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Editor's note: This is the seventh 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.

Love Conquers All

Jenna Silber Storey and Benjamin Storey

Nathaniel Hawthorne spent the first twelve years of his adult life in his mother's attic, huddled over his writing. Not long after emerging, he encountered Sophia Peabody, an artist from a decent Boston family whose mysterious headaches had kept her, too, distant from society. Hawthorne had found the love of his life, but it was unclear how two recluses of slender means would ever establish a household.

In early 1841, Hawthorne seized upon an unusual plan. He decided to invest much of his meager savings in Brook Farm, a community inspired by the loosely associated intellectual movements contemporaries dubbed "the Newness." Central to these movements were charismatic figures such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bronson Alcott, and Margaret Fuller, who encouraged New Englanders to dream of unexplored paths to self-fulfillment and novel forms of community. Brook Farm in particular advertised a mixture of agricultural and intellectual life that Hawthorne thought might allow the young couple to keep body and soul together while he continued to write.

Hawthorne's first letters from Brook Farm waxed enthusiastic about the gallant attacks he and his new friends made on heaps of manure, and the large quantities of buckwheat cakes they consumed at the end of a morning's work. His ardor for manual labor, however, soon waned,

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in part because it left him with neither time nor spirits for writing. His view from the inside also brought him to see that the community would prove financially unsound. After six months, Hawthorne concluded that he would find no lasting home at Brook Farm, and parted company with the reformers. His short experiment cost him, though, and his inability to recover his initial investment frustrated his efforts to stabilize the finances of his new household.

Several years later, in 1852, Hawthorne published *The Blithedale Romance*, a story recounting the failed attempt of a "knot of dreamers" to establish a new community outside Boston. As might be expected, some of the original members of Brook Farm read the novel as a thinly disguised satire of their efforts. In it, we see Boston intellectuals hoeing fervently amid the turnips, hoping that each stroke will "uncover some aromatic root of wisdom." We see them drinking proudly out of "earthen cups" with the laboring classes, and merrily trampling on the artificial conventions that constrain the relations of the sexes. The novel, in short, seems to be a send-up of Hawthorne's erstwhile friends.

While Hawthorne does have some fun at the expense of Bostonian luminaries contemplating in the cow-patch, his satiric sketch of the communal arrangements of Blithedale is drawn quickly and lightly, and with more gentleness and sympathy than one might expect. Interestingly, Hawthorne does not chime in with contemporary critics of Brook Farm's fanciful and failed economics, although he had personal reasons to complain. In fact, the farming operations in Hawthorne's Blithedale hum along successfully enough. The particular economic and social arrangements of the community, however flawed, are taken in stride, and are not finally Hawthorne's deepest subject. As Hawthorne himself makes plain in the preface, *The Blithedale Romance* is not a commentary on the feasibility of socialist reform.

Before much of the novel has elapsed, in fact, Hawthorne turns our attention decisively away from the reformers' plans for the new community and toward a quartet of characters who have congregated there: Hollingsworth, a charismatic blacksmith turned philanthropist; Zenobia, an enchanting champion of female independence; the tremulous young seamstress Priscilla; and the gentleman-poet, Miles Coverdale, who is our narrator. The real heart of the reader's interest in the novel lies with these entrancing characters and their intertwining passions. Hawthorne shifts our attention, then, from the enthusiasm for new economic strategies—ideas soon to be outdated—to focus on a human drama of obvious enduring appeal.

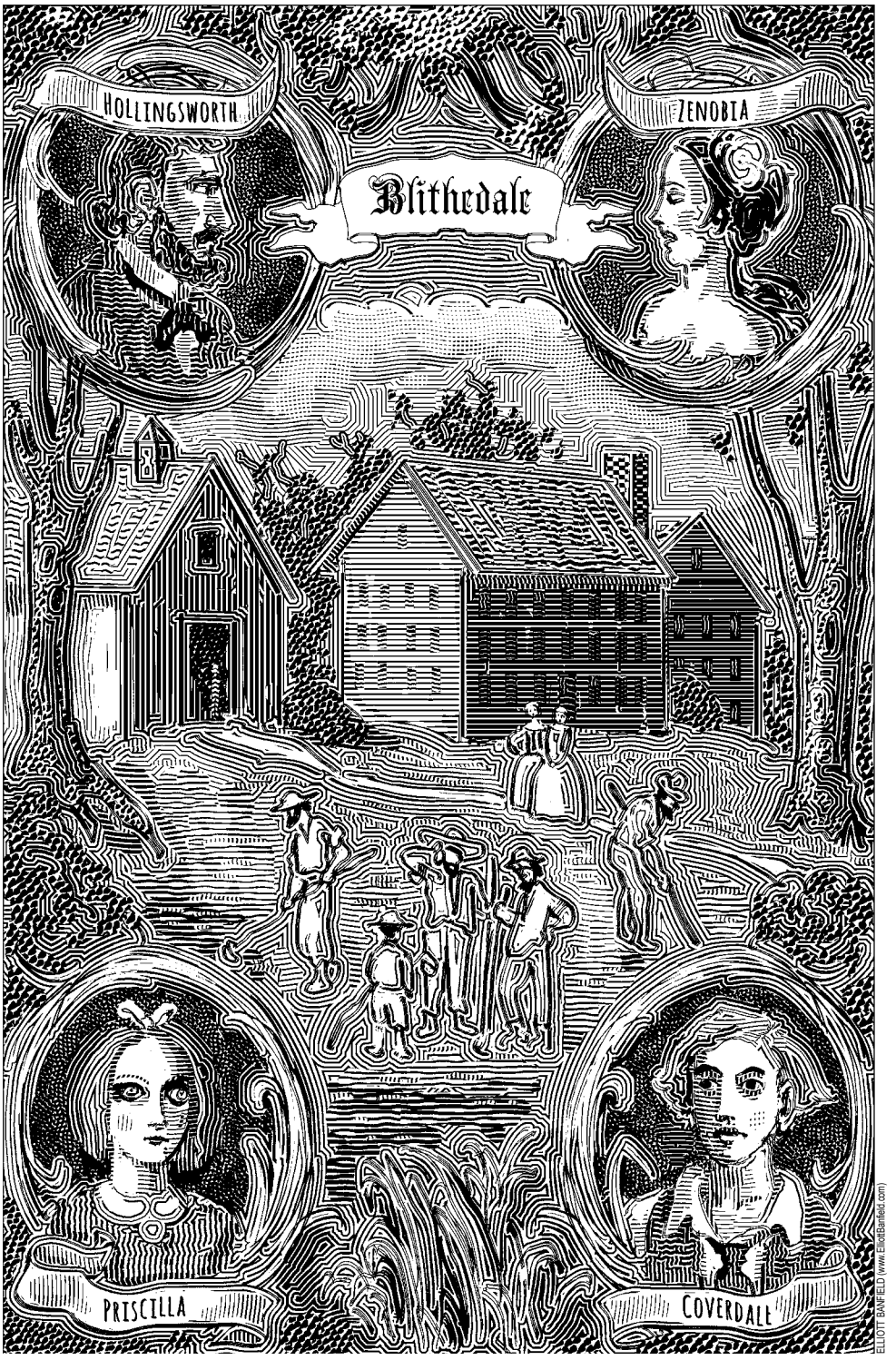
This redirection of our attention makes clear that Hawthorne's critique of the transcendentalist Newness is not primarily concerned with the various social and economic innovations it inspired but with the moral and metaphysical aspiration at its core. The essence of this aspiration was well expressed by the founder of Brook Farm, the former Unitarian preacher George Ripley, who thought that shedding the constraints of Bostonian custom and creating a more natural form of community outside the city promised the restoration of the natural unity of the spiritual and material elements of human life. Ripley hoped Brook Farm would herald an age in which "thought would preside over the operations of labor, and labor would contribute to the expansion of thought." By mixing effete Boston intellectuals and flinty New England farmers in a common way of life, he hoped both would overcome their characteristic deformations. They would thereby flourish more fully as individuals and, at the same time, achieve more genuine brotherhood. Ultimately, Ripley dreamed of nothing less than a restoration of the prelapsarian harmony between our desires for self-fulfillment and human togetherness.

