

The Need for Renewal: Nathaniel Hawthorne's Conservatism

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IN A CHAPTER IN *The Conservative Mind* titled "Transitional Conservatism: New England Sketches," Russell Kirk cited John Quincy Adams, Orestes Brownson, and Nathaniel Hawthorne as figures in whom the "conservative instinct struggled for successful expression" in a period of rapid innovation that was sweeping aside the ancestral institutions of nineteenth-century America.¹ Confronted with mass democracy, industrialism, and Transcendentalism, these New England conservatives either had to re-ground their beliefs in individuality, hierarchy, and reverence for transcendence on new intellectual foundations, or else they had to devise new social arrangements that might protect conservative thought and practices in the emerging modern world. Whereas Adams failed in politics by flirting with radicalism and Brownson rejected traditional New England Protestantism for the "foreign" religion of Rome, Nathaniel Hawthorne in some large measure succeeded in conserving the best of America's heritage by returning to the country's native religious soil in his study of Puritanism.

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For Kirk, Hawthorne's chief accomplishment was his ability to impress "the idea of sin upon a nation which would like to forget it."² By reminding Americans of the power and influence of original sin, Hawthorne maintained that real reform must be first and foremost *moral* reform, and such reform is not possible until one had remembered original sin. This position placed Hawthorne in direct disagreement with the increasingly influential Transcendentalists, whose optimism about human nature had erased sin as a check to man's appetites and behavior. Although Hawthorne would eventually lose his battle with the Transcendentalists—to the extent that he failed to make the doctrine of sin "popular" in the American political conscience—he nonetheless

...left a good many people uneasily or resentfully aware that possibly it is true. This is his powerful conservative achievement. A lurking consciousness of sin has haunted American letters ever since.³

Hawthorne believed that progress in society is possible, but it must be the slow progress of conscience instead of the "whirlwind of fanaticism, which wailed onward to Sumter, and then raved triumphant to Appomattox."⁴ Given this understanding, one can make better sense of Hawthorne's reply to Emerson that no

man was more justly hanged than John Brown. For Hawthorne, slavery could not be removed by federal legislation or by coercive enforcement measures; rather, “being contrary to the economical and moral convictions of the future, slavery ultimately would fade away without governmental interference.”⁵

But after the defeat of the South in the Civil War, New England conservatism, especially Hawthorne’s, became a conservatism of negation:

[N]ow burdened with the necessity for affirmation and reconstruction, the New England mind shielded and groaned and cursed at these perplexities.... Their conservative instincts were bewildered by the passion of this moral crusade and by the influence of Transcendentalism; they scarcely remembered, any longer, where to look for the foundations of a conservative order....⁶

New England conservatism had forgotten its roots, and therefore could only critique instead of proffer an alternative vision to progressivism for America. Beneficial as it may be in its criticism of the progressive movement, New England conservatism failed to provide either a new intellectual foundation or social arrangements to preserve the country’s past values of individuality, hierarchy, and reverence for transcendence. We are reminded here that Kirk’s original title for the book that was published as *The Conservative Mind* was: “The Conservatives’ Rout.”

Kirk seems to suggest that partially responsible for the negative character of New England’s conservatism was its Protestant foundation. According to Kirk, Protestantism underwent three stages of development, with the third and final stage being individualism: individuals could select their own religious beliefs and forms of worship and suffer no restraints except those that were self-imposed.⁷ By the mid-nineteenth century, the Protestant principle was universally understood to be “private judgment.”

When Protestantism reached this third and final stage, the result was a “congeries of fanatic sects and egotistical professions.” For Kirk, authority, not individualism, was required to preserve Christianity, since “authority is not the antagonist of liberty, but its vindicator.”⁸ But evolved Protestantism, with its stress on individualism, could not “sustain popular liberty” because it is “subject to popular control, and must follow in all things the popular will, passion, interest, prejudice, or caprice.”⁹

Recognizing that Protestantism had run its course on to liberalism—and that Roman Catholicism was the despised religion of immigrants—Hawthorne labored to resurrect Puritanism from its New England roots as a counterweight to a modern, hedonistic America. Puritanism is antithetical to the modern spirit in its cautiousness of action, suspicion of alteration, and repression of the appetites. Even today,

