Hawthorne and the Universal Reformers

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Writing to Thomas Carlyle in 1840, Emerson reported that “We are a little wild here with numberless projects of social reform. Not a reading man but has a draft of a new Community . . . . One man renounces the use of animal food; another of coin; . . . and another of the State; and on the whole we have a commendable share of reason and hope” (Correspondence, I, 334–35). Emerson engaged no doubt in some hyperbole here, not only as to the number but the nature of his countrymen’s reformist projects. Few were the sort of detailed drafts for the complete reorganization of society such as Charles Fourier produced contemporaneously in France or Robert Owen in England—the sort of imaginative reconstructions that we call utopias. And compared with the enormous outpouring in the last half of the nineteenth century, the first half of the century generated far fewer utopian fictions; furthermore, according to Joel Nydahl, “the main thrust of American utopian fiction during the first half of the nineteenth century was antiprogressive”—offering, that is, primarily negative visions of America’s prospects and possibilities (274). In this sense, then, Emerson’s era produced little memorable utopian literature, fictive or otherwise; it was, however, an era fermentative with the utopian impulse, rife with plans, projects, schemes and visions for reforming the world. “The present age,” Emerson claimed elsewhere, “will be marked by its harvest of projects for the reform of domestic, civil, literary, and ecclesiastical institutions” (Works, I, 269).

Indeed, 1840 witnessed the convocation in Boston’s Chardon Street Chapel of the Convention of Friends of Universal Reform, an assemblage—to cite Emerson once more—of “madmen, madwomen, men with beards, Dunkers, Muggletonians, Come-outers, Groaners, Agrarians, Seventh-Day Baptists, Quakers, Abolitionists, Calvinists, Unitarians, and Philosophers . . . [all come] to chide, or pray, or preach, or protest” (Works, X, 374). Thoreau, viewing this melioristic mania with the wryly skeptical eye that shades Walden, avowed: “If anything ail a man . . . if he have a pain in his bowels even, he forthwith sets about reforming—the world” (53). Much pain must have afflicted many bowels in the decades of the 40s and 50s, for, as James Russell Lowell declared, “every possible form of intellectual and physical dyspepsia brought forth its gospel. Everybody has a mission (with a capital M) to attend to everybody-else’s business” (Works, I, 362). The Friends of Universal Reform clearly were afoot.
Hawthorne was no friend of the Friends of Universal Reform, nor, indeed, of sweeping reform of any sort. Of all the significant intellectual figures of this time and place, he was probably the most conservative, certainly the most skeptical of the efficacy of human effort to effect its conscious design. In his 1852 campaign biography of Franklin Pierce, Hawthorne claimed categorically: "There is no instance, in all history, of the human will and intellect having perfected any great moral reform by methods which it adapted to that end" (Works, XII, 417). Ten years later in "Chiefly About War Matters," that curious, provocative account of his trip to the battlefields of Virginia, he reiterated this view: "No human effort, on a grand scale, has ever yet resulted according to the purpose of its projectors... We miss the good we sought, and do the good we little cared for" (Works, XII, 332). Construed literally, such statements would entail a fatalism severe enough to satisfy the most orthodox Muslim. Hawthorne was, however, no rigorous philosopher of history, and one could most charitably construe such sweeping generalizations as the somewhat overwrought response to the meddlesome and misguided attempts of the Universal Reformers to impose simplistic rationalistic theories on the intractable complexity of life. Put another way, Hawthorne may be suggesting, in these skeptical pronouncements, what Marx in The Eighteenth Brumaire called "the irony of history"—the fact that historical actions frequently have unintended consequences, consequences often in complete contradiction to the purposes of the actors. Thus, in Hawthorne's view, ironically a Northern victory in the Civil War would prove of greater benefit, morally, to the South: "whether we intend it so or no, they have a greater stake in our success than we can possibly have. For ourselves, the balance of advantages between defeat and triumph may admit of question. For them, all truly valuable things are dependent on our complete success; for thence would come the regeneration of a people, removal of a foul scuff that has overgrown their life..." (331). Even so pernicious a policy as Archbishop Laud's religious persecution had the paradoxical result of promoting the cause of liberty by driving the Puritans to the New World: "Liberty would have had no cradle," Hawthorne asserted, "and the world would have been hindered in its march, perhaps for centuries, but for the timely aid of the Archbishop." Truly, then, as he put it in one of his most memorable formulations, "Man's accidents are God's purposes" (Works, XII, 332).

