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Hawthorne and Nineteenth-Century Perfectionism

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ONE OF THE MOST prominent members of the Bowdoin College faculty at the time of Nathaniel Hawthorne's attendance was a young philosopher-psychologist named Thomas C. Upham. Horatio Bridge, Hawthorne's college classmate and friend, remembered Upham, who was Professor of Moral and Mental Philosophy during their senior year, as "young, scholarly, gentle, and kind to the students, by all of whom he was much beloved."¹ A few critics have speculated about the influence of Upham's theory of trifaculty psychology on Hawthorne,² but another of Upham's convictions, on which he wrote a number of books, has received almost no attention. This was the doctrine of Christian perfection for which Upham, in his day, was as well known as for his psychological theories. The very word, "perfection," however, connotes a belief so far removed from the dark vision of Nathaniel Hawthorne as to render absurd any consideration of the writer's relationship to the doctrine.³ The word leads one to think that the advocates of per-

¹ Horatio Bridge, *Personal Recollections of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (New York, 1893), p. 53.

² Marvin Laser, "'Head,' 'Heart,' and 'Will' in Hawthorne's Psychology," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, X (Sept., 1955), 130-136; Leon Howard, *Literature and the American Tradition* (New York, 1960), p. 122; Joseph Schwartz, "A Note on Hawthorne's Fatalism," *Modern Language Notes*, LXX (Jan., 1955), 33-36. Laser and Howard cite the influence of Upham's trifaculty psychology on Hawthorne's work. Schwartz makes the point that the insistence of Hawthorne's educators, including Upham, on freedom of the will contributed to his rejection of orthodox fatalism.

³ Merle Curti, "Human Nature in American Thought," *Political Science Quarterly*, LXVIII (Sept., 1953), 354-375; Joseph Schwartz, "Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1804-1864: God and Man in New England," *American Classics Reconsidered*, edited by Harold C. Gardiner, S.J. (New York, 1958), p. 141. These two critics reflect the tendency to ignore or to misrepresent perfectionism. Although Schwartz is aware of Upham's influence, he fails to take perfectionism into account, saying only that Hawthorne had no sympathy with the Unitarian idea of "human perfectability." Curti concludes, presumably because Upham was a perfectionist, that he had no sense, as did Hawthorne, of the profound depths of evil in the heart.

The summary of perfectionist doctrine in this paper is made on the basis of primary readings in the following nineteenth-century perfectionist literature: William Arthur,

fectionism thought that, after having been made "perfect," the heart was free from evil. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. Thomas Upham, Charles G. Finney, John Humphrey Noyes, and other perfectionists were as thoroughly convinced of the evil of the heart as were their Puritan forebears. The journals and the memoirs of perfectionists disclose that their knowledge of the heart's evil came from painful personal experiences. Like John Humphrey Noyes, they were very much aware of "the labyrinth of iniquity" at the bottom of the heart.⁴

Like the Puritans, perfectionists believed that man is, by nature, sinful and requires regeneration. Unlike those early Calvinists, however, the perfectionists taught that after conversion man could experience a second stage of religious growth when he would, for a second time, be the recipient of God's grace. At this time he was "perfected" by partaking of God's love which "purified" his inclinations. Even after purification, however, evil was a powerful force in the perfect man's heart. Noyes, who had an immense impact on nineteenth-century Protestantism through the circulation of *The Perfectionist*, was convinced that being purified in heart did not exempt one from inner experiences with evil. Evil was a part of the carnal self which would not be lost until the body died, and forces of good and evil would war within even a perfect man until he died. One needed only to look at the tempted Christ to understand this warfare:

Our theory of Christian life, while it equips the spiritual soldier with a pure heart and a good conscience at the outset, nevertheless does not discharge him from service. To *keep* his heart pure and his conscience good, in the midst of a world of pollution and accusation . . . will cost him

The Tongue of Fire (Toronto, 1857); Jeremy Boyton, *Sanctification Practical* (New York, 1867); J. T. Crane, *Holiness* (New York, 1875); Charles G. Finney, *Attributes of Love: A Section From Lectures on Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, 1963) and *Memoirs* (New York, 1876); R. S. Foster, *Christian Purity* (New York, 1869); Asa Mahan, *Out of Darkness Into Light* (New York, 1876); John Humphrey Noyes, *Religious Experiences of John Humphrey Noyes* (New York, 1923) and *Salvation From Sin* (Wallingford, Conn., 1866); Phoebe Palmer, *Present to My Christian Friend* (New York, 1853); Thomas C. Upham, *Treatise on Divine Union* (Boston, 1857); *Principles of the Interior or Hidden Life* (New York, 1843), and *Life of Faith* (New York, 1845).

