A system “too bare and meagre for human nature to love”: America in The American Claimant Manuscripts

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In the first chapter of Our Old Home Hawthorne recounts numerous examples of delusional Americans he met while acting as American Consul in Liverpool (1853-57). These characters imagined themselves as heirs to great English fortunes, and wanted Hawthorne’s help in prosecuting their claims:

A mere coincidence of names, . . . a suppositious pedigree, a silver mug on which an anciently engraved coat-of-arms has been half scrubbed out, a seal with an uncertain crest, an old yellow letter or document, in faded ink, the more scarcely legible the better—rubbish of this kind . . . has been potent enough to turn the brain of many an honest Republican, especially if assisted by an advertisement for lost heirs, cut out of a British newspaper. (5: 19-20)

While Hawthorne represents these characters humorously, they nonetheless reveal a failure to understand the democratic ideals of America or to appreciate the opportunities for self-development made possible by an egalitarian system of government.

“The American Claimant” project was originally imagined as a corrective to this impulse: it was to establish the superiority of the American identity and the greater opportunities for development that the nation offered its citizens. Narratives contrasting Europe and America were common in the period.¹ For Hawthorne, however, the exercise proved unsettling, and the “American Claimant” project went through a number of confusing plot shifts, character alterations and name changes, which radically altered its nature and direction. It consists of three separate documents, respectively labeled by the editors of the Collected Edition “The Ancestral Footstep,” “Etherege” and “Grimshawe,” which are supplemented by seven short studies, all of which were written between 1858 and 1861. Hawthorne’s efforts to shape the material into
a coherent narrative caused him to re-evaluate his idea of America, at
many points returning to and reconsidering themes developed in his
earlier writings. This process also compelled Hawthorne to undertake a
comprehensive interrogation of the nation and its history. As the work
progressed, he increasingly focused on the elements in American soci-
ety and culture that would lead the claimant—and by implication the
deluded visitors he dealt with in Liverpool—to imagine themselves as
having a fictitious heritage and identity. His revisions accordingly con-
stitute a crucial phase in his career, and a transitional point between his
earlier fiction and his increasingly caustic analyses of America expressed
in his Civil War writings, where he questioned the very rationale for the
nation.

The American Ideal: The Ancestral Footstep
In early drafts of the story, Hawthorne planned to connect the novel
specifically to the Americans who sought his help as Consul:

it begins, as an integral and essential part, with my introduc-
tion, giving a pleasant and familiar summary of my life in the
Consulate at Liverpool; the strange species of Americans, with
strange purposes in England, whom I used to meet there; and,
especially, how my countrymen used to be put out of their senses
by the idea of inheritances of English property. Then I shall
particularly instance one gentleman who called on me . . . And
then this Romance shall be offered half seriously, as the account
of the fortunes that he met with in his search for his hereditary
home. (12: 87)

Although the novel cannot be reduced to political or national issues, the
story was to emphasize the claimant’s eventual rejection of the English
estate and title. The plot Hawthorne originally projected would have
had the claimant—variously named Middleton, Etherege and Ned Red-
clyffe—experiencing the comforts of English upper-middle class life and
feeling tempted to take possession of the estate. However, the claimant’s
observations of England’s hierarchical class system and its limitations,
which are to be underscored by his relationship with a woman whom he
meets in England, lead him to repudiate his inheritance:

[He] forgoes his claim to the estate, and prefers the life of an
American, with its lofty possibilities for himself and his race, to
the position of an Englishman of property and title; and she, for her part, shall choose the condition and prospects of a woman in America, to the emptiness of the life of a woman of rank in England. So they shall depart, lofty and poor, out of the home which might be their own, if they would stoop to make it so. (12: 84-85)

Returning to America, “he and his wife become the Adam and Eve of a new epoch, and the fitting missionaries of a new social faith” (12: 58), this, of course, being freedom from the constraints and obligations of a class-based traditional society.

The claimant’s experiences in England would, moreover, highlight the inadequacies of the English social system. In an early description of the novel, Hawthorne writes that “English and American ideas [are] to be brought strikingly into contrast and contact” (12: 476), and that “[i]t must be shown . . . throughout, that there is an essential difference between English and American character, and that the former must assimilate itself to the latter, if there is to be any union” (12: 477). As such, in surveying the differences between the two cultures, the book, as initially planned, was to establish the superiority of American character and customs, as well as the greater possibilities that the nation afforded its citizens.