What Hawthorne saw as "the intricate and unintelligible machinery of Providence" at work in the world, the divine hand directing events supra-liminally and even in opposition to declared human purpose, led him, then, to an almost mystical quietism regarding political reform. Take, for instance, the Abolitionist agitation that dominated the 1850's, unquestionably the most important reform movement of the decade. Hawthorne opposed the policies of the radical Abolitionist—the John Browns and William Lloyd Garrisons and Harriet Beecher Stowes—not because he favored the maintenance of slavery, but because he "look[ed] upon slavery as one of those evils which divine providence does not leave to be remedied by human con-
trivances, 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" (Life of Pierce, Works, XII, 417). Even after the Civil War had begun and its outcome was apparent, Hawthorne still argued to his sister-in-law Elizabeth Peabody, herself an ardent abolitionist, that the war could "only effect by a horrible convulsion the selfsame end that might and would have been brought about by a gradual and peaceful change" (Letters, Works, Cent. Ed. XVIII, 590). While it is possible, of course, that slavery might have disappeared gradually and peacefully, over time, the proposition nevertheless enmeshes Hawthorne in contradiction: even if the War were an evil—one of man's "accidents"—it must nevertheless be viewed, on the Providential premise, as God's purpose. The concept of providence, that is, commits the proponent to the proposition that whatever is, is right: that how things happen must be how they were divinely ordained to happen. That God's vessel for ending slavery in America was Abraham Lincoln not Franklin Pierce, convulsion and civil war not compromise and evolution His modus operandi, ought, it seems, have suggested itself to Hawthorne. While one cannot be expected to anticipate the course of "the intricate and unintelligible machinery of Providence," still one should at least be able to discern it, if at all, post facto.

The concept of Providence generally—and certainly as Hawthorne invokes it—serves to validate a worldview that exalts tradition and inherited institutions over innovation and the exercise of unaided human reason as a guide to action. So meager is the personal stock of any man's experience and knowledge that to set it against the accumulated wisdom of the ages, as distilled into custom and tradition, constitutes a sort of intellectual hubris, foolish if not dangerous. Given this predisposition, Hawthorne, not surprisingly, viewed with utmost skepticism the attempts of Universal Reformers to remake the world according to their various rationalistic theories. "If mankind were all intellect," he wrote in The English Notebooks, "they would be constantly changing so that one age would be entirely unlike another" (45). The continuity of history, the persistence over centuries of the same beliefs and patterns of behavior, is explicable only on the premise that human nature is a constant, essentially unalterable—a view that entails a pessimistic assessment of mankind's ability to alter radically, by conscious design, itself or its institutions. Witnessing a troop of soldiers, Hawthorne mused: "Set men face to face, with weapons in their hands, and they are as ready to slaughter one another now, after playing at peace and good will so many years, as in the rudest ages, that never heard of peace societies" ("War Matters," Works, XII, 388–89). This view—so surprisingly like Freud's, for instance, in his exchange of letters with Einstein in Why War?—is meant as a descriptive statement, not a normative judgment: a realistic acknowledgment of the enduring psychic substructure of the human race. "The great conservative," Hawthorne declared, "is the human heart which remains the same in all ages" (English Notebooks, 45).