⁴ Noyes, "Journal Entry, July 25," *The Religious Experiences of John Humphrey Noyes*, pp. 47-48.

many and sore conflicts with his own corrupted propensities, and with "principalities and powers, and spiritual wickedness in high places."⁵

Thomas Upham in *The Interior Life* also warned that evil would be an even greater force within the soul of the perfected man than it was in other men:

Thou hast contended with Satan, and hast been successful. Thou hast fought with him, and he has fled from thee. But, O, remember his artifices. Do not indulge the belief that his nature is changed. True, indeed, he is now very complacent and is, perhaps, singing thee some syren song; but he was never more a devil than he is now.⁶

Even though evil would continue to fight within his soul, as long as love sustained the perfected man, he had reason to hope that his victories over evil would be assured. In short, the doctrine of perfectionism was in no sense the conviction that the soul could reach a stage in which it was free from the experience of evil.

This clarification of the perfectionists' beliefs about the evil of the heart, which, contrary to what the term may suggest, is not so radically different from Hawthorne's view, may serve to open for consideration the relationship of Hawthorne to this vital and far-reaching nineteenth-century Protestant movement.

Upham and his fellow perfectionists insisted on three essential characteristics of the perfected man which are relevant to Hawthorne's themes: man had to be guided by love, the transforming principle in the life of the perfected man; he had to live in this life rather than for the hereafter; and he had to be active rather than passive. The perfectionist taught that love was the transforming power of the soul, the indwelling principle which caused the old man locked in inwardness to emerge reborn. Love displaced selfish pride and united men. It propelled a perfected man into the world: perfectionism, by definition, meant the state of man *in this life*, not in the hereafter. One of the Methodist perfectionists, William Arthur, goes so far as to label a man's concern for his salvation as a selfish perversion of the gospel.⁷

Just as love drew the good man into this world, it necessarily

⁵ Noyes, *Salvation From Sin*, p. 394.

⁶ Upham, *The Interior Life*, p. 394.

⁷ Arthur, p. 129.

drew him into fellowship with other men. It made a life of solitude impossible. Introspection was a stage in Christian development, but to prolong seclusion was to be caught in the dead end of selfishness. Asa Mahan, the perfectionist president of Oberlin College, called such inwardness "spiritual paralysis."⁸ In Thomas Upham's comments on isolating inwardness one sees the expression of a theme which would be persistently repeated in the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne:

A being who is supremely selfish is necessarily miserable. . . . Instead of the principle of unity, which tends to oneness of purpose with other beings, and naturally leads to happiness, he has within him the principle of exclusion and of eternal separation. In its ultimate operation, if it is permitted permanently to exist, it necessarily drives him from everything else, and wedges him closer and closer in the compressed circumference of his own personality. . . . This is the true hell and everlasting fire.⁹

The perfect man, therefore, had to ascend from inwardness to union with the world. The man of God who failed in this union abdicated a profound Christian duty, according to Upham:

The mind, separated from the bonds which link it to others, and falling back upon itself, as both centre and circumference, becomes contracted in the range of its action, and selfish in its tendencies.¹⁰

Perfectionist doctrine not only insisted upon fellowship in the world; it demanded action in the world. Passivity was a characteristic of the initial religious experience of introspection, but a Christian must move from the passive to an active state. Love, again, was the compelling force. Charles G. Finney, the most prominent evangelist of the second great awakening and an Oberlin perfectionist, wrote of the perfect man:

. . . the intellectual perceptions never sink so low as to leave benevolence to become a stagnant pool. It is never sluggish, never inactive. . . . It is essential activity itself.¹¹

Thus, the good man, according to the perfectionist doctrine, followed a definite mythic development. In order to be converted,

⁸ Mahan, p. 117.