The four characters at the center of *The Blithedale Romance* fail dramatically in this quest to recover human wholeness and communal harmony. Indeed, their attempt to liberate nature from artifice and custom drives the plot to its surprising and tragic end. As becomes painfully clear by the end of the novel, the Blithedale community's faith in nature prevents any meaningful understanding of the personhood of the human individual, and consequently any meaningful relation between human beings. Nature, we find, is blind to what makes us lovable to each other, and the effort to love according to nature causes us to lose sight of ourselves.

The Knot of Dreamers

Though Hawthorne's ultimate verdict on the attempt to return to nature is sobering, *The Blithedale Romance* is not simply a conservative defense of the wisdom of custom or a churlish critique of hopes to transform human life. Communal life at Blithedale is enchanting, and the charm of the odd characters drawn to the community is essential to our experience of the story.

We first see Blithedale through the eyes of the narrator, the gentleman-poet Miles Coverdale. When we meet this young man on the eve of his departure for Blithedale, he has been indulging his idle curiosity in the spectacle of the "Veiled Lady"—a popular stage show involving mesmerism and a silent, wispy female form seemingly in communion with the spiritual realm—and is on his way back to his bachelor apartment and



its well-stocked wine closet. In spite of its amusements and pleasures, Coverdale has come to find his own life hollow and dreary; his poetry seems artificial and no longer inspires even himself. He is all too ready, the next morning, to down a last glass of champagne, fling away his cigar, and leave his cozy apartment to seek a community of sympathetic spirits and a revivification of his poetic energies in the snowy fields beyond Boston.

When Coverdale arrives at the Blithedale farmhouse, he finds a merry crowd gathered around an enormous fire, which he imagines to be like one "a family of the old Pilgrims might have swung their kettle over." The men and women greet one another with congratulations on their "blessed state of brotherhood and sisterhood." At the center of the scene stands a well-known feminist literary figure who calls herself Zenobia, after a Syrian queen who led a noble but unsuccessful revolt against the Roman Empire.

The "fine intellect" of this Zenobia, as Coverdale immediately notes, is "fitly cased." She is a luxuriant beauty, full of "bloom, health, and vigor," whose spirited invectives cause her to grow "all alive, to her finger-tips." Zenobia sports familiarly with Coverdale, "scorning the petty restraints which take the life and color out of other women's conversation," even indirectly inviting him to picture her in the "garb of Eden"—a suggestion our imaginative young poet is disinclined to resist. Her ostensible motive for coming to Blithedale is to find a community favorable to her ideas of equality for the sexes, of "love and free-heartedness." Once there, however, she reigns as its natural queen.

As the evening wears on, we are introduced to Hollingsworth, a blacksmith turned philanthropist who has been lecturing on the Boston circuit in hopes of gaining supporters for his novel scheme to reform criminals. When Hollingsworth arrives at the door, he "knocks as if he had a right to come in," and enters looking "as much like a polar bear as a modern philanthropist." Despite his lack of polish or sophistication, Hollingsworth's natural authority makes him a counterpart to Zenobia. He is a humanitarian chip off the old Puritan block, an enigmatic mixture of tenderness and firmness, with features that "seemed to have been hammered out of iron." As Coverdale quickly intuits, this is a combination "which few men could resist, and no woman."

Hollingsworth brings in his wagon a "slim and unsubstantial girl," Priscilla, mute and shivering either "with cold, fear, or nervous excitement." The poetic Coverdale immediately sees in this ethereal waif a kind of "shadowy snow-maiden" fit for a fable. Upon her entry, the mysterious girl hesitates a moment, and then sinks down at Zenobia's feet in a silent gesture of supplication. Zenobia balks, and Coverdale cannot suppress

a smile at "this odd scene of unknown and unaccountable calamity": the arrival of a real human being who makes a serious claim on the community's promise to consider all men as kin.

At Hollingsworth's insistence, Priscilla is however soon included in the festivities, and the dreamers adjourn to a hearty dinner, followed by a playful discussion concerning possible names for their "infant Community." Coverdale is content, comparing "the outer solitude [that] looked in upon us through the windows, gloomy, wild, and vague, like another state of existence" to his newfound home, "the littler sphere of warmth and light." Coverdale left his bachelor life in Boston hoping to renew his poetic energies while finding a community of like-minded souls eager to show "mankind the example of a life governed by other than the false and cruel principles, on which human society has all along been based." The cast of earnest, piquant characters he finds arrayed around him this first evening at Blithedale portends success in both regards.

Troubles in Paradise

And yet some sour notes have already been struck, even in the first scene at Blithedale. The desire to overcome the prideful boundaries and hierarchies of old seems to require a refashioning of all human relations, and Zenobia sets the tone for an atmosphere where traditional notions of marriage and family are accorded little reverence. Nonetheless, it is Zenobia and the women who serve the dinner on Coverdale's first night at Blithedale, causing him to lament that women in the new community will be consigned to the same work that they do in "artificial life." "What a pity," he remarks, "that the kitchen, and the house-work generally, cannot be left out of our system altogether!" Zenobia laughs at his illusions, pointing out the "difficulty in adopting the Paradisiacal system" while snowdrifts sweep past the windows. Her adoption of the garb of Eden will have to wait until Mayday, at least.

The self-congratulatory efforts of the Bostonians to mingle with the laboring classes gets a cold bath of reality when they sit down to dinner with the one actual farming family in residence—the "grisly Silas Foster, his rotund helpmate, and the two bouncing handmaidens." Coverdale quickly intuits that his voluntary experiment in rustic life involves far less unease for himself than for his "unpolished companions." As he remarks, it is "far easier to condescend, than to accept of condescension." It is one thing for a gentleman to play at farming; it is another for a farmer to accept the company of a man who makes a sport of his way of life.