The Universal Reformers, deluded in believing that they could alter substantially either the heart or condition of humanity, intrigued Hawthorne
throughout his career. As early as 1835 he sketched in his notebooks the plot for a tale (never actually written) of a messianic reformer who, on the point of converting many to his extreme doctrines, is discovered to be a lunatic escaped from a madhouse; and in his last published work, Our Old Home, he contemplates a tunnel under the Thames that he thinks would make a good dungeon for this sort: “How would every successive age rejoice in so secure a habitation for its reformers . . . [who seek] to burn up our whole system of society, under the pretense of purifying it from its abuses! Away with him into the Tunnel . . . !” (Works, VII, 296). In the three decades between these two examples and in various forms, Hawthorne reverted to the motif of the maniacal reformer doing his worst attempting to do good. The best known and artistically most satisfying version of this cautionary scenario is probably “The Birthmark,” with the reformer cast as a scientist (Aylmer) intent on ridding his wife of the one flaw, a small hand-like birthmark on his cheek, that—to him—mars her otherwise perfect beauty. Certain that his knowledge can yield a creation superior to God’s own, he vaunts that he will “triumph” in correcting “What nature left imperfect in her fairest work!” (Works, Cent. Ed., X, 41). The operation is a success, but the patient dies: the birthmark, that is, the emblem of Georgiana’s humanity, reaches so deep into her being that its removal amounts to murder. While this tale—like all those that have established Hawthorne’s reputation as one of the world’s great writers—is too complex, too aswirl with countercurrents, to yield an unambiguous moral, still it takes no great leap of imagination to see Aylmer as the only slightly “displaced” utopian reformer, what Robert Heilman, in his classic study of the story, calls “a romantic perfectibilitarian . . . [who] in his presumption . . . proposes to establish heaven on earth” (587). Though blinded by his hubris to human limitation, Aylmer is drawn with considerable sympathy for the nobility of his aspiration. Hawthorne seldom showed so much sympathy, however, for this type. In “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” Hawthorne’s other take on a maniacal scientist, he again presents the misguided idealist destroying what he seeks to improve, through his unwillingness to accept the natural, normal limits of human existence. The Universal Reformer is here figured as a perverted Prospero, a wicked magician employing his supernal arts in the cause of an unholy (and wholly illogical) perfectibilism. Likewise Hawthorne’s tales of the New England Puritans—whose purpose, of course, was the utopian goal of founding, in John Winthrop’s famous phrase, a City on a Hill, a New Jerusalem—evidence a skepticism toward their fanatical zeal to redeem the world, with the whipping-post and brand when necessary. “The May-Pole of Merry Mount,” “Endicott and the Red Cross,” “The Gentle Boy” all present the Puritans as rigid, self-righteous, persecutor in imposing their vision of truth upon the world; “The Man of Adamant,” thin and clumsy as fiction, nevertheless reveals most unambiguously Hawthorne’s antipathy toward the type who will sacrifice the fullness and complexity of life for the narrow rigidity of ideological purity: for Hawthorne, the very definition of the reformer. Of this type he charged: “You look at matters
with an awful squint, which distorts everything within your line of vision; and it is queer, though natural, that you think everybody squints except yourselves" (Letters, Works, Cent. Ed., XVIII, 89).

It was not so much the content of reformist ideology as the psychology of the reforming ideologue that interested Hawthorne, so that he tended to locate his crypto-reformist tales not in contemporary times confronted with specific contemporary problems, but rather in abstract and vaguely distant times and places (the Padua of "Rappaccini's Daughter" has no more reality than, say, the Paris of Poe's detective tales) or in the world of pure allegory, as in "The Hall of Fantasy," "The Celestial Railroad," or "Earth's Holocaust"; and to project the reformer's schemes in metaphoric and symbolic terms rather than literally. This displacement of the reformer's purpose in time and space allows Hawthorne to concentrate on the universal character of the reformer, sub specie aeternitatis, not on the specifics of the reform—a strategy in keeping with the general allegorizing imperative of Hawthorne's creative imagination. The major exception to such a strategy would seem to be The Blithedale Romance, with its contemporary setting and interplay of some of the pressing social issues of the day. Here, it is often claimed, Hawthorne revealed most explicitly, with the least indirection, his attitude toward utopia and utopian reformers. But that, as Hamlet says, would be scanned.

Blithedale, of course, is Hawthorne's fictionalized version of Brook Farm, the experiment in communitarianism located in Roxbury, near Boston. Much of the enduring fame of Brook Farm results no doubt from Hawthorne's having been one of its first inhabitants and his having memorialized his experience in fiction. Given the generally skeptical turn of Hawthorne's mind and particularly his skepticism of—even antipathy toward—the reformist mentality, it surprises to find him engaging in an enterprise whose founder, George Ripley, declared to be a harbinger of the millennium: humanity, the constitution of Brook Farm proclaimed, "is at length prepared to enter into that universal order toward which it has perpetually moved" (qtd. in Frothingham, 179). Although Hawthorne left Brook Farm before it was reorganized on strictly Fourierist principles, still its utopian aspirations were apparent from the outset. Speculation abounds on what led the introverted, intensely private, and skeptically conservative Hawthorne to cast his lot with the Universal Reformers, but the simplest and perhaps quite sufficient answer is economic: he could support himself there, he thought, and still find time to pursue his writing career. The venture did not work out for Hawthorne personally—he left after less than a year—nor, ultimately, for Brook Farm itself, which lasted for only six or seven years. Still, it provided him with the sort of first hand experience that could have enabled him to construct a trenchant analysis of utopian communitarianism in action. Such, however, proved not to be the case. In The Blithedale Romance, the reality of Brook Farm recedes into a hazy, insubstantial background, little more than a stage set for a melodrama of clashing personalities who have no real commitment to the experiment that they are ostensibly engaged in. Henry
James long ago noted that the ground of Blithedale slips from under our feet as we read: "we get too much out of reality.... I should have liked to see the story concern itself more with the little community in which its scenes are laid." The complaints that Hawthorne had slandered his former compatriots were misdirected, James declared: "Indeed, the brethren of Brook Farm should have held themselves slighted rather than misrepresented," for he "treated their institution mainly as a perch for starting upon an imaginative flight" (108).