...the memory of Puritanism still exerts some degree of restraint, if only by holding out the other extreme of remorseless discipline; and this conservative vestige of old New England belief will linger, embalmed by Hawthorne, so long as anyone reads American literature.¹⁰

Yet, by resurrecting the past, Hawthorne was “no idolizer” of it, for he knew

...the past to have been black and cruel, often; but for that very reason, apprehension of the past ought to be fundamental to the projecting of any social reform. Only through scrutiny of the past can society descry the limitation of human nature.¹¹

Because the expectation of historical continuity had been replaced by the expectation of inexorable change, Hawthorne sought to create an “artificial” reverence for the past, so that “men may look backward to their ancestry and by corollary look forward to their posterity.”¹² Puritanism, or at least the memory

of Puritanism, transformed in art, would serve as the new intellectual foundation for New England conservatism. In this respect, Hawthorne kept a remembrance of things past for a future yet to come, even if this remembrance would ultimately fail to hold back the spirit of modernity.

I

Let us turn, then, to Hawthorne's fiction, to examine first-hand the working of his conservative mind. In his early work, Hawthorne consistently criticized the progressive spirit's belief in human perfection: Feathertop is a "wretched simulacrum"; Beatrice is beautiful but lethal; Georgiana is faultless yet dead. Scientific and intellectual progress may lead to perfection of the body and even of the mind, but not of the heart. Technology alone cannot produce human virtue. For Hawthorne, the essence of reality could not be discovered by either scientific materialism or in an intellectualized spiritualization, but only in human charity.

The philosophies of scientific materialism and intellectual spiritualization are personified in the respective characters of Chillingworth and Dimmesdale in Hawthorne's greatest achievement, *The Scarlet Letter*. Chillingworth is the latest of Hawthorne's scientists who research the material world for human perfection:

...it may be that the higher and more subtle faculties of such men were materialized, and that they lost the spiritual view of existence amid the intricacies of that wondrous mechanism, which seemed to involve art enough to comprise all of life within itself.¹³

Chillingworth's mistake is to assume life is strictly a function of "mechanism" and that having knowledge of the mechanism is to have power over life itself. These assumptions stem from the sin of pride and result in Chillingworth withdrawing "his name from the roll of mankind" by instructing Hester not to reveal his

name.¹⁴ In renouncing his humanity, Chillingworth becomes an observer of human suffering: a scientist without having taken a course in bioethics. He becomes a caricature of the promise of scientific progress.

If Chillingworth represents the scientific movement of materialism, then Dimmesdale represents the nineteenth-century movements of Sentimentality, Romanticism, and Transcendentalism. Dimmesdale renounces the physical, the mechanism, in order to achieve spiritual perfection. But the price of this search for spiritual perfection is decay:

His form grew emaciated; his voice, though still rich and sweet, had a certain melancholy prophecy of decay in it; he was often observed, on any slight alarm or other sudden accident, to put his hand over his heart, with first a flush and then a paleness, indicative of pain.¹⁵

Dimmesdale's penance is not only private but also physical in his attempt to free his spirit. Yet his attempts to purify himself bring him to a state of decay that leads towards death.

If Chillingworth's sin is the pride of the scientist, then Dimmesdale's sin is the pride of the Transcendentalist. With his own efforts, Dimmesdale believes he can purify himself. Instead he must discover the truth about himself and announce that truth publicly, for

[t]o the untrue man, the whole universe is false,—it is impalpable—it shrinks to nothing within his grasp. And he himself, in so far as he shows himself in a false light, becomes a shadow, or, indeed, ceases to exist.¹⁶

Because Dimmesdale has not been truthful to himself and to others about his affair with Hester, the only truthful thing about him, paradoxically, is his lie:

The only truth that continued to give Mr. Dimmesdale a real existence on this earth, was the anguish in his inmost soul, and the

undissembled expression of it in his aspect.¹⁷

It is this existential tension, caused by his lies, that keeps Dimmesdale from ceasing to be altogether.