The hopes that the new community at Blithedale would presage an era of general cooperation is also dashed by Silas Foster's supper-talk, which dwells on strategies for gaining competitive advantage over the neighboring farmers. Blithedale does not portend a new brotherhood among all men, Coverdale realizes, but is a very particular society, "inevitably estranged from the rest of mankind," particularly as the enthusiastic bond of the reforming crowd brings them ever further out of step with the surrounding communities.

Despite the failure of these lofty goals, the Blithedale farm does not founder as an economic enterprise. In fact, the gentlemen find that "after a reasonable training. . . . our great brown fists looked as if they had never been capable of kid gloves." Coverdale discovers that he can work almost as hard and as well as Silas Foster. Their agricultural endeavors, though an object of ridicule for closed-minded neighbors, thrive.

After a few short weeks, however, Coverdale realizes that the social metaphysics underlying the communal experiment—the attempt to blend spiritual and material ways of life—is highly dubious. As his great brown fists attest, the danger is not that gentlemen cannot become farmers; it is that becoming farmers causes them to cease being anything else. The earth proves utterly recalcitrant to the dreamers' efforts to spiritualize it. "Clods of earth," Coverdale reluctantly concedes, can never be "etherealized into thought." Rather, long days in the dirt and sun cause thoughts to "fast becom[e] cloddish." As a disillusioned Hawthorne wrote to his Sophia, "labor is the curse of this world, and nobody can meddle with it, without becoming proportionably brutified."

Nonetheless, Coverdale shows no signs of a desire to leave Blithedale. Although he now sees through the exalted hopes for social reform that are the explicit goals of Blithedale, the actual human community he has encountered there retains its hold on him. Coverdale has found friends there, and renewed poetic inspiration in and through those friends. The unusual characters drawn by the metaphysical hopes Blithedale encourages, and the novel relations that form when one attempts to cast off artifice and custom, now occupy his full attention.

Hollingsworth, Zenobia, and Priscilla

After a few weeks in residence, Coverdale's interest shifts from the social claims of the reformers to the personal drama of his new friends Hollingsworth, Zenobia, and Priscilla. His focus reminds us that the metaphysical and moral premises of Blithedale intertwine in particular

ways with each character's most personal psychic longings. The drama of Hollingsworth, Zenobia, and Priscilla shows us how transcendentalist theory is actually lived.

Early on, Coverdale detects a problem brewing among his friends at Blithedale. As he sees it, the problem revolves around the charismatic, commanding figure of Hollingsworth. Even the indomitable Zenobia is captivated by him. One begins to suspect, in fact, that her impatience for his arrival the first evening betrays a secret motive for joining the community of reformers: she may have come there in hopes of winning Hollingsworth for herself. Everyone assumes that Zenobia comes to Blithedale because its stated goals align with the advocacy for "woman's wider liberty" for which she is famous, but it may turn out that she is drawn to Blithedale not least as a convenient setting for her longed-for courtship—for where else could a respectable lady plausibly offer herself to a blacksmith? The atmosphere of brotherly love that Blithedale promotes allows Zenobia the freedom to try to make Hollingsworth her own.

Hollingsworth has not come for romantic love, though. His interest in Blithedale seems connected to his ambition as a philanthropist: he is well known as a proponent of criminal justice reform. Hollingsworth sees the penitentiary system as unjust and counterproductive, since it throws underprivileged and uneducated people together and offers them no hope for or example of a better life. He aims to remedy this by founding a new kind of reformatory in the open country air, in which nobler sorts will introduce criminals, by "methods moral, intellectual, and industrial," to "the possibility of a worthier life." It seems natural, then, that Hollingsworth has come to Blithedale out of a general sympathy for the community's aims to mingle the higher and lower classes and their habitually different ways of life.

Before long, however, Hollingsworth reveals to Coverdale that he has serious doubts about the Blithedale project and its prospects for success. When Coverdale presses him, he reveals that he regards it as "a wretched, unsubstantial scheme." Why then is Hollingsworth at Blithedale? His philanthropic project involves the purchase of land and the construction of a building—expenditures far beyond his means. He has traveled the Boston lecture circuit trying to raise money for his venture, but has been unsuccessful. It gradually dawns on Coverdale that Hollingsworth has come to Blithedale with the intention of diverting not only the community's idealistic energies but also its land and resources toward his own goal. More than anyone else in *The Blithedale Romance*, Hollingsworth is moved by the desire to overcome artificial

boundaries between the laboring and intellectual classes. He is clearly more intent upon, and clear-sighted about, the practical project of social reform than the other characters. But while Hollingsworth's ambitions are determinedly public-minded, his pursuit of those ambitions threatens to undermine the only actual community we see built on the kinds of hopes he entertains.

Zenobia is not deterred by the fact that Hollingsworth does not come to Blithedale looking for romantic love. She quickly sees that she can intertwine her strongest passion and his by making her ample fortune available to him for the construction of his "visionary edifice." Coverdale observes this feminine maneuver, and realizes that the combined passions of these two remarkable individuals could easily bring about the destruction of the Blithedale community. And he is concerned about something else, perhaps more urgently: that the union of the two will fatally exclude Priscilla, who has developed a girlish attachment to her protector Hollingsworth. Priscilla, "budding and blossoming" in the salubrious country air, associates freely and happily with both Zenobia and Hollingsworth, seemingly unaware of any difficulties in which she may be entangling herself and totally unprepared to come to her own defense. The serious Hollingsworth surprises Coverdale, too, by bestowing his attention upon both women in careless alternation. As Coverdale sees it, this puts Priscilla in a dangerous place: she is exposed to Zenobia's wrath as a "maiden . . . to a dragon." Coverdale turns his attention to this love triangle, then, because he is worried about Blithedale, and even more so about the innocent Priscilla.

Neither Hollingsworth nor Zenobia is simply selfish: Hollingsworth is a most sincere philanthropist, and Zenobia's passion has a profoundly self-sacrificial element, as we will see. But their loves—of a noble philanthropic project, in Hollingsworth's case, or of a noble human being, in Zenobia's—include the desire for that noble object to become their own. Blithedale is animated by the faith that a natural form of inclusive, brotherly love will flourish once artificial constraints are removed. But new forms of community become established only if they inspire and motivate individual human souls, where longing for the good and the love of one's own are always mixed.

Love and Tyranny

Coverdale seems to be correct in his intuition that the passions of Zenobia and Hollingsworth, liberated from the customary restraints of Boston life

and indulged by the atmosphere of Blithedale, will exclude others around them and undermine the community. But he has no idea how deeply destructive their unfettered loves will prove.

It turns out that Hollingsworth's pursuit of what Coverdale calls his "great excrescence of a philanthropic scheme" makes it impossible for even Hollingsworth's most ardent supporters to secure his personal loyalty. Coverdale has a nagging sense of his inability to win any real regard from Hollingsworth from the beginning. Eventually, he precipitates a crisis in their friendship by pushing Hollingsworth to make clear his intentions with regard to the community. Without a trace of shame, Hollingsworth insists that he is right to undermine Blithedale secretly in pursuit of his project for criminal reform, and he demands that Coverdale declare his intention to join him in "sacrific[ing] all" to this "great end." Coverdale tries to get Hollingsworth to see that a friend may remain true while retaining some independence, looking at the world "through his own optics," but Hollingsworth is adamant that Coverdale must be with him or against him. Coverdale—who must summon all his strength to turn down this request from a man he deeply admires—refuses. Alienated from Hollingsworth and consequently from the women who adore him, Coverdale finds himself suddenly isolated. He soon departs Blithedale for Boston.