What James judges a minor aesthetic flaw in a generally successful work, George Eliot more sweepingly condemns as both an intellectual and moral failure of the novel's total conception. Blithedale, as a socialist community, serves merely "as a scaffolding": the ideal animating the experiment "has so little business in [the plot] that it never grows into an organic part of the story.... [I]t is really not made responsible for anything, good, bad, or indifferent. It forms a circumference of circumstances, which neither mould the characters, nor influence the destinies, of the individuals...—forms, in short, not an essential part of the picture, but an enormous fancy border, not very suitable for the purpose for which it was designed." Having taken up the challenge "to dramatize his experience and observation of Communist life," Eliot concludes, it was incumbent on Hawthorne to follow through on his premise in a consequential way; this he fails to do, substituting scenery for substance (263–64).

In fairness to Hawthorne it should be noted that in his Preface he explicitly abjures any intent to render a realistic account of Brook Farm: the author's "whole treatment of the affair," he insists, "is altogether incidental to the purpose of the Romance; nor does he put forward the slightest pretention to illustrate a theory, or elicit a conclusion, favorable or otherwise, in respect to Socialism." Anticipating, perhaps, the James–Eliot sort of objection, Hawthorne acknowledges that his use of a socialist community served only to establish a theater removed from ordinary life "where the creatures of his brain may play out their phantasmagorical antics"—a strategy defended by appeal to the generic character of the romance, with its release from "every-day Probability" and its evocation of an atmosphere of fairy tale or daydream (Works, Cent. Ed., III, 1). With so much conceded by the author, what cogency remains in the critics' strictures?

The problem with his rationale appears when Hawthorne claims: "Furthermore, the scene was in good keeping with the personages whom he desired to introduce." This is simply not so: that is, the three central characters—Coverdale (the narrator), Zenobia, and Hollingsworth—are not in the least "in keeping with" the communitarian spirit supposedly uniting the inhabitants of Blithedale. Coverdale, a rich young dandy and would-be artist, is far too arch, too cynical, too aware that he is engaged in what Emerson called a perpetual picnic of shepherds and shepherdesses, "an Age of Reason in a patty-pan" (Works, X, 364) to pass for a utopian of any sort; indeed, in his skepticism about human nature, Coverdale sounds very like his author, who, it is sometimes suggested, was offering here a masochistic
self-portrait. In any event, he provides for Coverdale sentiments we know to be entirely his own: "we may be very sure . . . that the good we aim at will not be attained. People never do get just the good they seek. If it come at all, it is something else, which they never dreamed of, and did not particularly want" (75). Coverdale, then, might well have gone on to write The Life of Franklin Pierce, but he can never convince us that he had any serious desire to reform the world—or even to farm communally.

Zenobia (much the most fascinating character in the book) does have a portion of the fanatical reformer’s furious zeal, but a zeal in no way channeled into the life of Blithedale. She is presented as a proto-feminist, angry, frustrated, fulminating against the oppression of women and the narrowness of the meager opportunities afforded them; but Blithedale offers no alternative gender roles—the women are quite traditionally domestic—nor is Zenobia ever shown trying to institute any. Her philippics could as well have been delivered in a Beacon Hill drawing room, which, truth to tell, would better suit her luxurious and luxury-loving personality. No more than Coverdale does Zenobia belong, intellectually or temperamentally, in a utopian commune. Furthermore, Hawthorne reveals that Zenobia’s true motive for coming to Blithedale is the quite un-feminist one of trying to catch a husband—Holllingsworth, to be exact. Indeed, even her feminism is exposed as an expression of purely personal frustration, a sublimation of unfulfilled sexual passion. Women, claims Hawthorne-as-Coverdale, “are not natural reformers, but become such by the pressure of exceptional misfortune. I could measure Zenobia’s inward trouble, by the animosity with which she now took up the general quarrel of woman against man” (121). If not altogether a pretense, Zenobia’s forcefully articulated feminism appears finally as only a defense mechanism disguising her true feelings—and, in any event, evaporates before her desire to become Mrs. Hollingsworth. “Can it be, Zenobia,” cries Coverdale at one point, “that you ever really numbered yourself with our little band of earnest, thoughtful, philanthropic laborers?” (164). The answer is no; but the answer would also be no, if the question were directed at Coverdale himself.