What saves Dimmesdale is Pearl's kiss at the end of the novel. This act of freely given human love transforms not only Dimmesdale but Chillingworth too. Dimmesdale repudiates his belief in spiritual autonomy by announcing his sin publicly, while Chillingworth loses his object of hatred and vanishes from human sight, "like an uprooted weed that lies wilting in the sun."¹⁸ Neither late-Protestant spiritualization, in the character of Dimmesdale, nor scientific progress, as represented by Chillingworth, fully captures the fullness of human reality. Only Pearl's kiss, this act of charity, is able to have any transformative effect on the human heart.

What is more, Dimmesdale's public pronouncement of his sin transforms Pearl into a fully human being. Prior to Dimmesdale's announcement, Pearl was made into a living symbol of Hester's—and to a lesser extent Dimmesdale's—sin. But with his open declaration of his wickedness, Dimmesdale frees Pearl of the narrow and distorted symbolic identity imposed upon her by her mother. In this sense, charity has both a transformative and a therapeutic effect for both the giver and the receiver. It is only freely given human love, not the progressive spirit's promise of human perfection, that can have a significant and permanent impact upon the human condition.

By resurrecting the virtue of charity from his Puritan past, Hawthorne was able to present a conservatism that could have been an effective intellectual, moral, social, and literary force in nineteenth-century America. In spite of its failure to become an effective force, Hawthorne's conservatism was not merely negative in character; rather, it was dialectical: it both

criticized and proposed an alternative vision to progressivism and Transcendentalism. This vision was a restored Protestantism that emphasized man's imperfection and free will along with God's grace and ultimate unintelligibility.

II

Beneath the conflicts and frustrations of their lives, Hawthorne's characters believe that beauty, goodness, and love are still possible because God's inscrutable designs are ultimately good and wise. These characters believe in the doctrine of justification by faith, for when the project of self-reliance collapses, then piety becomes all the more precious. This is why Dimmesdale publicly confesses his sin instead of fleeing with Hester into the forest: he knows that goodness is possible even in the rabble of Boston, for "this is far better than what we dreamed of in the forest."¹⁹

Dimmesdale's public confession also points to Hawthorne's belief in man's free will in accepting God's grace. But to whom God gives His grace remains impenetrable to the human mind. This is another doctrine of Puritanism that Hawthorne recovers from the past—the incomprehensibility of God's designs—as reflected in his characters of Dimmesdale and Kenyon in *The Marble Faun*:

But these reflections were of slight avail. No doubt they were the religious truth. Yet the ways of Providence are utterly inscrutable; and many a murder has been done, and many an innocent virgin has lifted her white arms, beseeching its aid in her extremity, and all in vain; so that, though Providence is infinitely good and wise,—and perhaps for that very reason,—it may be half an eternity before the great circle of its scheme shall bring us the super-abundant recompense for all these sorrows!²⁰

Although man must rely solely on his faith to receive God's grace, he is not to pursue this faith at the expense of the body. In this sense, Hawthorne departed from his

Puritan ancestors. For the Puritans, the physical abasement of the flesh pointed to a supreme ideal of perfection; yet, for Hawthorne, the attempt to submerge the animal for the spiritual aspect of man (or vice versa) would force him to recognize his own limitations, as shown in the cases of Dimmesdale and Chillingworth. Man may attempt to achieve the ideal, but he will be foiled in his attempts, and may even create tragedy, for he is an imperfect creature.

Since he is an imperfect creature with free will, man is capable of sin. For Hawthorne, sin is a grievous matter that requires full knowledge and full consent of man's will. For example, when Dimmesdale and Hester plan to leave New England to Europe in order to conceal their affair, Dimmesdale was "emptied by a dream of happiness...had yielded himself, with deliberative choice, as he had never done before, to what he knew was deadly sin."²¹ Although Dimmesdale never carries out his plan, he has already consented to it in his heart, which constitutes a sin:

And the infectious poison of that sin had been...rapidly diffused throughout his moral system. It had stupefied all blessed impulses, and awakened into vivid life the whole brotherhood of bad ones. Scorn, bitterness, unprovoked malignity, gratuitous desire of ill, ridicule of whatever was good and holy, all awoke, to tempt, even while they frightened him.²²

