

HAWTHORNE OUR CONTEMPORARY: NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE'S
"THE BIRTHMARK" AND "ETHAN BRAND"

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Of the three major American "dark" Romantics – Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, and Nathaniel Hawthorne – the latter was the most prophetic. In particular, Hawthorne possessed – one is tempted to say was possessed by – a seismic sensitivity to the cultural aftershocks of the Industrial Revolution. A notebook entry from July 31, 1838, reads,

A steam engine in a factory is supposed to possess a malignant spirit; it catches one man's arm, and pulls it off; seizes another by the coat-tails; and almost grapples him bodily; – catches a girl by the hair, and scalps her; – and finally draws a man, and crushes him to death (Hawthorne 1987: 315).

This horrific "Idea for a Story" was partly realized in "Ethan Brand", published twelve years later (see below).

But consider too this notebook entry, written by Hawthorne the same year as "Ethan Brand":

In a moment, it dashes along in front of the station-house and comes to a pause; the locomotive hissing and fuming, in its eagerness to go on. How much life has come at once into this lonely place! Four or five long cars, each, perhaps, with fifty people in it; reading newspapers, reading pamphlet novels, chattering, sleeping; all this vision of passing life! ... Meantime, the passenger, stepping from the solitary station-house into the train, finds himself in the midst of a new world, all in a moment ... [A]ltogether, it is a scene of stirring life, with which a person, who had been waiting long for the train to come by, might find it difficult at once to amalgamate himself (Hawthorne 1987: 327).

This paean to the social graces of the railroad suggests that Hawthorne, like his contemporary Ralph Waldo Emerson, could be of two minds about technology and the brave new future that it foreshadowed.

Hawthorne was also fascinated by photography, which began to come of age on both sides of the Atlantic during his middle years. In the following scene from *The House of the Seven Gables*, the daguerrotypist Holgrave instructs Phoebe Pyncheon on the finer points of his "art":

Most of my likenesses do look unamiable; but the very sufficient reason, I fancy, is, because the originals are so. There is a wonderful insight in heaven's broad and simple sunshine. While we give it credit only for depicting the merest surface, it actually brings out the secret character with a truth that no painter would ever venture upon, even could he detect it. There is at least no flattery in my humble line of art (Hawthorne 1967: 91).

Hawthorne died in 1864. He couldn't have foreseen, of course, the evolutionary spiral of televisual technologies that would characterize much of American cultural life in the twentieth-century. And yet, if we shift our focus from *The Notebooks* and *The House of the Seven Gables* to his short fiction, there's every indication that he intuited what history was to confirm a century after his death, namely that America would become a culture addicted to images.

Some contemporary critics – new historicists in particular – argue that writers can only be properly understood by situating them within the cultural context(s) of their own eras. I believe this proposition to be false. Of course it's important to see writers as men or women of their time, but if we limit ourselves to the perspectives of the past, then in essence the line between what constitutes a work of art and what constitutes a cultural document vanishes. This is fine for those new historicists who refuse to recognize the existence of such a line in the first place. But if the past illuminates the future, the future also illuminates the past. One need only recall how psychoanalytic criticism has enriched our understanding of Sophocles and Shakespeare to see how limited the new historicist position is. If, as Martin Esslin claims, "[L]iterary criticism can, and must, always be understood as an attempt to find in the past aspects of human experience that can shed light on the meaning of our own times", the exact opposite is also true: our own times can shed light on the meaning of past aspects of human experience *and* the texts that embody them (Esslin 1964: xi). Surely our reading of *Macbeth* gains by recognizing in it what Jan Kott calls "the Auschwitz experience", the quintessentially modern discovery that the mathematics of mass killing always comes down to the equation, one + infinity (Kott 1964: 82). Only in the twentieth-century, the age of assembly line death, can we appreciate the horror of Shakespeare's vision in ways in which his audiences, perhaps even Shakespeare himself, couldn't possibly envision. The same truism, I would argue, should be applied to the work of Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Let me begin this re-visioning of two of Hawthorne's major short fictions by offering symposium cushions to two theorists of contemporary¹ American culture, the late Marshall McLuhan and Jean Baudrillard. Applying their ideas to "The Birthmark" and to "Ethan Brand" will help reveal that Hawthorne anticipated with uncanny accuracy issues that only today commentators define as postmodern.

