelligibility, deems them connected, and does not see the apocalypse providing either. The sphinx's suicide accompanies the answer to a riddle. No such discovery will attend the end of the world.

Not only would the end of the world fail to provide any greater significance than the imperfect earth already does, but much of value would be lost. The narrator pictures "the poor old earth" as a matron whom we humans both suffer and love: "She has faults enough, in all conscience, but I cannot bear to have her perish." He goes on to insist that humans are not something alien to or independent of the earth. Rather, "the root of human nature strikes down deep into this earthly soil." And so no mystical or idealistic escape from the physical site of suffering can be met with exaltation, for "it is but reluctantly that we submit to be transplanted, even for a higher cultivation in heaven."

The earth itself, in all of its tangibility, is what is most painfully forfeited at world's end. What the narrator would miss would be those very real things "which no other sphere or state of existence can renew or compensate"—an "earthliness" exemplified by the

fragrance of flowers and of new-mown hay; the genial warmth of sunshine, and the beauty of a sunset among clouds; the comfort and cheerful glow of the fireside; the deliciousness of fruits and of all good cheer; the magnificence of mountains, and seas, and cataracts, and the softer charm of rural scenery; even the fast falling snow and the gray atmosphere through which it descends.

The narrator's companion teases him for this florid elegy, calling him "the very spirit of the earth, imbued with a scent of freshly turned soil." In fact, the guide sees "no real force" in the narrator's anxieties about the end of the world, for "man's disembodied spirit may recreate time and the world for itself, with all their peculiar enjoyments, should there still be human yearnings amid life eternal and infinite." Moreover, spirit without matter would likely be able to create something even better than the current Hall, which has been formed by "the earth-clogged intellect of man." What has stood in the path of the work of the eternal imagination is not the finitude of the human spirit but the obstinacy of the physical earth. And once it has passed, imagination alone will determine how things will be. The guide imagines a situation in which imagination has nothing to which it must say no, so that to imagine becomes a pure act of saying *yes* to whatever world we wish to create.

The narrator rejects this fantasy. For the narrator, there is an intimate correspondence between the "great, round, solid self" of the earth and

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the internal, imaginative lives of humans. There is nothing human that is fully divorced from the rich soil of the real world. The narrator longs for both the earth and “the kindly race of man, whom I uphold to be much better than he thinks himself” to endure in concert; one day, perhaps, they will orchestrate an answer to the riddle of reality. Until then, he counsels “merely an occasional visit” to the Hall, “for the sake of spiritualizing the grossness of this actual life, and prefiguring to ourselves a state in which the Idea shall be all in all.”

The alternative offered by the narrator is to keep faith in the world at all costs, to dampen the zeal for reform, to moderate both hope and despair. Perhaps things will slowly improve, and we will at least retain what is presently good. “The Hall of Fantasy” expresses this meliorism in the form of a homely earth-worship, in opposition to the more starry-eyed faiths of the fantasists whom the narrator has encountered in the hall. If the world is terminally imperfectible, then its human inhabitants face a choice: to call for its overcoming—or to suffer it with all the peace and even appreciation they can manage. Beyond the patient pursuit of a tenuous harmony between humanity and the earth, an answer will not be found—just a booming *no*, the rejection of all that is, the final despair.

Why is Hawthorne’s narrator so insistent upon this grounding of human reality in the physical earth? “The Hall of Fantasy,” along with the other stories that Hawthorne collected in *Mosses from an Old Manse*, are thematically suspicious of the imagination. Recall that the narrator ends up in the Hall having drifted off while writing an “idle tale.” The Hall may be the epitome of imagination, but with its lack of drama and orderly taxonomy of dreamers, the story itself is a flight from storytelling, from the bewildering world-making that was fast becoming Hawthorne’s livelihood. It is tempting to read such a body of work as a self-reflective critique of artistry; expressing a deep anxiety about the creative vocation, these stories act in part as a form of confession and self-censure for Hawthorne’s own imaginative excesses.