Meanwhile, Zenobia has been warned by an old acquaintance who pays her a secret visit in the woods near the farm, one "Professor Westervelt," that Priscilla is a serious threat to her happiness. Although at first reluctant, Zenobia has come to serve as a kind of elder sister and protector of Priscilla since that first night on which Priscilla threw herself on Zenobia's mercy. Zenobia's initial response to Westervelt is to brush off his concern and declare that she will not turn on someone who is so utterly devoted to her. And yet, before long, Zenobia proves willing to consent to Westervelt's plan to remove her rival. It turns out that Westervelt has a material interest in Priscilla, for he is none other than the magician who presides at the mesmeric exhibitions of the Veiled Lady, and Priscilla, with her "Sibylline" attributes, is the mysterious Veiled Lady herself. Feeling increasingly threatened by the growing attachment between Priscilla and Hollingsworth, Zenobia eventually consents to bring Priscilla back to the city, thereby removing her from Blithedale and Hollingsworth's too-fond eyes. Westervelt promptly resumes his exhibitions of the Veiled Lady.

Zenobia's consent to return her charge to this "intolerable bondage" when she gets in the way of her plan, and Hollingsworth's quickness to

reject his closest friend at Blithedale when he will not subsume his every thought and action to Hollingsworth's goal, cause growing suspicion about the beneficence of the liberated, natural love that is allowed to flourish among the reformers. In fact, it seems that Blithedale's revolution against the alleged tyranny of social custom has only made way for another tyranny—that of the unfettered passions of individuals.

Love and Self-Sacrifice

Hollingsworth and Zenobia are ready to trample on anyone or anything that stands in the way of the satisfaction of their aims. The "problem" of his friends, as it appears to the marginalized Coverdale, seems to be that their determined pursuit of their purposes will crush poor Priscilla's heart and bring the dreams of the Blithedale reformers to ruin. But we soon discover that the passion governing Zenobia's quest for Hollingsworth is stranger and more complicated than the understandable desire to partner with an admirable man.

The true nature of Zenobia's desire for Hollingsworth comes to light when her proclamations on behalf of female emancipation clash with Hollingsworth's understanding of the proper relations between the sexes. In response to one of Zenobia's impassioned arguments on this subject, Hollingsworth counters that woman's "office" is as the "Sympathizer" to man, "the unreserved, unquestioning Believer…the Echo of God's own voice, pronouncing—'It is well done!'" Astonishingly, Zenobia assents with tears of grief to this description, and responds, "I, at least, have deep cause to think you right. Let man be but manly and godlike, and woman is only too ready to become to him what you say!"

Coverdale is as surprised as we are to find that the proud Zenobia stands ready at a moment's notice to sacrifice her feminist principles on the altar of her beloved. As we probe her motives, though, we discover the root of her desire to submit to the noble blacksmith. It turns out that Zenobia is fleeing an ambiguous disgrace—perhaps a misalliance or a secret marriage—that connects her with Professor Westervelt, a character whose enchanting polish has a sinister edge. Westervelt is impeccably handsome and always attired in "well-ordered foppishness," but with his gold-rimmed teeth, his serpentine walking-stick, and eyes that expose "something that ought not to be left prominent," he immediately inspires in almost everyone an "infinite" dislike.

Why, then, would the young Zenobia have been attracted to him? Westervelt's seductiveness is revealed in a bizarre speech in which he

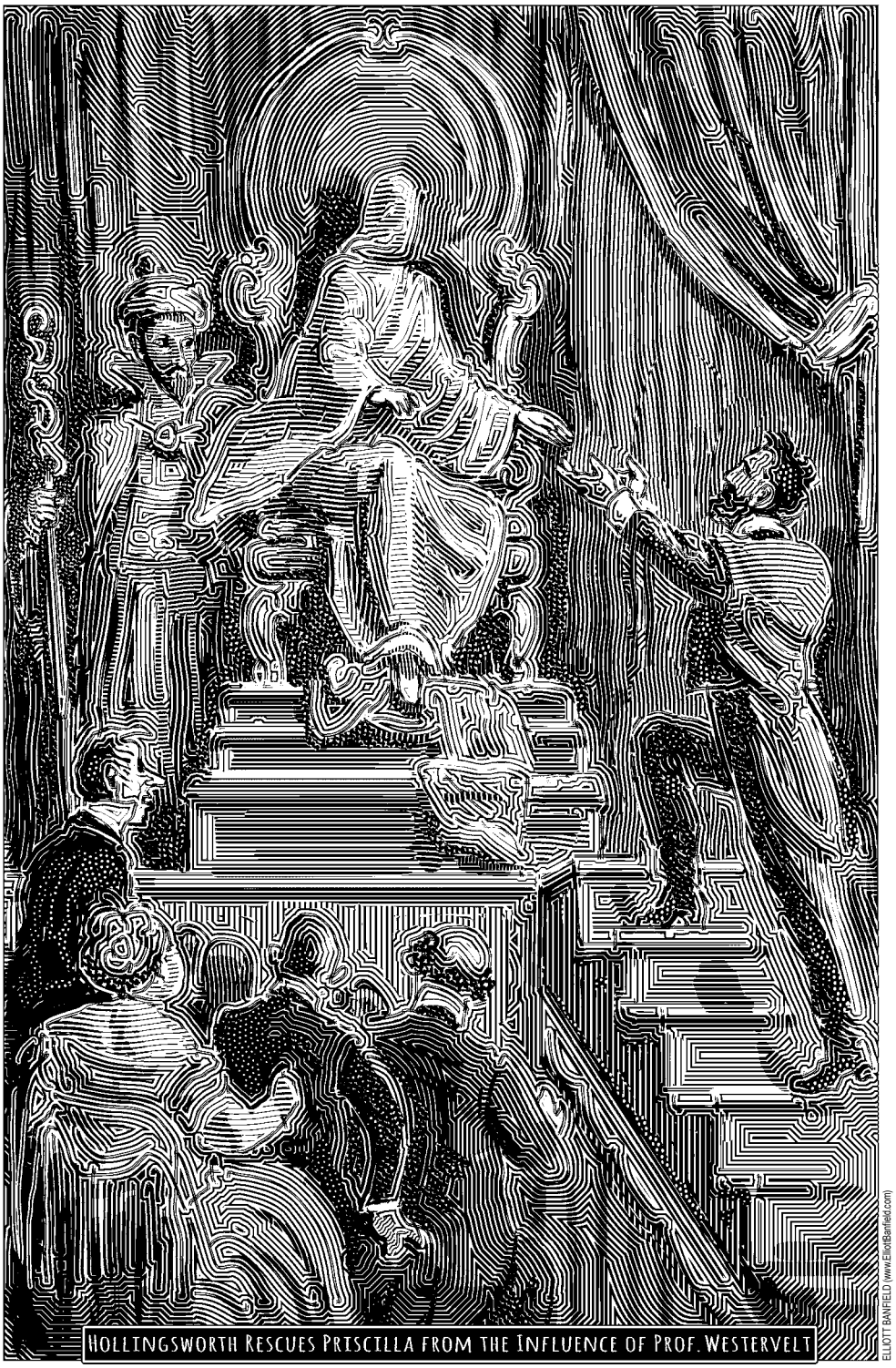
reminisces about the young Zenobia and her seemingly infinite potential: her mind, he notes, is "various in its powers," her heart has "a manifold adaptation; her constitution an infinite buoyancy." With such gifts, she can plausibly aspire to "a hundred varieties of brilliant success," refashioning the world around her according to her own imaginings. One can envision Westervelt whispering such stuff to a young Zenobia, encouraging her to think of herself as a kind of divine force of nature, obliged to and bound by no principle higher than the realization of her own potential.