In Hawthorne’s earliest sketches for this narrative, English and American differences—and his assumption of American superiority—were to be expressed through the history of a noble English family and the complications regarding its line of descent. The story was to begin in the 1600s, before the English Civil War. There is great enmity within the noble family, and the second brother is expelled, leaving a bloody footprint on the threshold of the family mansion; he is then sent to America as a bondservant. Guilt-ridden over the strife and the treatment of his younger brother, the eldest brother dies without children, and the estate passes to a third brother in whose own family it subsequently descends. The claimant of the story is a descendant of the emigrant brother and is therefore the legitimate head of the family. The legal right of the American branch of the family to the property and title is a key element in Hawthorne’s original version, because it would provide the claimant with the authority to judge and reject the life England offers.

Hawthorne’s delineation of the family conflict remains consistent
throughout all of his revisions, but its application to contemporary differences between England and America changes dramatically. This occurs through his introduction of the figure of the pensioner, an inmate at a charitable hospital connected to the estate to which the claimant has pretensions, and who possesses information essential to his legal claim. This figure—alternatively named Hammond, Wentworth, Pearson and Seymour—varies profoundly between the drafts, and Hawthorne’s struggle to define his character, motivation, and significance was the primary impetus behind many of his subsequent revisions. He is an American expatriate, who tries to impede or frustrate the claimant’s prosecution of the estate. Through the rivalries between the claimant and the pensioner, Hawthorne expanded the narrative to engage competing political and social tendencies within America.² His inclusion complicates Hawthorne’s comparison of the two nations: while analyses of the English and American attitudes towards class and property would be maintained throughout the drafts, these issues would also be explored in a specifically American context, in terms of how they were evident in that nation’s history and politics.

**American Tensions: Etherege**

When first outlining the figure of the pensioner in his notes, Hawthorne writes, “he shall have been a great speculator, a man endowed with great practical ability, yet having in him a certain wildness or madness, which, in the last result, is liable to produce ruin. He shall have almost irresistible influence over those with whom he holds intercourse; because his plans are so splendid and appear so feasible” (12: 124). Developing his history, he adds, “I suppose him . . . to have fled his country and taken refuge in England; he shall have been a man of the Nicholas Biddle stamp, a mighty speculator, the ruin of whose schemes had crushed hundreds of people” (12: 52), including the claimant’s father. Biddle was the president of the Second Bank of the United States during Andrew Jackson’s presidency; Hawthorne was an ardent supporter of Jackson, and from a Jacksonian perspective, Biddle’s fiscal policies were seen as threatening to reduce American economic liberty by transforming the nation into a plutocracy controlled by an elite.³ As such, in the context of this version of the novel, the pensioner appears to stand for the forces that threatened to turn America into a quasi-feudal society
controlled by large financial institutions. This conception is amplified in
a passage where the pensioner is described as “possibly … a partaker in
Burr’s treasonable projects” (12: 483). Aaron Burr, too, was commonly
perceived as an overly ambitious politician who pursued power at the
expense of national interest: he was rumored to have planned to take
possession of a section of the American Southwest as his own monarchy,
and was suspected of being an agent for foreign powers.

Hawthorne imagined the pensioner as having a partnership with the
English lord who occupies the estate to which the claimant believes he
has title, managing his property and acting as his proxy. In “The Ances-
tral Footstep,” the pensioner’s daughter explains his motivations:

“If after his ruin; after the catastrophe that overwhelmed him and
hundreds more, he took to flight; guilty, perhaps, but guilty as
a fallen conqueror is . . . He found his way hither, led . . . by a
desire to re-connect himself with the place whence his family
had originated . . . Arrived here, there were circumstances that
chanced to make his talents and habits of business available to
this Mr. Eldredge [the English lord], a man ignorant and indol-
ent, unknowing how to make the best of the property that was
in his hands. By degrees, he took the estate into his management,
acquiring necessarily a preponderating influence over such a
man.” (12: 25-26)

Through this relationship, the story is reframed to link European aristoc-
rapy with the threat of an emerging pseudo-aristocratic order in Amer-
ica. Because of this allegiance, the pensioner is hostile to the claimant’s
interests and—although this remains undeveloped in the drafts—seems
to intrigue on order to frustrate the claimant’s case.