Another way in which Hawthorne departs from his Puritan ancestors is in his distinguishing and ranking of sins. Although he does not provide a fully worked out catalog of sins, Hawthorne did believe that carnal sins are less grievous than spiritual ones. For example, Chillingworth's revenge is a more serious matter than Dimmesdale's and Hester's adultery. Sins of deliberative choice—those of knowledge—are weightier than sins of the flesh. Even between

Dimmesdale and Hester, their plan to flee to Europe results in two different types of sins: whereas Hester's sin is one only of her will, Dimmesdale's sin is one of both his will and his full knowledge and therefore is more grievous. This can be noted in the respective punishments of Hester and Dimmesdale: the former survives and practices charity, while the latter dies at the end of the novel.

Hawthorne believed that forgiveness was possible for every sin except where the sinner refuses to repent, as personified in Chillingworth. His singular desire for revenge—"devoting himself, for seven years, to the constant analysis of a heart full of torture, and deriving his enjoyment thence"—transformed him "into a devil."²³ After Dimmesdale's death, Chillingworth's fate was to live a broken and meaningless life, since the object of his revenge had passed away, because he was too proud to ask for forgiveness. If he were to repent—as Dimmesdale and Hester had for their adultery—meaning in Chillingworth's life would have been restored.

Finally, Hawthorne's emphasis on God's mercy instead of His awful and arbitrary sovereignty is a crucial difference between his Protestantism and his ancestors' Puritanism. Hawthorne's doctrine of forgiveness requires repentance and asking a pardon from God Himself. It is important here to distinguish between Hawthorne's idea of repentance and penance: repentance is a free and deliberate public confession of one's guilt; penance is externally imposed punishment upon the guilty person. Hester's act of "making coarse garments for the poor" is not repentance because it was not self-imposed and freely-given, for "morbid meddling of conscience with an immaterial matter betokened...no genuine and steadfast penitence, but something doubtful, something that might be deeply wrong, beneath."²⁴

But at the end of the novel, Hester *does*

repent for her sins, when she spends the remainder of her days in New England practicing charity:

Here had been her sin; here, her sorrow; and here was yet to be her penitence. She had returned...and resumed,—of her own free will...—resumed the symbol of which we have related so dark a tale.²⁵

Because it was of her own free will, Hester at last is able to repent for her sin of adultery.

Hawthorne's Protestantism is the positive component of his dialectical conservatism: if Chillingworth and Dimmesdale are a negative critique of the nineteenth-century belief in material and spiritual progress, then Hester and Pearl are the positive representatives of a resurrected Puritanism. Yet this recovered Puritanism is a transformed one, where the positive virtues of mercy, charity, and forgiveness are emphasized while self-abasement and damnation are moved to the background. In fact, this transformation is shown symbolically in the letter "A" on Hester's chest. It was once a stigma of her shame, but at the end of the novel it has become an emblem of her mercy and kindness: an object of veneration and reverence to those whose sorrows she alleviates by her acts of charity.

III

The predominant roles that sin and grace play in his thought made Hawthorne skeptical regarding one of the greatest and most progressive social movements of his day: abolitionism. The absence of the abolition debate in Hawthorne's literary works is especially puzzling given that other American writers of the period were deeply engaged in the issue. It is doubly puzzling, since his position in the Salem Custom House likely made him better informed about the slave trade than many others. Furthermore, the 1835 mobbing of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society and the 1848 seizure of two young black

women and the arrest of the officers of the schooner *Pearl* certainly brought the issue of abolition to Hawthorne's awareness, since his in-laws were involved in these two incidents. Hawthorne's peculiar position of political disengagement on the abolition question therefore deserves careful analysis.