At some point, Zenobia must have awakened to the evil import of Westervelt's schemes for power without purpose and influence without end, and to the dubiousness of the desires in herself to which Westervelt appeals. Having done permanent damage to her life through her association with him, she begins, beneath her queenly pride, to have deep doubts about the self-sufficiency of her own judgment. It seems that Zenobia falls in love with Hollingsworth because she sees in him a god-like man of inscrutable power to whom she can subsume her will. Her love involves, then, not only acts of tyrannical self-assertion over those who stand in her way, but also, and more fundamentally, a rather desperate attempt to renounce her own moral agency. Zenobia is a queen who expects to find her greatest triumph in being conquered.

The Self-Concentrated Philanthropist

Zenobia finds Hollingsworth worthy of her submission because he seems to be the consummate moral actor, full of what Coverdale calls an "overplus" of purpose. From the first pages, Hollingsworth is presented as the man to trust with responsibility. This is evident not only in his deep desire to lead the charge in criminal justice reform, but more tellingly in his care for Priscilla. Hollingsworth's apparent determination to stand by Priscilla, in fact, is what finally precipitates a break in the seemingly inevitable intertwinement of his ambitions and Zenobia's.

Hollingsworth makes a dramatic break with Zenobia's well-laid plans at one of Westervelt's exhibitions of Priscilla as the Lady. Midway through the spectacle, Hollingsworth mounts the stage, releases Priscilla from her mesmerized trance, takes her into his arms, and pronounces her safe. With this gesture, it seems that Hollingsworth has recovered the great capacity for sympathy that drove him to embark on his project for criminal reform in the first place. Perhaps he has realized that the degradation of Priscilla in Westervelt's show, to which he may have at one point consented, is not worth the collective redemption of criminals he hopes to



accomplish in his reformatory. Hollingsworth's act seems to signal that he has awakened to the potential for tyrannical self-assertion in the pursuit of his own passions, and that he has recovered a sense of moral balance by understanding himself as an individual responsible to other individuals.

But Hollingsworth's motives immediately become murkier. We learn from Coverdale, who has done some sleuthing into his friends' backgrounds while in Boston, that there is a fatal link between Zenobia and Priscilla, about which Hollingsworth seems to know. Coverdale's conversations with a shadowy drunk, "old Moodie," reveal that the two women are in fact both his daughters. This Moodie, now a shabby man who skulks in corners, had once lived a life of showy luxury, which he was forced to flee as bad debts and disgrace piled up—leaving his brilliant daughter, Zenobia, to be raised by an uncle. In his later squalid circumstance, Moodie married again and had another daughter, Priscilla, whom he raised on fairy tales of his other life and of her elegant half-sister. The death of Zenobia's guardian gives Moodie the power to transfer to Priscilla the inheritance Zenobia now enjoys.

As we piece together the implications of this background, we begin to wonder: was Hollingsworth's rescue of Priscilla the act of an awakened conscience or a devious, self-serving maneuver? When Coverdale finally returns to Blithedale, he finds precisely this question on trial. Stumbling unintentionally upon the three former friends, Coverdale is alarmed; he sees he has arrived in the midst of a terrible confrontation. Hollingsworth has paired off with Priscilla, intending to drop his connection to Zenobia without explanation or fuss. Zenobia, however, in almost "delirious disquietude," forces him to defend his sudden change in affection. Hollingsworth has apparently responded by accusing Zenobia of obscuring her romantic history, misrepresenting the freedom she had to bestow her affection, and betraying Priscilla's trust. Zenobia knows that she is guilty on all these counts. But who is judge and jury in this new community with unsettled customs? She demands an equal right to question Hollingsworth, and he reluctantly assents.

Zenobia cross-examines Hollingsworth with questions meant to expose the extent of his knowledge of the women's fortune, and the true meaning of his rescue of Priscilla. How long has Hollingsworth known that, at Moodie's whim, Zenobia's inheritance might be transferred to her sister? Is he now in love with Priscilla? Hollingsworth answers with deep consideration, and apparent honesty, that his affections have changed: while his feelings toward Priscilla for a long time "differed little from those of an elder brother," he is now in love with her.

To Coverdale, Zenobia's questioning seems to have exposed the astonishingly sinister character of Hollingsworth's apparently noble actions, and revealed him to be no better than a fortune-hunting scoundrel. But Zenobia's acute insight into character will not allow this judgment to hold sway. She insists on weighing heavily into the balance Hollingsworth's perfectly sincere self-deception. As her further questioning clearly reveals, Hollingsworth's fascination with a noble goal has utterly blinded him to his personal interest in being the one to accomplish this goal. He is consequently unaware of the possibility that he might sacrifice the well-being of others to the noble vision he has of himself. His pursuit of his project for the betterment of humanity in the abstract has cost him all awareness of himself as a human being with responsibilities to the individuals around him.

Zenobia tries to make Hollingsworth see this, that his philanthropic devotion has turned him into a "monster," or rather a "cold, heartless, self-beginning and self-ending piece of mechanism!" Hollingsworth is shocked, and challenges Zenobia to "show me one selfish end in all I ever aimed at, and you may cut it out of my bosom with a knife!" "It is all self!" answers Zenobia, "Nothing else; nothing but self, self, self!" At the accusation, Hollingsworth grows "deadly pale," but refuses to countenance Zenobia's description, and calls weakly for Priscilla to accompany him away.

Hollingsworth—surrounded by three friends whom he has treated as utterly dispensable—insists to the end on his innocent intentions and his noble love of mankind. Zenobia's trial reveals the insidious driving force of Hollingsworth's evident willingness to tyrannize over others in pursuit of his philanthropic passion. Because of the philanthropic character of his aims and his aloofness from petty passions, Hollingsworth believes unquestioningly in his own disinterested goodness; he can be frighteningly unscrupulous because he systematically refuses to see himself as a fallible moral agent.

The Burden of Individuality

After Hollingsworth and Priscilla depart, Zenobia weeps bitterly, driven almost mad by Hollingsworth's rejection of her. She asks Coverdale to convey to Hollingsworth a message: "Tell him he has murdered me! Tell him that I'll haunt him!" Later that evening, she fulfills her own prophecy by drowning herself in a Blithedale stream.