Hawthorne’s delineation of the pensioner as a speculator has ob-
vious analogues to other characters in his fiction, especially the Pyn-
cheon family in *The House of the Seven Gables*. In their case too there
is a persistent effort to establish their family as a colonial aristocracy.
Colonel Pyncheon, the founder, aspired to possession of “a vast . . .
track of eastern lands . . . more extensive than many a dukedom” and
potentially “the source of incalculable wealth” (2: 18); the expectation
of this property created “an absurd delusion of family importance . . .
as if there were yet a prospect of its ultimately forming a princedom for
themselves” (2: 19). In later generations, this expectation continues to
haunt the family, so that “the poorest member of the race [felt] as if he inherited a kind of nobility, and might yet come into the possession of princely wealth to support it” (2: 19). The Colonel’s grandson, Gervayse Pyncheon, returns to America after many years in Europe hoping to claim the same tract of land, the wealth from which would “be worth an earldom, and would reasonably entitle him to solicit, or enable him to purchase, that elevated dignity from the British monarch” (2: 199). The Pyncheons, like the pensioner, aspire to a kind of power and position for their family that is inherently incompatible with a democratic society. Judge Pyncheon, a descendant of this family, although not seeking official title, is part of a class that Hawthorne characterizes as working to extend its own power at the expense of democratic processes: he is one of the “practiced politicians . . . skilled to adjust those preliminary measures, which steal from the people . . . the power of choosing its own rulers” (2: 274).

In accord with this characterization of the pensioner, the claimant assumes a role akin to that of Holgrave in *The House of the Seven Gables*—that is, as embodying ideals of American self-reliance, and rejecting the political and economic forces that conspire to protect privilege. Indeed, many of the claimant’s remarks support this identification. Although initially charmed by England’s sense of permanence and security, he consistently champions American freedom from social constraint and tradition: he speaks of “a feeling, unknown probably to any but a republican . . . that there is no man above me . . . nor any below me” (12: 162) and complains of the English sense of “the Past hanging like a millstone round a country’s neck, or incrusted in many stony layers over the living form” (12: 165). These sentiments correspond strongly with those of Holgrave, who characterizes the past as lying “upon the Present like a giant’s dead body!” and the present as “a young giant . . . compelled to waste all his strength in carrying about the corpse of the old giant, his grandfather, who died a long while ago, and only needs to be decently buried” (2: 182-183). Later, when the claimant contemplates the traditional English village and the life of the peasantry, the narrator notes that the “stirring blood of the new land—where no man dwells in his father’s house—where no man thinks of dying in his birth-place—awoke within him, and revolted at the thought” (12: 180). This again recalls Holgrave’s description of the old Pyncheon house as
marked by “‘grime and sordidness, which are the crystallization on its walls of the human breath, that has been drawn and exhaled here, in discontent and anguish’” (2: 184).

Hawthorne’s conflation of the English aristocracy with the various forces he saw as conspiring to erode American freedoms moves the narrative beyond specifically nationalistic rivalry to a more general study of the dangers of social stratification: one that would obviously include discussions of the deadening effects of the English class system, but which would also examine its corrupting influence upon individuals in general. In the first half of the “Etherege” manuscript, however, Hawthorne evinces dissatisfaction with this trajectory, and writes “there is something wanting to make an action for the story” (12: 197). Although he does not elaborate upon his reservations, he notes that the conflict within the English family that led to the brother’s expulsion needs to parallel more specifically the current struggle over the estate: it must “appear as if dead men’s business . . . came to life again, and had to be finished now” (12: 198). To resolve this, Hawthorne abruptly reimagines the role of the pensioner:

A plain, quiet old man, and yet with some mighty importance and availability attaching to him. How? It must be something independent of the estate and title, which, in connection with it, shall seem morally incidental and trifling; and he must be the moral representative of the first emigrant—the planter of the Bloody Footstep. . . . In the end, it shall be not Etherege, but this simple old man who is the rightful heir; and he shall have been all along aware of it, but shall have quietly determined not to assert or to accept his rights. So this old man shall be the real hero of the story; and the reader shall have been prepared for him from the first; and his dignity and heroism shall be wrought out of peaceful elements, and shall take poverty and contempt for its royal robes. (12: 200)