Or at Hollingsworth. Of all the characters in The Blithedale Romance, he has the true personality of the Universal Reformer—as Hawthorne conceived it: radical, monomaniacal, ruthless. Had he been presented as the guiding spirit of Blithedale, Hawthorne could have merged the radical reformer and the utopian reform in a single encompassing experiment, demonstrating how personality and program re-enforced each other. The situation, that is—given Hawthorne’s anti-millennial animus—had all the makings of the great American dystopia. Hawthorne, however, depicts Hollingsworth not as a supporter of Blithedale’s socialist experiment, but actually as its subverter. He is an agitator for some vaguely presented panacea of penal reform and joins Blithedale only in hopes of using it as a means for furthering his own ends. To Coverdale’s urging that he enter into the spirit of the place, Hollingsworth remains impervious, even hostile. “I begin to discern,” Coverdale confesses, “that he had come among us, actuated by
no real sympathy with our feelings and our hopes" (54–55). That puts the matter rather mildly, for, as Robert Elliott sums up, “Hollingsworth is contemptuous of the project from the beginning, seeing it as a miserably frivolous thing compared to his own scheme for reforming criminals” (73–74). With Hollingsworth alienated from Blithedale and its ideals and with the injection of his advocacy of a conflicting agenda of activism, Hawthorne dissociates the reformer from the reform, the personality type that is drawn to utopia from the utopia to which, one would have thought, it would naturally be drawn. “A radical incoherence,” Elliott correctly claims, “exists at the heart of The Blithedale Romance” (79).

The result is a dual failure in The Blithedale Romance: first, the failure to make Blithedale real, an idea-in-action exerting discernable influence on the lives of the characters inhabiting it; second, the failure to effect the obvious ideological union between Hollingsworth, Hawthorne’s archetype of the Universal Reformer, and the attempt at radical social reform that Hawthorne saw firsthand at Brook Farm. A result of these failures is that utopia never gets—not a fair hearing: one would hardly expect that from Hawthorne—but a serious hearing. What could have been a profound political novel—perhaps even on a par with The Possessed or The Charterhouse at Parme—becomes instead an exercise in evasive Gothic mystification, so that one can but agree with Irving Howe that “by any serious reckoning The Blithedale Romance must be called a remarkable failure by a very remarkable writer” (174).4

I want to suggest that, despite its contemporaneity, the setting of Hawthorne’s romance has about it the same distanced abstractness as the setting of his earlier tales—and, perhaps, for the same reasons, though with less fortunate results. Clearly, crucial to the purpose of his story is the exposure of the true nature of the Universal Reformer, whose benevolence is all coldly theoretical, never personal and practical. Although Hawthorne squandered the opportunity to realize this figure in a realistic and socially significant context, he nevertheless provides in his blacksmith-turned-philanthropist the most extensive anatomy anywhere in his opus of the psychology of the reformer. Some years earlier Coleridge had written: “I have never known a trader in philanthropy who was not wrong in heart somewhere or other. Individuals so distinguished are usually . . . men not benevolent or beneficent to individuals, but almost hostile to them” (qtd. in Abel, 186). This provides an exact description of Hollingsworth—or, indeed, of any of Hawthorne’s philanthropists: like the one in “The Christmas Banquet” “who had become so deeply sensible of the calamities of thousands and millions of his fellow creatures . . . that he had no heart to do what little good lay immediately within his power” (Works, Cent. Ed., X, 303). In characterizing Hollingsworth, Hawthorne hammers this theme relentlessly: his only friend, Coverdale relates,

was the cold, spectral monster which he has himself conjured up, and on which he was wasting all the warmth of his heart, and of which, at last—as these men of a mighty purpose so invariably do—he had grown to be the bond-slave. It was his philanthropic theory! . . . Sad, indeed, but by no means unusual. He
had taught his benevolence to pour its warm tide exclusively through one channel; so that there was nothing to spare for other great manifestations of love to man, nor scarcely for the nutriment of individual attachments, unless they could minister, in some way, to the terrible egotism which he mistook for an angel of God. (55)

This terrible egotism leads him to exploit others—particularly Zenobia and the pitiful ice-maiden Priscilla—to further his monomanically embraced ideal: fruitlessly, as it proves, for Coverdale, embittered by the damage he has done, forces him to confess that he has reformed not a single criminal.