⁹ Upham, *The Interior Life*, p. 118.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

¹¹ Finney, *Attributes of Love*, pp. 110-111.

he descended into the depths of his heart as the Puritans had taught that he must. After having received a clear view of his sins, he was converted. But a man could become entrapped and poisoned in this pious, passive introspection if he were not moved by love. If he were guided by love, he would ascend from inwardness to an active existence on the earth among his fellow human beings. Thomas Upham's student, Nathaniel Hawthorne, saw the perils and possibilities of man in just such terms.

"The Haunted Mind," Hawthorne's sketch of the progress of the mind which descends into inwardness and emerges renewed, mirrors the perfectionists' values as well as their concept of man's spiritual development. In this early sketch, a dreamer in repose isolates himself from the realities of the world in order to descend into his heart, which he subsequently comes to know as an infernal region outside of time, outside of nature, and outside of society, "where the business of life does not intrude" (p. 343).¹² The bed into which the dreamer sinks in "conscious sleep," is no less than a cozy womb until the thought of death breaks in to remind him that the components of this inward world—timelessness, lifelessness, inaction, and isolation—are also the components of death. As he sinks deeper into the tomb of the heart, he is accosted by fiends of his own making and comes to know that to remain forever in this inward inferno is to live forever with fiends. The everyday materials of the real world—book, table, letter—and the influence of love bring the dreamer back to the living world which is now presented in pictures of "gladsomeness and beauty" (p. 348), the last of which is "a brilliant circle of a crowded theatre. . ." (p. 348). Thus the moral history of man's descent and rebirth, as it is portrayed in "The Haunted Mind," is almost identical to that outlined by nineteenth-century perfectionists.

Furthermore, the vision of Hawthorne's major tales and romances is basically perfectionistic in that his characters are measured against the perfectionist possibility. In a few instances his characters reach a greater humanity than they have known before as love displaces self, action displaces inaction, and social concern displaces

¹² Quotations from Hawthorne's short stories are taken from *The Complete Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (New York, Sully and Kleinteich, 1882, 1883). Quotations from the novels are taken from *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*.

egoistic isolation. More often, however, his characters fail to ascend from that inwardness which Upham called "a true hell."

Although Hawthorne was strongly convinced that the man who would be regenerated must make a descent into the tomb of the heart, he, like the perfectionists, was just as strongly convinced of the dangers of sustained inwardness. It is not surprising that his characteristic protagonist in the tales is a man who remains in an inner hell, unable to pronounce his brotherhood with other men or to join them in a common struggle. Goodman Brown, the Reverend Hooper, Wakefield, Richard Digby, Adam Coburn, and Roderick Elliston are the protagonists who best exemplify the perfectionist pattern, albeit in Hawthorne's largely negative fashion.

These protagonists are caught in a stage of development which the perfectionists called the descent into the heart. Because each of them meditates within the circle of his own ego, he is removed from the larger world of human society and human passions. The man of adamant physically leaves his village and, shutting himself away in a cave, an image of his own heart, contemplates his righteousness in an evil society. Adam Coburn deserts the village to find shelter in a sect which turns its back on the world and human nature; Wakefield steps aside "from the main business of his life" (p. 163) to seclude himself in disguise; and Goodman Brown leaves his wife and his village not just for a night, but for a lifetime. The Reverend Hooper's veil and Roderick Elliston's bosom serpent are symbolic of the dark obsessive visions which separate them from other men. Neither love nor sympathy touches the Reverend Hooper in his "true hell": "With self-shudderings and outward terrors, he walked continually in its shadow, groping darkly within his own soul. . ." (p. 65). Roderick, too, lives without the love of friends, wife, or God: "Not merely the eye of man was a horror to him; not merely the light of a friend's countenance; but even the blessed sunshine, likewise, which in its universal beneficence typifies the radiance of the Creator's face, expressing his love for all the creatures of his hand" (p. 307). Wakefield, in deserting his wife, loses his place in the universe.