In developing his new conception of this character, Hawthorne notes that he is to be “an object of vague suspicion and dislike among his associates” (12: 205-206), because he has “a conscience, and the inveterate habit of acting on it” (12: 207). The pensioner’s advice will be consistently ignored, because “his doctrines have not enough quackery and humbug about them to make any mark in the world” (12: 334).
Hawthorne’s decision to make the pensioner the true heir fundamentally redirected the course of the narrative and its representation of America. The pensioner is to be both an outcast in America and—because of his refusal to press his claims to the estate—the moral center of the project; this implies a more far-reaching critique of America than would Hawthorne’s initial characterization of him as a speculator. The pensioner’s treatment in America would become indicative of the failures of the nation to fulfill its own democratic and egalitarian promise.

**Etherege and Grimshawe: Reconceptualizing America**

The altered character of the pensioner led Hawthorne to incorporate America’s history of violence and injustice more fully than was dictated by his original design. Throughout the drafts of *The American Claimant*, Hawthorne attempts to establish parallels between the present action of the novel and the initial conflict that had led to the brother’s migration. For this reason, when the pensioner is established as the actual heir, the history behind the family breach is also revised, rendering the reason for his ancestor’s expulsion more complex; the America to which the emigrant flees, moreover, is made more hostile and his subsequent experience there more difficult. These changes emphasize the mistreatment and persecution that the emigrant and the pensioner endure in both England and America because of their adherence to conscience.

While the original emigrant was first described as leaving England because of a romantic rivalry with his brothers, Hawthorne now added an elaborate political and religious framework. The reason for the brother’s expulsion is to be made a matter of legend, and different versions of it are to be provided in the novel. The English Civil War is made the premise for the family’s conflict:

> The family is Catholic and royalist; this young man is extruded from them because he is a Protestant, and has refused to take up arms in the cause of the King. They, for certain reasons, believe that under a changed name he has fought for the Parliament, and went so far as to behead the King. (12: 202)

The bloody footstep that he leaves behind is believed to be a sign of his guilt, caused by his treading through the king’s blood. This version, however, proves to be untrue, and the story illustrates “the unreliability of tradition” (12: 333). In fact, he had had a much different role in the
War: “the emigrant must be made out to have been, in that chaos of strange opinions, a man of peace, and a follower and friend of George Fox” (12: 203). While brought into conflict with his brothers because of a romantic rivalry, the emigrant abandons England because of their cruelty, which Hawthorne in turn associates with religious persecution. In the “Grimshawe” draft, the pensioner recounts

how a Jesuit priest had been mixed up with this wretched business, and there had been a scheme at once religious and political to wrest the estate and the lovely lady from the fortunate heir; and how this grim Italian priest had instigated them to use a certain kind of torture with the poor heir; and how he has suffered from this;... [and leaving] him senseless, he contrived to make his escape from that cruel home, bleeding as he went, ... that blood had never been staunched. (12: 396)

In this version, the emigrant is made a victim of greed, jealousy and intolerance, and the footprint he leaves “turns out to be the track, not of guilt, but of persecution” (12: 204).

