



Memoir of Nathaniel Hawthorne: With Stories Now First Published in This Country

Nathaniel Hawthorne, H. A. Page

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“MEMOIR of Nathaniel Hawthorne” is hardly the right title to stand conspicuously at the head of this volume. Of the whole volume, the latter part, confining the stories, is the more important; of the former part, criticism is a more important—at least a more bulky—ingredient than biography. I do not mean to say that Mr. Page's criticism is bulk and no better. On the contrary, it is the criticism of a good intelligence, and of an intelligence improved for this purpose by what is evidently a warm natural sympathy with the object to which it applies itself. I think Mr. Page's style might be mended; but he has many sentences which define acutely the genius of the master whom he celebrates. And he is probably right in thinking that there is more of an inner biography to be got out of an attentive and sympathetic study of Hawthorne's writings, taken especially in reference to the circumstances and genesis of each, than out of any other materials we are likely to get. Why, then, say “Memoir?” since it was Hawthorne's expressed wish that no formal memoir of him should be written, and since, if the matter that is usually implied by that word, Mr. Page has little more to add to what has been mentioned in the sketch of Mr. Fields, and those portions of the “Note-Books” to which it has been thought fit to give publicity? Why not rather say “Study?” That, I think, would be the truer title. There is a good deal, then, in Mr. Page's preliminary study to give us a closer view of this reserved spectator of society, a better understanding of his genius as one in which a legacy of weird traditions out of the past — that, together with an imagination naturally prone to weird and mystical constructions of nature and man—were united with a first-rate power of positive penetration and practical insight into his fellow creatures. The positive penetration and practical insight are employed in the services of the mystifying imagination, and by them its constructions acquire a strange reasonableness, a reality facing towards both worlds. By long brooding and meditating a mystical conception, in the light of a psychological science that has its roots in real observation, a bridge is built between the world of magic and the supernatural — nay, the world of allegory and abstraction itself — and the world of sense and touch. It is upon this bridge that the creations of Hawthorne's genius dance with those gestures, and that reality in strangeness, which so haunt and impress the imagination.

Besides seizing clearly on this particular point, the present essayist is interesting throughout in his observations on Hawthorne's ways of work, and the action and reaction of his genius and its successive surroundings. Of the stories collected from magazines, and brought together for the first time for English readers in the other part of the volume, ‘Mother Rigby's Pipe’ is an entertaining instance of the writer's witch-wife vein in story-telling, applied to a purpose of rather sweeping sarcasm against his kind; ‘A Virtuoso's Collection’ is a capital piece of ingenious historical inventory, showing an extreme readiness in marshalling the resources of knowledge and memory on a fancy parade ; the Canal Boat is quite in Hawthorne's finest vein of character and landscape description: they all, it is needless to say, bespeak one of the masters who in his English, has seemed classical with the most case, who has had his thought or image the most clearly before him for as mystical as it might be, and found with the least uncertainty the word to fit it with the most precision and grace.

—*The Fortnightly Review*, Volume 19 [1873]

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