Zenobia's suicide comes as a shock, both to the reader and to the characters in the novel. The practical Silas Foster is incredulous: she had "more means than she can use or waste," was immensely charming, astonishingly capable and resilient, and seemed poised to enjoy everything life

had to offer. Why would Zenobia consider herself decisively ruined by Hollingsworth's rejection? What Silas Foster doesn't understand is that Zenobia was not seeking a boon-companion, but a mortal god to whom she could submit her will. The courtship she arranged was an elaborate attempt to renounce her own moral agency, which had so burned her in the past. When Hollingsworth rejects her and reveals her schemes, she is left alone with an unbearably acute consciousness of her individuality.

Hollingsworth, although he lives on, in fact undergoes a similar fate. Once Zenobia is buried, Hollingsworth is left alone with Priscilla, whom he eventually marries. When Coverdale returns to visit the site of the now-defunct Blithedale community years later, he finds Hollingsworth and Priscilla living in deep seclusion. Approaching them on their habitual afternoon walk, he sees that the "powerfully built man showed a self-distrustful weakness, and a childlike, or childish, tendency to press close, and closer still" to Priscilla's slender side. In his single-minded pursuit of his philanthropic project, Hollingsworth rejected the love and friendship of anyone with even a shred of independence. Priscilla's slavish devotion is exactly what Hollingsworth had been seeking in his loves and friendships. Priscilla's unquestioning love, however, provides little solace to a man who wants a wife to be an echo when he no longer emits a sound.

Coverdale cannot resist probing Hollingsworth's obvious woundedness, and in the course of doing so, discovers that Hollingsworth is caught up in endless remorse for his role in Zenobia's death. He has abandoned his project for the reform of criminals, and proclaims that his sole preoccupation since Blithedale has been with "a single murderer!" It appears that Hollingsworth, like Zenobia, has also been crushed by the sudden revelation of his own moral agency. The proud purposiveness that had been at the core of Hollingsworth's character was destroyed by Zenobia's final words, which showed him not only his intolerance for anyone who would "not be quite [his] slave," but, worse, the stifling of his "inmost consciousness," the "deadly wrong" he has done to his own heart in ceasing to think of himself as an individual moral agent, capable of wronging the particular individuals with whom he is actually connected. As those words resonate, Hollingsworth recovers his sense of moral agency, but only as a sharp pain of remorse. His individuality presses unbearably upon him.

The Veiled Lady

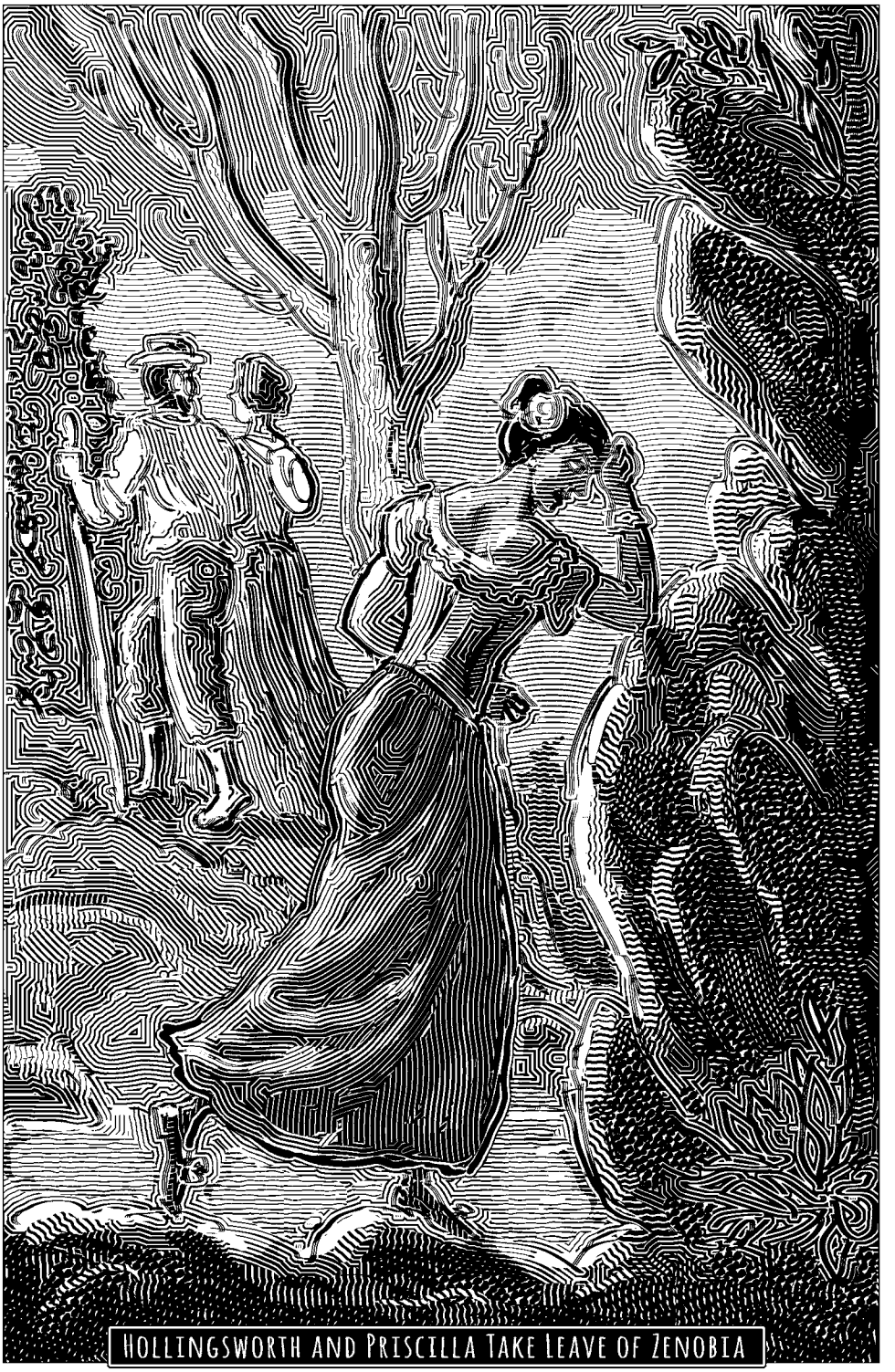
The story of Hollingsworth and Zenobia makes a mockery of the pretensions of Blithedale to liberate natural love from the constraints of artifice

and custom, and thereby to allow the true human individual to flourish and join with others in a more satisfying form of community. Zenobia and Hollingsworth both follow their own hearts without the slightest concern for convention or common opinion. In so doing, they destroy one another and themselves, and poison the community in the process. In these two, belief in the power of unfettered love leads to both a tyrannical overvaluing of their individual purposes and an attempt to escape consciousness of themselves as morally responsible individuals.