But “The Hall of Fantasy” makes clear Hawthorne’s belief that there are many uses of the imagination far more dangerous than the writer’s. Indeed, as Hawthorne’s narrator lambastes activist reformers and social critics for the violence of their visions, “The Hall of Fantasy” almost turns in on itself, becoming a sort of defense of poetry. Objecting to the narrator’s attribution of pure foolishness to the poets in the Hall, the guide argues that the poet, being so deeply acquainted with the stark

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divide between his eccentric musings and the dull realities of the everyday, “knows his whereabouts” better than more ostensibly practical minds, “and therefore is less likely to make a fool of himself in real life.”

The narrator’s proposed solution to the dangerous-yet-noble imagination is a strange form of materialism: While refusing to drown human dreams in the impersonal soup of ether or atoms, the narrator seeks to anchor our peculiarly human extravagance in the gravity of the unavoidably present earth. He alludes to a domestic order in which eccentrics, romantics, and visionaries would have to pledge ultimate respect for their material mother, earth—the source and guarantor of their wild, flighty beings. This recognition of the material world—a saying yes to the earth at all times—need not entirely stifle creativity, the narrator argues. Rather, he invokes a strict division between inside and outside, private and public, such that the imagination can still act as a spur to activity, an invigorating sentiment, even while full realization of its strange visions is discouraged. Fantasy is a source of positive energy as long as it remains an entirely personal, internal affair.

But the imaginations of reformers can never be a private matter. The world *must* transform in accord with their personal visions. And once the imagination makes demands on the community or the physical world, all peace and order is put at risk. Let the fantastic story be enjoyed in a quiet study; let it bring hope or cheer or amusement. But its visions must not be mistaken for reality, or preached in the town hall.

This compromise between private fantasy and public restraint is nothing other than the creed of American liberalism, derived from a slapstick journey through the imaginary cathedral of the unreal.

As the narrator and guide are leaving the Hall, they pass the incoming “spirits of several persons who had been sent thither in magnetic sleep”—an allusion to the pseudoscientific hypnotism craze that had recently swept New England, to Hawthorne’s disapproval. There is the suggestion that narrator and guide, having achieved clarity and moderation on their journey, are returning to a far-too-maniac real world.

That cherished moderation was threatened by one class of people more than any other, a group that never makes an appearance in “The Hall of Fantasy.” The “poor old earth” harbored a race of slaves—men, women, and children deemed property, and spent like fuel for the fire of American prosperity. These earthlings were, so it would seem, barred from the emancipated world of the imagination and its fantastic hall. Prisoners, exiles, mourners, and the sick escape to Hawthorne’s dream-world—but slaves

are nowhere to be found. The mad dream of the abolitionist—paragon of the dangerous reformer—was to transmute slaves into free spirits.

This kind of alchemy was too much for Hawthorne. A decade after writing “The Hall of Fantasy,” Hawthorne penned the campaign biography of his old Bowdoin classmate Franklin Pierce. In it, he advocated looking “upon slavery as one of those evils which Divine Providence does not leave to be remedied by human contrivances, but which, in its own good time, by some means impossible to be anticipated, but of the simplest and easiest operation, when all its uses shall have been fulfilled, it causes to vanish like a dream.” In this call for inaction, we hear the echo of Hawthorne’s narrator, condemning the reformer and millenarian both, happy to stand pat while the fabric of the world irons the crinkles out of itself. A decade later, in a famous *Atlantic* essay voicing skepticism about some aspects of the Civil War then entering its second year, Hawthorne offered a fatalistic conservatism: “No human effort, on a grand scale, has ever yet resulted according to the purpose of its projectors. The advantages are always incidental. Man’s accidents are God’s purposes. We miss the good we sought, and do the good we little cared for.”

Hawthorne was certainly right to believe that the free exercise of the imagination can lead to great violence. The abolitionist ultimately brought not peace but a sword. Yet in a world where ploughshares were instruments of tyranny and torture, the sword ultimately was the gentler tool. The fatal flaw in Hawthorne’s critique of political creativity was that the “old earth” is itself a product of human hands. The institution of slavery was a human contrivance of the worst kind, a horrendous act of the imagination that could only be undone by an equally ambitious fantasy. Dying in 1863, Hawthorne did not live to see how emancipation remade the world without destroying it. It is a shame that so talented an artist could not even imagine such a creative act.