The America to which the brother flees, however, fails to provide refuge. In his notes Hawthorne writes that “[t]he original emigrant must have been the model of a Christian, and therefore misunderstood by everybody—therefore maligned—therefore bitterly hated always” (12: 204). The reference here to John Winthrop’s sermon, “A Model of Christian Charity”—preached en route to America and intended to establish the principles upon which the Bay Colony would be based—underscores the fundamental dissonance between actual Christian charity and the bigotry and intolerance that characterized the practices of the colony. Elsewhere Hawthorne amplifies this idea, noting specifically that “he is persecuted by the Puritans” (12: 333), and at points in the narrative entertaining the idea that he may have been executed by them for his beliefs (12: 228, 334). In the “Grimshawe” manuscript this theme is again accentuated: in the pensioner’s account of the story, he remarks that the emigrant “‘heart-broken, and sick and weary of the world, and its pomps and vanities ... died here, after suffering much persecution likewise from the Puritans. For his peaceful religion was accepted nowhere’” (12: 397). From this perspective, America is constructed as a continuation of the same cruelty that has always characterized human history.
This representation of America’s past again redirects the narrative. Identifying America and the Revolution with the reforms of radical Protestantism and making this the basis for a moral distinction between the United States and England was common.\(^5\) Connecting the emigrant with the Puritan persecution of the Quakers, however, emphasizes a more critical interpretation of American history—one marked by intolerance and brutality. This history was of special significance for Hawthorne himself: in his “Custom-House,” he writes of his first ancestor in America as “a bitter persecutor; as witness the Quakers, who have remembered him in their histories, and relate an incident of his hard severity towards a woman of their sect, which will last longer, it is to be feared, than any record of his better deeds” (1: 9). By focusing on this strand of early American history, Hawthorne reconceptualizes America not as a land of democratic tolerance, but as one of continued prejudice, which, in the case of the Quakers, was worse than what they experienced in Great Britain.\(^6\) With this shift in emphasis, Hawthorne also significantly revised his sense of America’s capacity to create a new social order distinct from the injustices endemic to the English class system, as it proved at least as hostile to such a figure as England had been.

The image of America that is developed in the final draft of the novel is consistent with this interpretation. This version begins with the claimant’s childhood in a New England village in the post-Revolutionary period, and Hawthorne summarizes its intellectual environment as consisting of “surmises, taken for certainties; superstitions, the genuine hereditary growth of the frame of public mind which produced the witchcraft delusion; national prejudice, pure mischief—all fermenting together” (12: 382). At one point a character is attacked by a crowd described as “fiends, sent by Satan in the likeness of a blackguard population . . . the off-scourings of the recently finished war, old soldiers, rusty, wooden-legged; there sailors, ripe for any kind of mischief; there the drunken populace of a neighboring grog-shop, staggering helter skelter to the scene, and tumbling over one another…” (12: 384). Hawthorne’s description of American political life also is far from positive. The claimant has served a term in Congress, and Hawthorne describes it as an empty experience: “the hard, hot practical life of America has so long made his life arid & dusty,” and “has thrown up public life in disgust with the abuse, the brutal violence with which it is carried on”
While in England he is offered a diplomatic post, but suspects that it is only because a member of his own party wants to remove him as a potential rival (12: 187-188)—it is not given to him out of any sense of public interest, but because of political expediency. The character of the claimant, as it develops over the narrative, aligns with and extends this analysis of American corruption. Rather than being a model of American self-actualization, as was originally intended, in each successive draft the claimant becomes more desperate, self-seeking, hypocritical and delusional. The political positions he espouses align him with the extreme aspects of Jacksonian reform; however, weighing the life offered by America against the aristocratic position he would occupy in British society, he realizes that his hesitation is based primarily on his political ideology rather than conviction. While advocating the democratic ideas of America, he, in fact, secretly desires rank and privilege: “if he were restrained from taking it, it would probably only be by the democratic pride that made him feel that he could not . . . accept this gew gaw, on which the ages—his own country especially—had passed judgment” (12: 241). Later, when discussing his case, the claimant is surprised to discover that his expectations had “taken form and hardened into substance; and he became aware, in spite of all the lofty and patriotic sentiments which he had expressed . . . that these prospects had really much importance in his mind” (12: 255).

**Grimshawe: The Attraction of England**

While initially intended as a defense of American republican values, the *American Claimant Manuscripts* ultimately became an examination of the psychological factors motivating various Americans to seek alternative identities. In Hawthorne’s analysis of the claimant, a great part of the attraction England possesses is bound up with the nature of the estate itself. In his *English Notebooks*, Hawthorne describes the extreme privacy and luxury provided by such places, but remarks, “I doubt whether anybody is entitled to a home, in so full a sense, in this world” (21: 156). Communicating an assurance of immutability, such properties appear to stand apart from the vicissitudes of history and confer an automatic sense of superiority on their occupants, so that “they come to think it created exclusively and on purpose for them” (21: 156). For the claimant, it is precisely this value the estate confers that makes it so
compelling.