The alternative to gloomy inwardness in each of these tales is the love of a woman who is capable of drawing the self-directed soul back into human society. The Reverend Hooper, however, re-

fuses to lift his veil in order to love Elizabeth. It must always separate him from the world and from love. Richard Digby disregards all of Mary Goffe's pleas that he return with her to the village. Adam Coburn withdraws his hand from Martha's in "satisfied ambition" (p. 476) as he chooses to be a Shaker leader and a brother instead of a lover and father. Although Goodman Brown returns to Faith, he "looked sternly and sadly into her face, and passed on without a greeting" (p. 105). Of these men, only Roderick Elliston is happily reunited with his wife and the society from which he had separated himself.

Like the nineteenth-century perfectionists, Hawthorne often compares the achievement of a higher humanity to growing up, a metaphor which is central to his first two major novels, *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of the Seven Gables*. The unregenerate man who lingers in inwardness is like a child whose only world is himself, whose primary interest is attending to his own wants, who feels little responsibility for those other than himself, and who, as a stranger in the larger world, sacrifices almost nothing of himself to it.

Indeed, in both of these novels the principal settings suggest the childlike dependency of the characters. The society created by the Puritan elders in *The Scarlet Letter* and the ancestral home place of *The House of the Seven Gables* are both paternalistic shelters from the larger world and reflections of the decay and gloom of the characters who live in them. The most prominent landmarks of the Puritan community are the scaffold, the prison, and the cemetery. The community's most prominent members are stern and somber old men who are incapable of "sitting in judgment on an erring woman's heart and disentangling its mesh of good and evil. . ." (p. 64). The ordinary citizens remain children in this oligarchy.

Dimmesdale is a child not only in his dependence upon the Puritan elders and in his rejection of fatherhood, but in his failure to emerge from the closed circle of his own heart. He is a striking example of the self-centered, unperfected man as he is described on the scaffold under cover of darkness:

In such a case, it could only be the symptom of a highly disordered mental state when a man, rendered morbidly self-contemplative by long, intense, and secret pain, had extended his egotism over the whole expanse

of nature until the firmament itself should appear no more than a fitting page for his soul's history and fate. (p. 155)

Hester also knows years of despairing self-contemplation, pride, and self-deception but, in contrast to Dimmesdale, the love which she feels for him and for Pearl turns her affections outward and enables her not only to endure, but eventually to mature into a stronger and more productive member of human society. After she returns to the place of her ignominy to take up the letter humbly and of her own free will, her acts of charity grow from love rather than from concern for her own salvation:

And, as Hester Prynne had no selfish ends, nor lived in any measure for her own profit and enjoyment, people brought all their sorrows and perplexities, and besought her counsel, as one who had herself gone through a mighty trouble. (p. 263)

In short, despite her inescapable gloom, she comes to possess those traits by which the perfected human being was identified.

A similar pattern discloses the values of perfectionism in *The House of the Seven Gables*, where the inhabitants of the patriarchal shelter remain children, each largely wrapped up in his own world, unacquainted with anything outside that world, and unable to act in it. For all of her life Hepzibah has hidden away in her father's house like a child. Because she has never before "put forth her hand to help herself" (p. 52), she is as clumsy as an infant in setting up her shop, in keeping her house, and in trying to establish a relationship with the everyday world of the street beside her house. Clifford, too, is a child devoid of judgment, overwhelmed by his immature emotions, and absorbed almost entirely in himself. Holgrave, although he does not fit the metaphor of immature child as clearly as Clifford and Hepzibah do, is, nonetheless, unregenerate in that he is largely loveless, egoistic, and ill at ease in the world. He has wandered, homeless, from place to place, from profession to profession, unwilling to become sufficiently involved with his fellow creatures "to help or hinder" (p. 216), but only to observe and analyze them.

Phoebe, on the other hand, lives harmoniously with a world in which she is productive and orderly. Shop-keeping and house-keeping are not mysteries to her, and she is capable of giving her love

to the unlovely Hepzibah and Clifford. She represents the agency of love which embodies active commerce with the greater world beyond the self.

The issues which occupied perfectionists continued to be apparent in Hawthorne's last major novels. Miles Coverdale is the chief illustration of the unregenerate or unperfected man in *The Blithedale Romance*. His inaction, his preference for the spiritual, and his obsession with the lives of his friends betray a failure to ascend to the living world. The leafy cave to which he retreats during his Blithedale stay is symbolic of the state of his soul. He is persistently guided by cold curiosity and self-interest rather than by love, and he fittingly ends his life as an unproductive writer and lonely bachelor. Hollingsworth, by contrast, is able to break the circle of his egoistic obsession and to begin reforming himself with the help of Priscilla, his link with the world.