The moral which presents itself to my reflections, as drawn from Hollingsworth’s character and errors, is simply this:—that, admitting what is called philanthropy...to be often useful by its energetic impulse to society at large, it is perilous to the individual whose ruling passion, in one exclusive channel, it thus becomes. It ruins, or is fearfully apt to ruin, the heart... (243)

The ruined heart, reflecting the loss of human sympathy, figures in “Ethan Brand” as a metaphor for the Unpardonable Sin, the forfeiture of one’s hold “on the magnetic chain of humanity.” Brand, too, begins as a philanthropic idealist, but the hypertrophy of his intellect results in an atrophy of his heart—which “had withered—had hardened—had perished! It had ceased to partake of the universal throb” (Works, Cent. Ed., XI, 98–99). When, in despair, Brand leaps into the flaming lime furnace, his heart is revealed to have turned to marble—the symbolic equivalent of what Hollingsworth’s reformist mania had done to him.

If Blithedale is Hawthorne’s most ambitious attempt to depict the type of the Universal Reformer, “Earth’s Holocaust”—one of the most complex and successful of his allegorical satires—presents the spectacle of Universal Reform itself. Quite literally, universal reform: for, in it, all the “evils” that have plagued human history are consigned to the flames of a great bonfire of the vanities. One of Hawthorne’s pure allegories, it has none of that shifting interplay between the real and the fantastic that marks his great stories—“Young Goodman Brown,” say, or “My Kinsman, Major Molineux.” Rather “Earth’s Holocaust” is unalloyed fantasy, playful in manner but wholly serious in intent—and patently didactic. Allegorical satire, as a genre, with its palpable intent to instruct, exerts little appeal to modernist readers who want unresolved tensions and teasing ambiguities in their tales, and less to the post-modernists who embrace only uncertainty: so that, as a type, “Earth’s Holocaust” seems old-fashioned and literal, univocal. However, as Hyatt Waggoner suggests, we may often go to these works “to find out the meanings Hawthorne intended to express in his fiction. In the sketches belief is generally in control, the phantoms that haunt the mind mostly absent... ‘Earth’s Holocaust,’ for instance, tells us what Hawthorne must have intended to say on his theme of social reform in Blithedale” (27). Without subscribing wholly to this instrumental way of reading the allegories, I would agree that belief rather than imagination, in the deepest sense, informs them. In any event, “Earth’s Holocaust” provides Hawthorne’s clearest credo on the subject of utopian reform.
The allegory has two "voices" that run throughout: a naïve young narrator, initially enthusiastic, but increasingly alarmed at the escalating virulence of reform; and his older, wiser companion who offers skeptical, often wryly understated judgments on the consequences of the frenzy. In addition there is a babble of other voices, arguing the merits of each new consignment to the fire—with the more radical voice always carrying the day. Hawthorne's strategy is to begin with what his readers, nineteenth century American democrats, would universally concur ought to be swept out of existence—the vestiges of hereditary monarchy and aristocratic privilege—and, by increments of destruction and a Pyrohnik logic, to arrive finally at the inevitable tossing-on meant to horrify these same readers the most—the Bible itself: for what was the Bible but the symbol of traditional authority that checked the will of man himself and for which "the inhabitants of the earth had grown too enlightened? Therefore, as the final sacrifice of human error, what else remained, to be thrown upon the embers of that awful pile, except the Book, which, though a celestial revelation to past ages, was but a voice from a lower sphere, as regarded the present race of man? It was done!" (Works, Cent. Ed., X, 400). Between the baubles of aristocracy and the Bible, an array of the world's evils is conflagrated: liquor, of course, and tea and coffee and tobacco—"Everything rich and racy—all the spice of life!", complained one old gentleman—female modesty, armies and all the weapons of war, the instruments of punishment and then the idea of punishment itself, marriage, money, property, the state, literature and philosophy, and all organized religions. This is Universal Reform with a vengeance, a catalogue lacking only fur coats, Styrofoam cups and veal chops to satisfy even the most demanding philanthropist of this, our own demandingly philanthropic age.