In the “Grimshawe” manuscript, the claimant is described as having been raised to believe in his noble birth and rightful title to the estate, which has led him to “think ridiculously high of his own gifts, powers, attainments, and at the same time doubt whether they could pass with those of others”; he has not been able to fully participate in society nor find satisfaction in the opportunities it offered him: his inflated self-image “made him despise all flesh, as if he were a superior race, and yet have an idle and weak fear of coming in contract with them, from a dread of his incompetency to cope with them” (12: 426). As a consequence, “he had never felt any home-feeling [in America].” To become fully actualized, “it seemed to him that he was to go back to that far, old, country, and there wander among the green, ivy-grown, venerable scenes” (12: 422). For him, then, the estate is the material substantiation of his early conviction of his special destiny: its sheer grandiosity provides a way of transcending the contingencies of his own birth and career. When advised, in the earlier “Etherege” manuscript, to abandon his claim, he exclaims,

“My dreaming childhood dreamt of this. . . . I was alone; . . . I
grew up without a root, yet continually longing for one—longing
to be connected with somebody—and never feeling myself so. . . .
I have tried to keep down this yearning, to stifle it, annihilate it,
with making a position for myself, with being my own past, but I
cannot overcome this natural horror of being a creature floating
in the air, attached to nothing; nor this feeling that there is no
reality in the life and fortunes, good or bad, of a being so uncon-
ected.” (12: 257-258)

When the claimant arrives at the estate as the guest of its owner, he accordingly does not view it as an actual place, but rather as the source of psychic reassurance and compensation for his previous deprivations. For this reason, during his residence he perceives the estate as the ideal expression of his identity, and imagines himself as becoming organically one with it: “he was frightened to perceive what a hold the place was getting upon him; how the tendrils of the ivy seemed to hold him and would not let him go” (12: 298). While supplying the sense of rootedness he misses, he recognizes that it exacerbates his sense of isolation—he describes his desire for the place as irresistible. While acknowledg-
ing that America would offer "[a] brighter, healthier, more useful, far
more satisfactory, though tumultuous life," he also admits that "there
is about this place a strange, deep, sad, brooding interest which pos-
sesses me" and that he "must needs linger here, and make it my home"
(12: 305-306). The attraction to the estate, then, is compulsive and lies
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The claimant's psychic experience of the estate as a place of subjec-
tive fulfillment overlooks its actual history and its role in English society
and economy, of which Hawthorne himself was keenly aware. While
struck by the beauty of such estates, he was equally impressed by the
extremes of English poverty; in Our Old Home, Hawthorne stressed the
fundamental injustice of a system that allowed some English aristocratic
families to enjoy great wealth while multitudes were deprived:

And is it possible, after all, that there may be a flaw in the title-
deeds? Is, or is not, the system wrong that gives one married pair
so immense a superfluity of luxurious home, and shuts out a
million others from any home whatsoever? One day or another
. . . the gentlemen of England will be compelled to face this
question. (5: 309)

The claimant ignores this aspect of the estate largely because he is fo-
cused almost exclusively upon his own fulfillment: his obliviousness to
his place in such a system underscores his narrow self-focus. His identi-
fication with the site to the point of subjective dissolution also accentu-
ates his alienation from humanity in general.

This alienated condition is often illustrated in Hawthorne's fic-
tion through characters such as Roderick Elliston in "Egotism; or the
Bosom-Serpent," Ethan Brand in "Ethan Brand," the Virtuoso in "A
Virtuoso's Collection" and, most notably, Coverdale in The Blithedale
Romance. Hawthorne characteristically diagnoses this state as deriving
from a failure to sympathize with others because of morbid self-inter-
est. The description of the claimant's childhood in the "Grimshawe"
manuscript, however, addresses the causes of the claimant's isolation;
Hawthorne's analysis assumes a national and political dimension, work-
ing to highlight those aspects of America that have exacerbated the
claimant's fixations. Here the claimant's beliefs are described as having
been carefully nurtured by his guardian, the Doctor. This figure—named
alternately Norman Hanscough, Archdale, Ormskirk and Grimshawe in the drafts—has himself been damaged by the noble English family. He is English, and has come to America not for a new life, but because his trauma has made residence in England untenable. Obsessed with avenging his mistreatment, it was “his unfortunate necessity, to let his thoughts dwell very constantly upon a subject that was hateful to him, with which this old English estate, and manor-house, and family, was somehow connected” (12: 368). His bitterness served, at times . . . almost to drive the grim Doctor mad; for he would burst forth in wild diatribes and anathemas, having a strange, rough force of expression, and a depth of utterance, as if his words came from a bottomless pit within himself, where burned an everlasting fire, and where the furies had their home, and plans of dire revenge were welded into shape in the heat of a furnace. (12: 368-369)