Of course "Ethan Brand's" supporting cast of characters – among them the stage-agent, the soap-boiler, and the village doctor – are victims of the Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the dehumanizing consequences of which Hawthorne was keenly aware. But as Leo Marx has convincingly shown, in "Ethan Brand" Hawthorne was also years ahead of his time in diagnosing the dangers inherent in the American mania for technology.² In fact, "Ethan Brand" is far more contemporary in spirit and in letter than even Marx suspected.

In coining his now-classic metaphor for the technological man, Marshall McLuhan helps us to detect what is "postmodern" in Hawthorne's prescient vision:

[The] extension of himself by mirror numbed [Narcissus'] perceptions until he became the servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image ... He had adapted to his extension of himself and had become a closed system (McLuhan 1964: 51).

In an age of digital TV's, personal computers and cellular phones, the myth of Narcissus serves as a perfect metaphor for the relationship of the technological man to the world of his own making: an environment of self-extensions. In McLuhan's familiar idiom, television is an extension of the eye, the telephone an extension of the ear, the automobile an extension of the foot, the Internet (which McLuhan clearly foresaw) an extension of the entire human nervous system.

In "Ethan brand", Nathaniel Hawthorne prefigures the technological dilemma of latter-day persons who have become servomechanisms of their own "extended or repeated" images. Twice in the story Hawthorne identifies Ethan Brand with his own technological implements:

At frequent intervals, he flung back the clashing weight of the iron door, and, turning his face from the insufferable glare, thrust in huge logs of oak, or stirred the immense *brands* with a long pole.

¹ By "contemporary" I mean since (roughly) 1960. Many critics see the sixties as a watershed of postmodernism. McLuhan's *Understanding Media* was published in 1964.

² See the discussions of "Ethan Brand" and other works by Hawthorne in Marx's classic volume (Marx 1964).

And:

As he advanced, he fixed his eyes – which were very *bright* – intently upon the brightness of the furnace, as if he beheld, or expected to behold, some object worthy of note within it [*italics added* – SC] (Hawthorne 1987: 232-233).

The “brands” in the furnace constitute, of course, a deliberate echo of the ego-driven Ethan’s last name, suggesting that they are but an extension of *him*. Put another way, over the years Ethan has become dehumanized, morally or spiritually indistinguishable from a “brand”, i.e., an inert technological object. In like manner, the “brightness” of the Promethean fire is depicted as an extension of Ethan’s “bright”, or fiery, eyes. Ethan is, in short, what I’ve called elsewhere³ an *ontological cyborg*, or a closed mechanomorphic system.

Something strikingly similar also occurs in “The Birthmark”. Like Ethan Brand, the scientist Alymer is a narcissist who is worshipped like a god by his doomed wife Georgiana; like Ethan, he too has become “numbed” to the human needs – indeed, to the very *being* – of his fellows. Alymer’s ontological numbness,⁴ like Ethan’s, is directly traceable to the fact that his work has also become an extension of himself:

Georgiana, you have led me deeper than ever into the heart of science. I feel myself fully competent to render this dear cheek as faultless as its fellow; and then, most beloved, what will be my triumph when I shall have corrected what Nature left imperfect in her fairest work! Even Pygmalion, when his sculptured woman assumed life, felt not greater ecstasy than mine will be (Hawthorne 1987: 121-122).

Pygmalion’s ivory statue, with whom the sculptor fell in love, is of course another instance of the psychology of self-extension(s) as articulated in Greek myth. Likewise for Alymer, Georgiana is an object of scientific curiosity, no more human to him than the brands ablaze in the furnace are to Ethan.