The allegory, Waggoner states, "invites, indeed almost demands, the kind of explication best offered by historical scholarship, for it is a satirical comment on many of the most important trends and historical events of Hawthorne's age" (19). One recognizes throughout echoes of many of the contemporary melioristic or millenarian voices of the times—satirically distorted, of course, but recognizable. To take a single instance, the burning of the books follows from arguments against the burden of tradition and for the sufficiency of nature as a guide that are easily identified with the Transcendentalists: "Is not Nature better than a book?—is not the human heart deeper than any philosophy?—is not life replete with more instruction than past observers have found possible to write down in maxims?" (398). These are of course the Romantic, anti-traditionalist sentiments found, for instance, in Emerson's "The American Scholar": admirable—or at least innocuous—sentiments in themselves, they serve as the premise for a **reduc-tio ad absurdum** that leads ultimately in Hawthorne's fantasy to the burning of all books: "Now we shall get rid of the weight of dead men's thought, which has hitherto pressed so heavily on the living intellect... The chief benefit to be expected from this conflagration of past literature, undoubtedly is, that writers will henceforth be compelled to light their lamps at the sun..."
or stars” (396). The American rejection of the past and faith in its intellectual independence are thus presented as contributory to a destructive mania.

Hawthorne’s strategy involves creating a context in which ideas, individually well-meant and supportable, are condemned by association—or, perhaps, by acceleration: a sort of whirlpool effect in which each reform sucks the next into the fire behind it, until only desolation and a pile of ashes remain. At one point the old observer comments: “Believe me, the fire will not be allowed to settle down, without the addition of fuel that will startle many persons, who have lent a willing hand thus far” (399). Correspondingly, Hawthorne’s strategy presupposes that each reader, who has lent a willing ear thus far, will mentally call a halt, at some point in the allegory, to the orgy of reform, will draw the line somewhere between what should be burned and what spared. Some will agree that the gallows must go, but prisoners too? Some will reject this or that form of government or perhaps some feature of all governments, but how many will endorse anarchy? No one, presumably, is expected to go all the way in endorsing the reformist pyromania: but where to stop—or, more importantly, why stop? Hawthorne, that is, anticipates the dynamics of the leftward imperative of modern politics, the drive toward ever more radical solutions to social ills and the consequent contempt felt by the more extreme for the less extreme: the Jacobins for the Girondists, the socialist for the liberal, the Marxist for the socialist, the Stalinist for the Trotskyite, the anarchist for them all. Once one begins down the slippery slope of radical reform, Hawthorne suggests, there is no secure purchase until one reaches bottom. “Unless we set fire to the earth itself,” laments the once true-believing narrator, “I know not that we can carry reform to any further point” (399).

The implicit inference from the allegory—and the conclusion that I think Hawthorne himself drew—is that radical reform should not be undertaken at all. Consequently, even the initial reform—the destruction of monarchial/aristocratic structures, which, as I noted earlier, nineteenth-century American democrats could be expected to endorse—is called into question, subtly but unmistakably. First, Hawthorne allows an exponent of the old order to have his say:

This fire is consuming all that marked your advance from barbarism, or that could have prevented your relapse thither. We—the men of the privileged orders—were those who kept alive, from age to age, the old chivalrous spirit; the gentle and generous thought; the higher, the purer, the more refined and delicate life! . . . In abolishing the majestic distinctions of rank, society loses not only its grace, but its steadfastness—. (383–84)

The egalitarian spirit no doubt rejects such objection as the worst sort of special pleading—and it keeps not a single crown or coat-of-arms from being consigned to the fire—but Hawthorne encapsulates here the argument for aristocracy that prevailed in European culture at least since the Renaissance, the locus classicus of which is probably Ulysses’ speech on degree in Troilus and Cressida, and that still found vigorous expression in, for instance, the words of Samuel Johnson, one of Hawthorne’s intellectual heroes. In
Boswell's *Life*, Dr. Johnson declares: "Sir, I am a friend of subordination, as most conducive to the happiness of society. . . . Were all distinctions abolished, the strongest would no longer acquiesce, but would endeavor to obtain a superiority by . . . strength . . . . As subordination is very necessary for society . . . mankind, that is to say, all civilized nations, have settled it upon a plain invariable principle. . . . Were we all upon an equality, we should have no other enjoyment than mere animal pleasure" (I, 442).

To what degree Hawthorne shared such sentiments is debatable, but certainly he agreed with Dr. Johnson that remedies for life's ills must be palliative not radical, for "Radical changes, or changes en masse, would very probably make things worse than they are" (Sewell, 313). When the narrator exults that all the aristocratic nonsense has been swept away, the wise old figure replies, "And in good time—if no worse nonsense come in its place" (384). Hawthorne no doubt had in mind the example of the French Revolution, which yielded, along with the Declaration of the Rights of Man, the term *terrorism*; but his old sage may be accorded even a degree of prescience: in the worst year of political repression under the last Russian czar, known to history as "Bloody Nicholas," far fewer political prisoners were executed than in any year of Stalin's purges, as Robert Conquest reminds us, when the body count ran into the tens of thousands (285–88). At all events, Hawthorne, ever suspicious of any radical rupture in the social fabric, presents the overthrow of the *ancien régime* as the first step in that imagined process of reform that leads inexorably to the earth's holocaust. He seems to draw the line, then, right at the beginning, counseling the bearing of those collective ills we have rather than flying to others that we know not of.