Priscilla seems to be their precise contrary. Whereas Hollingsworth and Zenobia assert their wills with no regard for others, Priscilla is perfectly passive. With uncanny receptivity, she sways subconsciously with changes in the emotional atmosphere, and lives always in the present moment, never plotting out a next step. Although originally an unwelcome oddity at Blithedale, Priscilla's seeming lack of self-assertion eventually makes her the locus of the universal and disinterested love that is one of the high motives animating the community. She loves "everybody" there, she affirms, and she inspires affection and generosity in everyone else: "everybody would have given her half of his last crust, or the bigger share of his plum-cake." Her "pleasant weakness" causes the rest of the community to think that she is "not quite able to look after her own interests," and makes her an easy object of general good will. In contrast to the story of Hollingsworth and Zenobia, Priscilla's unassertive disposition provides hope that a love that avoids tyranny and embraces an expanded community is not a chimera after all.

While Priscilla loves everybody, she also has more intense and particular affections: she is especially devoted to her protector, Hollingsworth, and her sister-mistress, Zenobia. Midway through the novel, we learn that it was love of Zenobia that drew Priscilla to Blithedale in the first place. In her impoverished life with her decrepit father, Priscilla endured a "sad little existence," enlivened only by old Moodie's stories of her wealthy, brilliant, and beautiful half-sister. These tales of beauty and hope nourished Priscilla's "profound and still capacity for affection," which would have otherwise died in the gloomy Boston slums. As a child, Priscilla clung to these dreams of Zenobia; her imagination twined itself "perseveringly around this unseen sister; as a grape-vine might strive to clamber out of a gloomy hollow among the rocks, and embrace a young tree, standing in the sunny warmth above." Priscilla's seemingly chance sojourn at Blithedale has a more determinate purpose than at first meets the eye.

In sharp contrast to her headstrong sister, though, Priscilla does not seem to desire anything of her own will once at Blithedale: she simply



delights in her good fortune and sees no reason it will not continue forever. When Zenobia removes her to Boston she seems equally content. To Coverdale's anxious inquiries concerning her intent in accompanying Zenobia to the city, she responds blithely, "I am blown about like a leaf.... I never have any free-will." Priscilla seems to be the perfect anti-tyrant, having no consciousness of private purpose. Her protestations concerning her lack of agency, however, are an eerie echo of Zenobia's efforts to shake off the consciousness of herself as a morally responsible individual.

As we saw with Hollingsworth and Zenobia, one can combine tyranny with a lack of awareness of one's personal agency, and indeed tyranny is made more effective when one remains blind to it. In contemplating the whole arc of Priscilla's story, the reader realizes, with growing horror, that Priscilla is in fact the epitome of this awful possibility. She never breathes a word against her sister, and her last gesture toward Zenobia is to kneel submissively before her as she did that first night. Nonetheless, Priscilla climbs into the arms of her husband at the expense of Zenobia's life. Like a vine that, without conscious malice, "lovingly strangle[s]" the tree it grasps, Priscilla embodies an almost subhuman, vegetative form of evil.

Surprisingly, the story of Priscilla, like that of Hollingsworth and Zenobia, also turns out to be a cautionary tale about blind self-assertion and the obscuring of moral self-consciousness, albeit with a different twist. Whereas Hollingsworth considers himself above the ordinary obligations of moral life because of his high sense of philanthropic purpose, Priscilla considers herself below the obligations of moral life. By avoiding self-assertion, she avoids the sense of responsibility that comes with self-conscious agency.

The Frosty Bachelor

It begins to seem that all the characters who flock to Blithedale come there not to find their individuality but to lose their very consciousness of it. The one exception appears to be our narrator, Miles Coverdale. Coverdale stands out at Blithedale as the only character who self-consciously cherishes and cultivates his own individuality. In the midst of the enthusiastic fellowship of the community, Coverdale periodically withdraws into a secret hermitage in the forest, where he can psychically reenter the "inner circle of self-communion." Hawthorne, while at Brook Farm, liked to ensconce himself in a nook under a staircase where he could observe the conviviality without being part of it; like him, Coverdale is naturally drawn to standing apart.

Coverdale's self-contained individuality allows him to think of himself as the dispassionate conscience of the community. He likens himself to "the Chorus in a classic play, which seems to be set aloof from the possibility of personal concernment." This detachment allows him to discern the problem brewing among his three friends and the threat it poses to Blithedale. He frets about his responsibility to save the community and particularly Priscilla, and attempts to prod the consciences of Hollingsworth and Zenobia so as to avert the impending disaster.

Coverdale's ultimate failure to thwart Hollingsworth and Zenobia's tragic course seems entirely excusable. But the last lines of the novel—in a late-added chapter entitled "Miles Coverdale's Confession"—complicate the picture. In those last lines, we learn that Coverdale was less aloof than his poetic pretensions demand: "I—I myself—was in love—with—Priscilla!" As Zenobia intuits and cleverly attempts to exploit, Coverdale's affection for Priscilla could have motivated a courtship that would have conveniently removed her from the tragic love triangle. So why didn't Coverdale make the obvious step, at once both satisfying his personal desires and preventing a disaster for his friends?

In his final "confession," Coverdale identifies his own fatal flaw: a deep-seated lack of will, which he suspects "has rendered my own life all an emptiness." As we leave him at the end of the novel, Coverdale is a "frosty bachelor," once again holed up in a comfortable apartment, living in ease with "nobody but myself to care for." However, unlike Priscilla, whose life is also characterized by a persistent willlessness, Coverdale is aware of this as a problem and strives, albeit unsuccessfully, to overcome it. In the final pages, he half-satirically protests that he would be willing to join a battle to die for some great cause—provided that "the effort did not involve an unreasonable amount of trouble," and that he could sally forth on a sunny day after a good breakfast.

Coverdale's persistently feeble efforts to commit himself seem to spring from his acute consciousness of moral agency and the burdens it entails. Commitment, he knows, requires definitively pinning oneself down, even unto death. Coverdale's piercing poetic vision charts the motives of others from the withdrawn perspective of a passive observer, and only reinforces his reluctance to act seriously. His unconsummated love for Priscilla is merely a poet's love, the love of a type rather than an individual. His imagination "crystallizes" Priscilla, as Stendhal would put it, encrusting her with glittering reflections of the world around her, as he prefers to see it. He loves her as an emblem of the poignant fleetingness of youthful joy and innocence; he loves her childlike heart that loves everyone around

her. For Coverdale, Priscilla is the delicate and blithe soul who epitomizes the knot of dreamers at its best. This poetic love, though, requires that Coverdale refrain from engaging with Priscilla as a real individual, a free and responsible adult capable of love and answerable to man and God for the consequences of her passions. Coverdale's sentimentality about the object of his love is the necessary corollary of his inability to regard any purpose as worth the irrevocable commitment of his life.

Coverdale is not coincidentally the character we meet who is most programmatically and sincerely moved by Blithedale's advertised claims to universal brotherhood. At Blithedale, one can commit to everyone and no one. One might begin to suspect that his enthusiasm for the communal project and its schematic plans for social reform may be in part a consequence of his unwillingness to commit to any way of life that could make a probable and enduring claim to his allegiance. Like the others, Coverdale is attracted to Blithedale as a place where his consciousness of his own moral agency might lose its edge.