As revenge, he plots to disinherit the family by recourse to the myth of the lost brother: he provides an orphan—the eventual claimant—with a forged ancestry to establish him as the estate’s heir. By exploiting the orphan in this way, the Doctor perpetuates his own psychic injury. He systematically deforms the child’s character, raising him to believe that he is of a special lineage and possesses a destiny that sets him apart from others. The claimant thus comes to share the Doctor’s psychological and social isolation, as well as his monomaniacal need for vindication.

The Doctor’s monomania is, of course, specific to his own situation. When considered in conjunction with Hawthorne’s descriptions of the intolerance and violence generally evident in America, however, it implies a larger trauma that has affected the nation. In Our Old Home, Hawthorne calls attention to the shock of America’s separation from England: the colonists “pulled up many of their roots, but trailed along with them others” (5: 18), and still have “a blind, pathetic tendency to wander back again” (5: 19). Separation was only forced by the sheer brutality of England—what Hawthorne calls “the boorishness, the stolidity, the self-sufficiency, the contemptuous jealousy, the half-sagacity, invariably blind of one eye and often distorted of the other, that characterize this strange people” (5: 19). He imagines Americans, then, as essentially abused children, and describes the Doctor as “himself a grown-up child, with the exception of lost simplicity and innocence,
and ripened evil” (12: 362). The culture that would emerge from such mistreatment would tend to focus excessively on personal vindication and find expression in the narcissistic fantasies of importance that have warped the claimant. His delusion, like the delusions Hawthorne heard as Consul, illuminates a larger disaffection with what it means to be an American and participate in an individualistic and egalitarian society.

Conclusion: A Formative Miscarriage

Hawthorne was unable to complete the “American Claimant,” but the project nonetheless played a key role in the development of his thought in this period, and he explored its issues in his later journalism. His Our Old Home included many of his criticisms of English society and culture from that work. His appraisal of America also clearly anticipated his critique of the nation in his essay, “Chiefly about War Matters,” in which many of his ideas are almost directly reiterated. The argument made in “Chiefly about War Matters,” however, moves to a different conclusion than was the case in the American Claimant Manuscripts: here Hawthorne himself adopts many of the negative assessments made of America in that work. In his early incarnation as a failed speculator, the pensioner diagnoses the problems with the American identity as deriving from its sheer geographical extent and the superficiality of the legal contracts sustaining it:

“You cannot love anything beyond the soil of your own estate; or, in your case, if your heart is very large, you may possibly take in, in a quiet sort of way, the whole of New England. What more is possible? How can you feel a heart’s love for a mere political arrangement, like your union? . . . Your system is too bare and meagre for human nature to love, or to endure it long.” (12: 161-162)

In “Chiefly About War Matters,” Hawthorne augments this idea, asserting that “[t]here never existed any other government, against which treason was so easy, and could defend itself by such plausible arguments, as against that of the United States,” because the territory itself is “too vast, by far, to be taken into one small human heart”; and individuals’ deepest allegiances are naturally given to “[their] own State, or, at farthest, to [their] own Section.” The “State,” he argues, “comes nearest home to a man’s feelings, and includes the altar and the hearth, while
the General Government claims his devotion only to an airy mode of law, and has no symbol but a flag” (23: 416). The altar and hearth are tangible realities that confirm an individual’s place in the world. The image of the flag, on the contrary, recalls the claimant’s “lofty and patriotic” assertions, which are ultimately meaningless. Again emphasizing the basis of this observation in his English experience, Hawthorne argues that as a nation, America does not allow its citizens to feel “that sentiment of physical love for the soil which renders an Englishman . . . so intensely sensitive to the dignity and well-being of his little island” (23: 416-417).