The perfectionistic values which had been the basis for Hawthorne's tales and novels are, in *The Marble Faun*, formulated explicitly as myth in the history of the Monte Benis. The characters in this last major novel are measured against the perfectionist possibility of gaining greater humanity. As the novel opens, each of the four characters is in a state of withdrawal from the active, time-affected world, out of touch with society, and out of sympathy with other people: Donatello in his Arcadia is too animalistic to be called fully human; Hilda lives in an angel's untouchable world; Miriam broods in the dark cave of bitterness; and Kenyon lives in the cold marble world of art. Each must, if he is to reach a higher form of being, first enter a period of self-scrutiny, become fully aware of his own ignominy, and, as Donatello finally does, emerge from inwardness to commit himself in love to other mortals.

After he has committed murder, Donatello begins to brood about the ugliness and mortality of his soul. It is Kenyon who warns him of the dangers of sustained inwardness:

"Believe me," said he, turning his eyes upon his friend, full of grave and tender sympathy, "you know not what is requisite for your spiritual growth, seeking, as you do, to keep your soul perpetually in the unwholesome region of remorse. It was needful for you to pass through that dark valley, but it is infinitely dangerous to linger there

too long; there is poison in the atmosphere, when we sit down and brood in it, instead of girding up our loins to press onward." (p. 273)

In order to grow, the soul must take a new direction. The perfectionist hope of a greater life for a man who dedicates himself in love to humankind is reflected by Kenyon and then by the narrator as they anticipate Donatello's emergence from remorse. Kenyon advises him to avoid the life of seclusion and to make his new life among men:

"But, for my own part, if I had an insupportable burthen—if, for any cause, I were bent upon sacrificing every earthly hope as a peace-offering towards Heaven—I would make the wide world my cell, and good deeds to mankind my prayer." (p. 267)

Donatello seems to respond to Kenyon's humanism:

. . . when first the idea was suggested of living for the welfare of his fellow-creatures, the original beauty, which sorrow had partly effaced, came back elevated and spiritualized. In the black depths, the Faun had found a soul, and was struggling with it towards the light of heaven. (p. 268)

That Donatello does eventually achieve what the perfectionists would call a higher humanity is supported by the growth of a mature love for Miriam and by the awakening of a moral sense which leads him to deliver himself up to the world for judgment.

Thus from the earliest published tales to the last major novel, Hawthorne demonstrated that he shared with nineteenth-century perfectionists a timeless moral concern, which had caught the attention of his Puritan ancestors, of how man rises above his natural state to a finer humanity, a greater manhood. Like both Puritan and perfectionist, Hawthorne believed that it was necessary for man to begin by making a journey into his own foul heart. Only when he faced the awful truth that he was the worst of sinners could he begin to grow in love. Man's ultimate concern, however, could not continue to be his own soul nor his own salvation in the hereafter, but the well-being of his brothers on this earth. The arrow of his soul's compass had to be moved outward by love rather than inward, for although contemplation and seclusion were necessary stages in man's development, the complete man had to emerge from seclusion

to become an active participant in society. The Hawthornian character who fails to emerge continues to be obsessed and bedeviled. The possibility of regeneration is usually represented by the love of a woman who is invariably a link with society.

Hawthorne found these concerns interesting and useful to the end of his life because he was both Puritan and democrat, convinced of the dangerous inner hell of the soul at the same time that he was caught up in the high possibilities of nineteenth-century society, and because he could not dismiss either the past or the present, either the light or the dark of human nature.

The combination of seventeenth-century Puritanism and nineteenth-century progressivism, which has confused or intrigued Hawthorne's critics, is no other than the religious mind of the age as it was mirrored in the perfectionism of Hawthorne's Bowdoin professor, Thomas C. Upham, and others. Both recognized the dark, forbidden mystery of the soul below, which had to be experienced and transcended in love, and the active, growing world of human relationships above, in which salvation had to be achieved.