

REVIEW

from “Hawthorne and His Mosses” (1850)

By a Virginian Spending July in Vermont

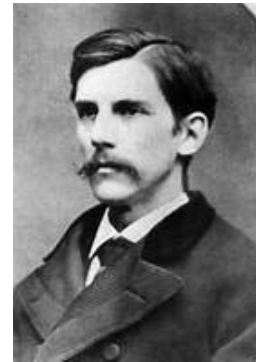
(Herman Melville)



Nathaniel Hawthorne



Herman Melville



Oliver Wendell Holmes



Evert Duyckinck

INTRODUCTION

On 5 August 1850, Nathaniel Hawthorne noted in his *American Notebook* that he drove from his home in Lenox, Massachusetts to the home of the Boston publisher James T. Fields in Stockbridge. There he joined a gathering that included New York publisher Evert Duyckinck, Oliver Wendell Holmes and Herman Melville. The group climbed Monument Mountain and were caught in a shower. Taking refuge under a shoulder of rock, Hawthorne and Melville overcame their shyness, especially on Hawthorne's part, and had a conversation. Melville did not reveal to Hawthorne that he had written a review comparing him to Dante, Spenser and Shakespeare.

The review was published by Duyckinck in two parts in his *Literary World*, August 17 and 24, 1850. Melville concealed his identity by posing as a Virginian in Vermont. Apparently, anticipating an

opportunity to meet Hawthorne, he did not want to come on too strong and revealed himself only with symbolic hints: His choice of home states identifies him with the most famous Virginian, the egalitarian Thomas Jefferson, and perhaps anticipates the contrast he is going to make in *Moby-Dick* between himself and Poe as expressed in *Pym*. Locating himself as a Virginian in Vermont, in July, the month identified with independence, implies a synthesis of opposites represented by North and South.

Melville had just begun to read Hawthorne and seems to project his own nature when he tentatively describes “the man of Mosses” as “a seeker, not a finder yet.” He soon changed his mind, as shown in *Moby-Dick*, where he symbolizes the Christian Hawthorne as “the Moss” in a safe harbor of faith. In his review, he is also mistaken in attributing a “Calvinistic sense of innate depravity” to Hawthorne, who believed in the blackness of sin, but not in innate depravity, which he portrays as an evil doctrine that damns both Goodman Brown and Parson Hooper.

Curious about his reviewer, Hawthorne wrote to Duyckinck: “The writer is no common man, and, next to deserving his praise, it is good to have beguiled such a man into praising me more than I deserve.” Melville had recently moved to nearby Pittsfield. Thereafter he became a regular visitor at the Hawthornes, where the family called him Mr. Omoo. He sometimes came over with his big dog, the children rode on the dog’s back and young Julian said later he loved Melville as well as his parents. Melville told stories of his adventures in the South Seas, dramatizing with such realism that on one occasion Sophia Hawthorne said that after he left, she was surprised to realize that he had not been swinging a real club. His bold personality may have inhibited Hawthorne, who was 15 years older and a deeply introverted man whose modesty was often taken for aloofness. His reserve seems to have disappointed Melville.

During their association in the Berkshires (1850-51) Hawthorne published *The House of the Seven Gables* and Melville finished *Moby-Dick*, dedicating it to Hawthorne, from whose fictions—“Young Goodman Brown” in particular—he learned better how to write a clear and forceful allegory of symbols. In Chapter 13, he “gams” with Hawthorne by having Ishmael and Queequeg sail over to Nantucket in “the Moss,” a reference to *Mosses from an Old Manse*, which he had reviewed, calling Hawthorne the “Man of Mosses.” For his contrast of his own vision as a “seeker” to Hawthorne’s vision as a “finder,” see analysis of *Moby-Dick*.

Michael Hollister (2015)

MELVILLE EXALTS HAWTHORNE

...A man of deep and noble nature has seized me in this seclusion....It is curious how a man may travel along a country road, and yet miss the grandest or sweetest of prospects by reason of an intervening hedge, so like all other hedges, as in no way to hint of the wide landscape beyond. So has it been with me concerning the enchanting landscape in the soul of this Hawthorne, this most excellent Man of Mosses. His [*Mosses from an*] *Old Manse* has been written now four years, but I never read it till a day or two since....

Stretched on that new mown clover, the hill-side breeze blowing over me through the wide barn-door, and soothed by the hum of bees in the meadows around, how magically stole over me this Mossy Man!... The soft ravishments of the man spun me round about in a web of dreams, and when the book was closed, when the spell was over, this wizard “dismissed me with but misty reminiscences, as if I had been dreaming of him”....No rollicking rudeness, no gross fun fed on fat dinners, and bred in the lees of wine,-- but a humor so spiritually gentle, so high, so deep, and yet so richly relishable, that it were hardly appropriate in an angel....this sweet Man of Mosses...

Such touches as are in this piece [“The Old Apple-Dealer”] cannot proceed from any common heart. They argue such a depth of tenderness, such a boundless sympathy with all forms of being, such an omnipresent love, that we must needs say that this Hawthorne is here almost alone in his generation,--at least, in the artistic manifestation of these things. Still more....But it is the least part of genius that attracts admiration....The great beauty in such a mind is but the product of its strength. What, to all readers, can be

more charming than the piece entitled "Monsieur du Mirror"...How profound, nay appalling, is the moral evolved by the "Earth's Holocaust"; where--beginning with the hollow follies and affectations of the world,--all vanities and empty theories and forms are, one after another, and by an admirably graduated, growing comprehensiveness, thrown into the allegorical fire...