The publication of “Chiefly about War Matters” resulted in Hawthorne’s social and political isolation, some of his critics going so far as to charge him with treason.15 His response to the war in his essay, however, is nonetheless the inevitable consequence of the logic established in the American Claimant Manuscripts. The delusions of the many claimants he encountered as Consul underscored how easy it was for Americans to become isolated from one another and lose themselves in their own fixations. The enthusiasm with which the Civil War was greeted by both the North and the South seemed to Hawthorne similarly delusional, driven by the inability of either side to apprehend the war’s true carnage and devastation. The American Claimant Manuscripts provided Hawthorne with a framework within which this disposition could be analyzed.

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Works Cited


---. “Egotism; or The Bosom-Serpent.” *Mosses from an Old Manse. Centenary


Notes

1For a comprehensive study of American travel writing during this period, see William W. Stowe.

2Charles Swann notes that in his original formulation, Hawthorne treats both England and America as single entities (136-137). Through his changes to the story, however, he expanded his treatment to incorporate more fully the differences existing within America.

3Larry J. Reynolds notes that while Hawthorne remained an enthusiastic supporter of Andrew Jackson throughout his career, his understanding of Jackson’s politics was selective: “Jackson seemed to stand for principles of equality and self-reliance that Hawthorne claimed as his own . . . the mythic folk hero, the great Democrat, the champion of the common man”; the “shady land speculator, unprincipled slaveholder, ruthless military leader, and unlawful destroyer of Indian life and culture was not Hawthorne’s Jackson” (17).

4Hawthorne briefly entertains the possibility of maintaining the pensioner in is role as
speculator, but to have him assist the claimant as a way of making amends for his past actions, “to do right by re-instating him in the estate and title” (12: 197).

For a sustained study of Hawthorne’s representation of the relationship between the Puritan colonialists and the American Revolution, see Frederick Newberry, 59-110.

Brenda Wineapple notes that Hawthorne’s great-great-great grandfather, William Hawthorne “pursued Quakers with the inventive zeal of the true paranoid, hunting them ‘like a bloodhound,’ or so it was alleged. He ordered Ann Coleman dragged half naked through town while being lashed with a whip of knotted cords, and under his watch, another poor blasphemer was flogged until his back turned to jelly” (15).

Newberry discusses how Hawthorne, in this section, “went out of his way to create a hostile view of Americans” in the post-Revolutionary period (224). Rita Gollin observes, too, that in this scene “Hawthorne deplored mob violence, scapegoating, indifference to suffering, and the ravages of war while challenging the myth that America is the land of ‘liberty and justice for all’” (166).

Gloria C. Erlich provides a psychological interpretation of the claimant’s motivations: the ancestral estate is “a paradise because it is the long-lost origin” and “symbolizes the orphan’s mother” (161). The claimant’s return to it represents a return to childhood, especially significant for him because he is an orphan.

In the “Etherege” draft, Hawthorne attempted to develop the theme of a prisoner who has been kept in the house. This is to be the actual lord, who is presumed dead but has locked himself away because of the Doctor’s machinations. Erlich argues that this figure is a double for the claimant, both prisoners of the Doctor’s design, and when they meet it “seems to be a confrontation of the active aspect of Hawthorne’s personality with the withdrawn part” (178).

For a discussion of Hawthorne’s exposure to English poverty and its influence upon him, see James Wallace.

In “Egotism,” for example, Roderick describes his alienation as caused by “‘diseased self-contemplation’” and states that he would be freed from it if he “[c]ould, for one instant, forget [him]self” (10: 282-283).

Swann argues that the Doctor’s injury by the noble family highlights class tensions in England (168), and that his desire to substitute a false heir is “a kind of revenge not so much on an individual but on a class system which has victimized him” (173).

Swann notes the connections between these works, observing that “War Matters” “should be able to be read as a conclusion or, perhaps, as an obituary to the American Claimant materials” (180).

Hawthorne mentions these points in a letter to Horatio Bridge: “The States are too various and too extended to form really one country. New England is quite as large a lump of earth as my heart can take in” (18: 8).

For a comprehensive discussion of Hawthorne’s responses to the Civil War and his estrangement from his neighbors in Concord, see Reynolds, 217-243.