Yet it is finally not so much the danger as the impossibility of utopian reform that Hawthorne stresses. In his essay on *Hard Times*, Shaw states, "whereas formerly men said to the victims of society who ventured to complain, 'Go and reform yourself before you pretend to reform society,' it now has to admit that until Society is reformed, no man can reform himself except in the most insignificantly small ways" (334). Hawthorne clearly belongs to that earlier age, for he believed that the source of evil was not institutions but individual human hearts and that no amount of social tinkering would avail against the heart's impurities. He ends "Earth's Holocaust" with a coda in which the old wise man offers the disillusioned narrator "a strange assurance"—that "there is far less both of good and evil, in the effect of this bonfire, than the world might be willing to believe" (401). Tomorrow, he promises, will be very much like yesterday. Then, to overstate his point, Hawthorne introduces a dark stranger—clearly Satan—to have his say:

There is one thing that those wisaacres have forgotten to throw into the fire, and without which all the rest of the conflagration is just nothing at all . . . the human heart itself. . . . And unless they hit upon some method of purifying that foul cavern, forth from it will re-issue all the shapes of wrong and misery—the same old shapes, or worse ones—which they have taken such a vast deal of
trouble to consume to ashes... Oh, take my word for it, it will be the same old world yet! (403)

Hearing this, the narrator draws the allegory's moral: "Purify that inner sphere; and the many shapes of evil that haunt the outward...will turn to shadowy phantoms, and vanish of their own accord. But, if we go no deeper than the Intellect, and strive, with merely that feeble instrument, to discern and rectify what is wrong, our whole accomplishment will be a dream" (404). Universal Reform, Hawthorne thus contends, will be achieved, if at all, only heart by heart, never by the sort of top down restructuring of society envisioned in utopias.

The picture of Hawthorne's conservative attitude toward reform that I have drawn here, while accurate, is nevertheless monochromatic and not quite the whole truth. Scattered throughout his works one finds the occasional more forgiving estimate of the idealism that animates the reformer. I will close, then, with perhaps his most generous characterization, this from another of his allegories "The Hall of Fantasy." There are, first, the usual reservations:

It would be endless to describe the herd of real or self-styled reformers that peopled this piece of refuge. They were the representatives of an unquiet period, when mankind is seeking to cast off the whole tissue of ancient custom, like a tattered garment. Many of them had got possession of some crystal fragment of truth, the brightness of which so dazzled them, that they could see nothing else in the wide universe.

And yet, he continues,

The heart of the stanchest [sic] conservative, unless he abjured his fellowship with man, could hardly have helped throbbing in sympathy with the spirit that pervaded these innumerable theorists. It was good for the man of unquickened heart to listen even to their folly. Far down, beyond the fathom of the intellect, the soul acknowledged that all these varying and conflicting developments of humanity were united in one sentiment. Be the individual theory as wild as fancy could make it, still the wiser spirit would recognize the struggle of the race after a better and purer life, than had yet been realized on earth. My faith revived, even while I rejected all their schemes. (Works, Cent. Ed., XI, 180–181)

NOTES
1. For Hawthorne's attitude toward "reform," see Doubleday ("Hawthorne's Criticism"), Turner, Hall, Abel, Van Cromhaut, and Ziff. More tangential, but also relevant see Johnson, Reynolds, and Newberry (206–17). And for the attitude of some of the "reformers" toward Hawthorne, see Moore (128–129).
2. For Hawthorne's ambiguous position on abolition and the Civil War, see Mellow (409–10), Flint, and Yellin ("Hawthorne and the American National Sin" and "Hawthorne and the Slavery Question").
3. Although the review was unsigned, it has been convincingly attributed to Eliot by Rust.
4. Most recent commentary on The Blithedale Romance takes a more positive view of that work than the one reflected here; but comparing that commentary with the bracing rigor of
Eliot reaffirms that, as in art, there is no progress in criticism. Among the spate of criticism, however, for that most relevant to my focus here, see Howard, Stoehr and Berlant. A good general discussion is found in Miller (Ch. 26).

REFERENCES