"The Christmas Banquet," and "The Bosom Serpent," would be fine subjects for a curious and elaborate analysis, touching the conjectural parts of the mind that produced them. For spite of all the Indian-summer sunlight on the hither side of Hawthorne's soul, the other side--like the dark half of the physical sphere--is shrouded in a blackness ten times black. But this darkness but gives more effect to the ever-moving dawn, that forever advances through it, and circumnavigates his world. Whether Hawthorne has simply availed himself of this mystical blackness as a means to the wondrous effects he makes it to produce in his lights and shades; or whether there really lurks in him, perhaps unknown to himself, a touch of Puritanic gloom,--this, I cannot altogether tell.

Certain it is, however, that this great power of blackness in him derives its force from its appeal to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free. For, in certain moods, no man can weigh this world without throwing in something, somehow like Original Sin, to strike the uneven balance. At all events, perhaps no writer has ever wielded this terrific thought with greater terror than this same harmless Hawthorne.

Still more: this black conceit pervades him through and through. You may be witched by his sunlight,--transported by the bright gildings in the skies he builds over you; but there is the blackness of darkness beyond; and even his bright gildings but fringe and play upon the edges of thunderclouds. In one word, the world is mistaken in this Nathaniel Hawthorne. He himself must often have smiled at its absurd misconception of him. He is immeasurably deeper than the plummet of the mere critic. For it is not the brain that can test such a man; it is only the heart. You cannot come to know greatness by inspecting it; there is no glimpse to be caught of it; except by intuition; you need not ring it, you but touch it, and you find it is gold.

Now, it is that blackness in Hawthorne, of which I have spoken, that so fixes and fascinates me. It may be, nevertheless, that it is too largely developed in him. Perhaps he does not give us a ray of his light for every shade of his dark. But however this may be, this blackness it is that furnishes the infinite obscure of his background,--that back-ground, against which Shakespeare plays his grandest conceits, the things that have made for Shakespeare his loftiest but most circumscribed renown, as the profoundest of thinkers....

The great mistake seems to be, that even with those Americans who look forward to the coming of a great literary genius among us, they somehow fancy he will come in the costume of Queen Elizabeth's day; be a writer of dramas founded upon old English history or the tales of Boccaccio. Whereas, great geniuses are parts of the times, they themselves are the times, and possess a correspondent coloring....You must have plenty of sea-room to tell the Truth in; especially when it seems to have an aspect of newness, as America did in 1492, though it was then just as old, and perhaps older than Asia, only those sagacious philosophers, the common sailors, had never seen it before, swearing it was all water and moonshine there. Now I do not say that Nathaniel of Salem is a greater writer than William of Avon, or as great. But the difference between the two men is by no means immeasurable. Not a very great deal more, and Nathaniel were verily William....

The world is as young to-day as when it was created; and this Vermont morning dew is as wet to my feet, as Eden's dew to Adam's....Let America, then, prize and cherish her writers; yea, let her glorify them. They are not so many in number as to exhaust her good will....I would have America be heedful of the increasing greatness among her writers. For how great the shame, if other nations should be before her, in crowning her heroes of the pen! But this is almost the case now....There are hardly five critics in America; and several of them are asleep.

Let us away with this leaven of literary flunkeyism towards England. If either must play the flunkey in this thing, let England do it, not us. While we are rapidly preparing for that political supremacy among the

nations which prophetically awaits us at the close of the present century, in a literary point of view, we are deplorably unprepared for it; and we seem studious to remain so....And now, my countrymen, as an excellent author of your own flesh and blood,--an unimitating, and, perhaps, in his way, an inimitable man --whom better can I commend to you, in the first place, than Nathaniel Hawthorne. He is one of the new, and far better generation of your writers. The smell of your beeches and hemlocks is upon him; your own broad prairies are in his soul; and if you travel away inland into his deep and noble nature, you will hear the far roar of his Niagara....

In treating of Hawthorne, or rather of Hawthorne in his writings (for I never saw the man; and...perhaps never shall); in treating of his works, I say, I have thus far omitted all mention of his *Twice-Told Tales*, and *Scarlet Letter*. Both are excellent, but full of such manifold, strange, and diffusive beauties, that time would all but fail me to point the half of them out. But there are things in those two books, which, had they been written in England a century ago, Nathaniel Hawthorne had utterly displaced many of the bright names we now revere on authority....

I submit it, then, to those best acquainted with the man personally, whether the following is not Nathaniel Hawthorne;--and to himself, whether something involved in it does not express the temper of his mind,--that lasting temper of all true, candid men--a seeker, not a finder yet..."I seek for Truth," said he."

To what infinite height of loving wonder and admiration I may yet be borne, when by repeatedly banqueting on these *Mosses* I shall have thoroughly incorporated their whole stuff into my being,--that, I cannot tell. But already I feel that this Hawthorne has dropped germinous seeds into my soul. He expands and deepens down, the more I contemplate him; and further and further, shoots his strong New England roots in the hot soil of my Southern soul...."Who in the name of thunder" (as the country-people say in this neighborhood)...would anticipate any marvel in a piece entitled "Young Goodman Brown"? You would of course suppose that it was a simple little tale, intended as a supplement to "Goody Two Shoes." Whereas, it is deep as Dante; nor can you finish it, without addressing the author in his own words --"It is yours to penetrate, in every bosom, the deep mystery of sin." And with Young Goodman, too, in allegorical pursuit of his Puritan wife, you cry out in your anguish: "Faith!"....

"A Select Party"...is the sweetest and sublimest thing that has been written since Spenser wrote. Nay, there is nothing in Spenser that surpasses it, perhaps nothing that equals it....I am Posterity speaking by proxy--and after times will make it more than good, when I declare, that the American, who up to the present day has evinced, in literature, the largest brain with the largest heart, that man is Nathaniel Hawthorne....

A Virginian Spending July in Vermont
[Herman Melville]