The Newness

Hollingsworth and Zenobia, the modern philanthropist and the modern feminist, are the cutting-edge reformers in residence at Blithedale. But the spirit of the community is in fact better represented by Priscilla, who most fully exemplifies the avant-garde promises of the Newness to transform our self-consciousness and our relation to others.

Priscilla, in her role as the Veiled Lady, literally embodies one of the strangest preoccupations of the dawning age: mesmerism. Mesmerism was a key plank in the transcendentalist platform because it promised a new form of connection among human beings, a novel kind of intimacy. The showman Westervelt plays to precisely this desire, advertising his Veiled Lady performance as heralding a new era that will "link soul to soul, and the present life to what we call futurity, with a closeness that should finally convert both worlds into one great, mutually conscious brotherhood." The hopes the mesmerist arouses are an extreme form of the hopes that might lead one to attach oneself to a social experiment like that at Blithedale. By placing a suspect mesmeric pair—Priscilla and Westervelt—at the center of his novel, Hawthorne calls our attention to the dubious theoretical underpinnings of the entire transcendentalist movement.

On his second visit to the Veiled Lady, after his stay at Blithedale, Coverdale reacts with horror at the principles Westervelt expounds in

his preliminary lecture. Coverdale now detects a "cold and dead materialism" beneath Westervelt's "delusive show of spirituality." The audience, though, thrills at the prospects Westervelt offers, and people around Coverdale begin to whisper outlandish tales of the power of mesmerism to excite or extinguish, at will, the deepest human sentiments—a mother's love, a sweetheart's passion, religious awe. The charm of mesmerism, Coverdale realizes with a shudder, is that it suggests that the passions we most deeply experience as our own are in fact reverberations of underlying magnetic forces, and that the self is an epiphenomenal delusion.

If every passion has a material basis, Coverdale reasons, our actions are at bottom physically determined and the concept of "man's eternal responsibility" loses all meaning. There is no sense in regretting a failure, no moral nobility in which to take pride, no reason to cherish one human being rather than another. Indeed, it seems that the promise of brotherly love with which Westervelt charms the crowd is nothing more than a seductive illusion. For if Westervelt can connect souls by material manipulation, there is no real basis for human love. Feeling honored by the love of another human being makes no more sense than feeling flattered by a favorable breeze.

Why would anyone find this dehumanizing perspective at all appealing? As Coverdale observes, individuality entails an awesome responsibility, perhaps even an eternal one. It is tempting to try to unshoulder that burden. As Alexis de Tocqueville pointed out a year prior to Hawthorne's sojourn at Brook Farm, pantheism—mesmerism's theological twin—entices us for precisely this reason. By collapsing the divine into the natural, pantheism denies that there is a creator God who stands apart from the universe, and consequently absolves us of our special status as uniquely responsible creatures made in God's image. Pantheism, despite its apparent hostility to human life, holds out a secret charm: the prospect that we might be able to renounce our distinctive consciousness as individuals who must answer for the use we make of our characteristic freedom. The knowledge of oneself as a being that stands alone before death and God is a severe challenge to bear, and no one is immune from the temptation to obscure that awareness.

The tragedy of *The Blithedale Romance* is a tragedy of four particular men and women seduced by precisely this temptation. The story of their self-forgetting is intertwined with the characteristic enthusiasms of mid-nineteenth-century America, but the desire to relinquish moral agency at the heart of Hawthorne's psychological drama remains with us even now. To be sure, mesmerism seems nothing more than a quaint parlor

trick today. Still, in the transhumanist fascination with mind-merging technological possibilities, one sees that the secret longing to lose one's individuality endures.

Love's Triumph

All of the important trends of the age of the Newness converge in Hawthorne's unconventional courtship of Sophia Peabody. For while Hawthorne is off at Brook Farm, deciding whether it would make a suitable environment in which to start a family, Sophia writes to mention that she is considering seeing a mesmerist to cure her recurrent headaches. This letter seems to serve as a final wake-up call to Hawthorne. In an alarmed response written over the course of two days, he agonizes over the prospect of Sophia mixing with the "earthly effluence" of the medium, coming into such close communion with someone who is not "thy husband." Though clearly skeptical about mesmeric claims, Hawthorne points out that if the "magnetic lady" has real power, contact with that power would entail an appalling "intrusion into thy holy of holies."

More crucially, though, Hawthorne realizes that if he himself possessed mesmeric power, he would not choose to exercise it on his beloved Sophia, for it would violate her "sacredness" as an individual. What makes her loveable to him, and what makes him capable of loving her, is his awed respect for her mysterious personhood. At the close of his letter, Hawthorne writes that he has decided to return to be with Sophia in the city; he in fact leaves Brook Farm for good just a few weeks later.

Hawthorne's polemic against mesmerism and his rejection of the Brook Farm community are tied closely together, then, biographically as well as intellectually. His encounter with the reformers at Brook Farm may have helped him articulate the error at the core of the transcendentalist Newness: it undermines the metaphysical foundation for mysterious personhood and responsible moral agency, and is thereby unable to fulfill its own promise of deepening the experience of both individuality and love.

The metaphysics of Blithedale are essentially based in an appeal to nature, to Pan rather than to a personal God. But it turns out that nature, as Coverdale observes while visiting Zenobia's grave, does not care a jot for human individuality. Nature, Coverdale finds, seems just as well pleased with the "tuft of ranker vegetation that grew out of Zenobia's heart" as it had been with the wild splendor of Zenobia herself. The "inestimable" value of an individual human spirit, Coverdale realizes, is not a

phenomenon nature can assess. Genuine human flourishing and genuine human love must be rooted in a perspective that is based on something more than natural.

At the pastoral gravesite, Coverdale is struck by his inability to comprehend human life and love from the perspective of nature. At the grotesque midnight scene in which Coverdale participates in the dredging up of Zenobia's corpse, though, he finds an odd glimmer of solace in considering the mystery of her last moments. Zenobia's stiff and bloated body is bent at the knees and her hands are clenched. Was this a last-minute attempt at prayer? Or are her hands clasped "in never-ending hostility" against Providence? Zenobia's short life is summed up in this terrible gesture of ambiguous meaning. But whether she kneels in anger or in humility, her native stubbornness reminds Coverdale of our instinctive refusal to bow before nature's indifferent judgment of human life. Whether we seek God or defy Him, we stand apart from nature at our very core.

As he gazes at Zenobia's corpse, Coverdale begins to consider a less tragic view of human life. The possibility that the secret truth of Zenobia's last seconds—"when her breath was gone, and her soul at her lips"—might determine the whole cast of her existence prompts him to see human finitude in a different light. A "flitting moment," he thinks, may in fact be "as long, in its capacity of God's infinite forgiveness, as the lifetime of the world." Perhaps, then, the burden of man's eternal responsibility is not a crushing weight, impossible to be borne, but an ever-open invitation for the intrusion of divine love into the world. Acceptance of our eternal responsibility may be the price of self-knowledge as a creature worthy and capable of love.