Hawthorne's awareness of slavery is evident in his *Notebooks*, where he considered using slavery as a literary device, showing how one enslaves another person both morally and psychologically. He writes:

Sketch of a person who, by strength of character, or assistant circumstances, has reduced another to absolute slavery and dependence on him. Then show, that the person who appears to be the master, must inevitably be at least as much a slave, if not more, than the other. All slavery is reciprocal, on the supposition most favorable to the rulers.²⁶

The literary device of slavery is used in the characters of Chillingworth, Dimmesdale, and Hester: Dimmesdale is psychologically tortured by Chillingworth, while Hester is branded and treated as chattel by the Boston community for Pearl. But like Hegel's master-slave relationship, both Boston and Chillingworth are dependent upon the subservient status of Hester and Dimmesdale in order to recognize or realize their superior standing.

However, the link between slavery as a literary device and the political issue of abolition during Hawthorne's day is absent in the novel. Time and time again, Hawthorne uses the literary device of slavery in a context where the abolition question is *not* present. Part of this reason maybe aesthetic, as Hawthorne states his intention in the preface of *The Snow-Image*: "to pave the reader's way into the interior edifice" of a person's soul.²⁷ One could see how a socially relevant novel could distract instead of focus on Hawthorne's intention to study the fun-

damentals of the human soul. After finishing such a novel, the reader would be more apt to contemplate the nature of God and man than rush out and join the latest political movement.

There is thus an advantage in Hawthorne's choice to avoid the slavery issue. By depicting a world wholly apart from the politics of his day, Hawthorne manages to avoid historicization in his fictions. Instead of interpreting Hawthorne's stories and novels in their social and political context, the reader is "forced" to focus on questions of human sin, will, and conscience—especially when the novel is deliberately set in a context quite distant from the reader's present-day perspective. A work like *The Scarlet Letter* therefore has a timeless quality, since it is neither a commentary of Hawthorne's times nor a historically accurate description of Puritan New England. It is an ageless account of the eternal themes of the human condition, a looking-glass in which one may discern the Permanent Things.

Another reason that may explain Hawthorne's apparent political indifference is his own ambiguous views of African Americans. In his *Notebooks*, Hawthorne described his reactions to a racist incident in western Massachusetts in 1838, where "some blacks were knocked down and otherwise maltreated." After a purely descriptive account of each black person who was injured, Hawthorne writes that "I was amused" and "On the whole, I find myself rather more of an abolitionist in feeling than in principle."²⁸

In another entry in his *Notebooks*, Hawthorne describes his reaction to a white man's comment that "I wish I had a thousand such fellows in Alabama," after observing a black man who blends in with his fellow travelers except for his color. This comment for Hawthorne "made a queer impression on me—the negro was really so human—and to talk of owning a thousand like him."²⁹ And in

a piece written during the Civil War, Hawthorne describes a group of contrabands in Virginia:

They were unlike specimens of their race whom we are accustomed to see at the North, and, in my judgment, were far more agreeable. So rudely were they attired—as if their garb had grown upon them spontaneously—so picturesquely natural in manners, and wearing such a crust of primeval simplicity (which is quite polished away from the northern black man), that they seemed a kind of creature by themselves, not altogether human, but perhaps quite as good, and akin to fauns and rustic deities of olden times. I wonder whether I shall excite anybody's wrath by saying this? It is no great matter.³⁰

Hawthorne never takes a definite position on the full humanity of blacks. Even in the analysis of his own reactions, he distances himself and never examines the moral implications or consequences of his views.

Besides his aesthetic and racial views, it was probably Hawthorne's dislike of reformers that finally made him indifferent to the politics of abolition. In a journal entry before he joined Brook Farm, Hawthorne had written:

A sketch to be given of a modern reformer—a type of the extreme doctrines on the subject of slaves, cold-water, and other such topics. He goes about the streets haranguing most eloquently, and is on the point of making many converts, when his labors are suddenly interrupted by the appearance of the keeper of a mad-house, where he has escaped. Much may be made of this idea.³¹

Throughout his works, Hawthorne criticized reformers who suffer from a utopian vision of the world. The final conflagration in "Earth's Holocaust" is caused neither by an accident nor by those in power but by the reformers themselves. For Hawthorne, reformers were nothing more than enthusiasts who wound up under-

mining the very institutions and societal achievements they had hoped to improve.