In his classic essay, “The Evil Demon of Images and Precession of Simulacra”, Jean Baudrillard, like Marshall McLuhan (1964), diagnoses the postmodern condition in terms of narcissistic self-extensions. For Baudrillard, however, these extensions take the form not of objects or material phenomena but of *images* or *simulacra*. In Baudrillard’s precession, the image undergoes four phases of development, each one of which is increasingly distanced from the “real”. In the first phase, “[the image] is the reflection of a basic reality”; in the second, “it masks and perverts a basic reality”; in the third, “it masks the ab-

³ See Carter (1999), and especially the chapter entitled, “The Descent of John Henry’s Hammer”.

⁴ McLuhan also points out the Greek root of the word “Narcissus” in “Narcosis” (1964: 51).

sence of a basic reality”; in the fourth, “it bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum” (Baudrillard 1993: 196).

“Ethan Brand” also contains an episode which may be interpreted in the light of Baudrillard’s second stage, the masking and perversion of reality. During Ethan’s visit on the mountain, “a number of the youth of the village” show up, intent on seeing the legendary Ethan Brand in the flesh. Their interest in the real personage, however, soon wanes:

As it happened, there was other amusement at hand. An old German Jew, traveling with a diorama on his back, was passing down the mountain-road towards the village ...

‘Come, old Dutchman!’ cried one of the young men, ‘let us see your pictures, if you can swear they are worth looking at!’ (Hawthorne 1987: 238).

The Dutchman⁵ obliges, and soon the youths are seduced away from the reality of Ethan Brand’s presence into a world of simulacra: “cities, public edifices ... ruined castles in Europe ... Napoleon’s battles and Nelson’s sea fights ...” (Hawthorne 1987: 238).

In the midst of these images, the Dutchman’s monstrous hairy hand – “which might have been mistaken for the Hand of Destiny” – is seen on the screen gesturing toward various objects (Hawthorne 1987: 238). Then, still another horrifying human extension appears:

... the German bade little Joe put his head into the box. Viewed through the magnifying glasses, the boy’s round, rosy visage assumed the strangest aspect imaginable of an immense Titanic child, the mouth grinning broadly ... (Hawthorne 1987: 238).

This grotesquerie itself is soon interrupted by “the eye of Ethan Brand” which is “fixed upon [the child] through the glass” (Hawthorne 1987: 239).

In this extended tableau, the power of the diorama (the nearest nineteenth century equivalent to modern-day television) to reconfigure reality into image, *and* to make that image more palatable than reality itself, is strikingly apparent. The substitution of the image (or the sign) for reality occurs in two sub-phases. In the first, it “masks” a “basic reality”; in the second, it “perverts” that reality. In both cases, the “basic reality” is *Ethan Brand himself*, who a) disappears from the text to be replaced by images, and b) becomes an image himself.

Baudrillard’s fourth phase, wherein the image “bears no relation to any reality whatsoever”, may be applied to a similar scene in “The Birthmark”. In it, Alymer seeks to “release [Georgiana’s] mind from the burden of actual things”:

⁵ “Dutchman” was contemporary slang for German.

Airy figures, absolutely bodiless ideas, and forms of unsubstantial beauty, came and danced before her, imprinting their momentary footsteps on beams of light ... Then again ... the procession of external existence flitted across a screen. The scenery and the figures of actual life were perfectly represented, but with that bewitching yet indescribable difference which always makes a picture, an image, or a shadow so much more attractive than the original (Hawthorne 1987: 123-124).

In this disturbing scene, Baudrillard's "precession of simulacra" is uncannily anticipated by Hawthorne's "procession [of images] across a screen" (Hawthorne 1987: 124). Georgiana is so entranced with Alymer's light show that she becomes increasingly anesthetized to what's happening to her. She has now entered what Baudrillard calls the fourth stage of the precession of simulacra: a world which is its own pure simulacrum. Like Ethan Brand, who we last saw "frozen" in Baudrillard's second stage, she'll soon be dead.

The figures that entrance Georgiana are created by Alymer, even as the image of his eye in the diorama is a "bewitching" simulacrum of Ethan Brand. Of course, images on a screen also constitute extensions of man. Thanks to the postmodern vocabulary of cultural critics like Marshall McLuhan and Jean Baudrillard, we may understand Hawthorne's prophetic vision of technology's dehumanizing power in ways in which his contemporaries couldn't possibly have imagined.

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