Instead of a radical transformation of society driven by man, Hawthorne believed that only trust in God's providence and a gradual change in man's conscience will make true reform possible. However, the nature of this reform ultimately remains a mystery, as the narrator in *The Scarlet Letter* concludes the novel: "At some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven's own time, a new truth will be revealed."³² Reform cannot occur programmatically for Hawthorne, but only organically, as Edmund Burke would have advocated. With respect to the abolition question, Hawthorne wrote that a wise man

...looks 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.³³

Yet such statements raise the question whether Hawthorne believed that man had *any* role in the true reform of society or whether he must resign himself to Protestant fatalism.

IV

Kirk's contention that New England conservatism could not furnish a new intellectual foundation or social arrangements for renewal is correct except in the case of Nathaniel Hawthorne. In his works, primarily in *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne resurrected and transformed Puritanism into a positive vision for conservatism where man's imperfections and reverence for the transcendent were emphasized in

an age of progressivism. The virtues of charity and forgiveness, along with God's unintelligibility, grace, and mercy, are positive characteristics stressed in Hawthorne's conservatism. Hawthorne's Puritanism therefore was not merely a negative reminder of man's sin, but a constructive vision of man's place in the universe.

In spite of this new intellectual foundation, Hawthorne failed to convince his countrymen. This failure is one of the great lessons for the contemporary conservative: there must be a political component to a conservative vision. Kirk was correct in observing that the political aspect of Hawthorne's conservatism, especially in his criticism of "reformers," was essentially negative. Perhaps if Hawthorne had a more Burkean interest in politics, he would have presented a politics that would have preserved conservative values and become a social and political force in nineteenth-century American politics.

Nevertheless, Hawthorne's conservatism, for both its strengths and failures, reminds the modern conservative of the need to renew his beliefs in an ever-changing society. The conservative should not be confused with the reactionary. By resurrecting a forgotten tradition to explore the progressive movement of his day, Hawthorne recognized the need to renew New England conservatism on a new intellectual foundation—a reformed and resurrected Puritanism. The contemporary conservative therefore should not only conserve the past but *recover* it for the intellectual and political debates of his day. The past always exists in the present; this why Hawthorne will always speak to us, not only for today but also for another tomorrow.

1. Kirk, Russell. *The Conservative Mind* (Washington, D.C., 2001), 226. 2. *Ibid.*, 253. 3. *Ibid.*, 255. 4. *Ibid.*, 259. 5. *Ibid.*, 251. 6. *Ibid.*, 338. 7. *Ibid.*, 246. 8.

Ibid. 9. *Ibid.*, 247. 10. *Ibid.*, 253. 11. *Ibid.*, 252. 12. *Ibid.* 13. Boston, 1991, 102. 14. *Ibid.*, 101. 15. *Ibid.*, 103. 16. *Ibid.*, 121. 17. *Ibid.* 18. *Ibid.*, 198. 19. *Ibid.*,

194. **20.** New York, 2002, 372-73. **21.** Boston, 1991, 173. **22.** *Ibid.* **23.** *Ibid.*, 137. **24.** *Ibid.*, 78. **25.** *Ibid.*, 200. **26.** Charvat, William, Roy Harvey Pearce, Claude M. Simpson, Fredson Bowers, Matthew J. Bruccoli, L. Neal Smith, and Thomas Woodson, eds., *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (Columbus, Ohio, 1962), Vol. 8, 253. Hereafter cited as *Centenary*. **27.** Hawthorne's aesthetic intention to study the "interior edifice" of a person's soul is consistently stated in the prefaces of his other works: *Grandfather's Chair*,

"Rappaccini's Daughter," in *Democratic Review*, *Mosses from an Old Manse*, the second edition of *The Scarlet Letter*, *Twice-Told Tales*, *House of the Seven Gables*, *A Wonder-Book for Girls and Boys*, *The Blithedale Romance*, *Life of Franklin Pierce*, *Tanglewood Tales*, *The Marble Faun*, and *Our Old Home*. **28.** *Centenary*, Vol. 16, 26. **29.** *Centenary*, Vol. 8, 151. **30.** *Centenary*, Vol. 23, 419-20. **31.** *Centenary*, Vol. 8, 10, 136. **32.** Page 201. **33.** *Centenary*, Vol. 23, 419-20.