Verdant Letters: Hawthorne and Horticulture

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Writer's block is not a new thing. Once when addressing his editor, Nathaniel Hawthorne explained his reluctant pen. “An engagement to write must in its nature be conditional; because stories grow like vegetables, and are not manufactured like a pine table.” Throughout his life Hawthorne both laced his writing with horticultural references and grew actual vegetables.

Even his name has a horticultural ring to it. On reaching the age of majority, Nathaniel Hathorne changed the spelling of his family name. He chose an archaic spelling of a thorny tree, “hawthorne,” common name for **Crataegus**, a genus grown across England and America. In his writings, Hawthorne grafted his own brand of nineteenth-century Transcendentalism onto Puritanism. His novel-length romances, short stories, and sketches use landscape imagery to evoke atmosphere, like the misty quality of Hudson River School paintings. Flowers in his writing signal beauty, innocence, and the ephemeral qualities of youth. Nature can be mysterious or euphoric. If Hawthorne’s houses are haunted, his New England gardens are transcendent.

Hawthorne had a legitimate claim to a Yankee pedigree. Born on the Fourth of July, 1804, his roots ran deep into Massachusetts soil. “The spirit of my Puritan ancestors was mighty in me,” Hawthorne declared, still clinging “with oyster-like tenacity.” His notorious great-grandfather, John Hathorne, was a judge at the Salem witch trials; his grandparents were farmers. His father was a sea captain who died of yellow fever in Surinam when Nathaniel was four years old. He was raised by his mother and her siblings, especially his uncle Robert Manning, a horticulturist and nurseryman whose *Book of Fruits* (1838) was the standard text for mid-century Americans. In a letter to her brother, Hawthorne's Aunt Priscilla said, “Be so good Robert as to favour him with your advice [which I think will not fail to be influential] with regard to attending to writing and some of his lessons, regularly . . . However rich the soil, we do not expect fruit, unless good seed is sown, and the plants carefully cultivated.” Years later in *The Blithedale Romance*, Hawthorne acknowledged his uncle's legacy in this description of an orchard.

There were apple-trees, and pear and peach-trees, too, the fruit on which looked singularly large, luxuriant, and abundant; as well it might, in a situation so warm and sheltered, and where the soil had doubtless been
enriched to a more than natural fertility. In two or three places, grape-vines clambered upon trellises, and bore clusters already purple, and promising the richness of Malta or Madeira in their ripened juice. The blighting winds of our rigid climate could not molest these trees and vines; the sunshine, though descending late into this area, and too early intercepted by the height of the surrounding houses, yet lay tropically there, even when less than temperate in every other region.

Manning cultivated his nephew's future, creating a microclimate with a steady education: tutors, boarding school, and a rich library. Hawthorne was fond of travel books, including the writings of American botanist John Bartram. His formal education culminated at Bowdoin College in Maine. There young Hawthorne decided that being a minister was "too dull a life" and "as to Lawyers there are so many of them already that one half of them [upon a moderate calculation] are in a state of actual starvation." Being a physician was out of the question since he "should not like to live by the diseases and Infirmities of my fellow Creatures." Finally, he preferred "becoming an Author and relying for support upon my pen."

His first major milestone was the publication of Twice Told Tales (1837). This collection of short stories, originally written for magazines, was well received by the critics. Of it, Longfellow, a Bowdoin classmate and already acclaimed poet, wrote, "A rose bathed and baptized in dew — a star in its first gentle emergence above the horizon — are types of the soul of Nathaniel Hawthorne." The tales included "The Hollow of Three Hills," an early example of Hawthorne painting a landscape as a backdrop for a plot.

Three little hills stood near each other, and down in the midst of them sunk a hollow basin, almost mathematically circular, two or three hundred feet in breadth, and of such depth that a stately cedar might but just be visible above the sides. Dwarf pines were numerous upon the hills, and partly fringed the outer verge of the intermediate hollow, within which there was nothing but the brown grass of October, and here and there a tree trunk that had fallen long ago and lay mouldering with no green successor from its roots.

Even after the warm reception of his first book, Hawthorne was unsure about his ability to earn a full-time living from his pen. After a stint as a political appointee to the Salem Custom House, he spent part of 1841 as a member of the fledgling Brook Farm, a utopian experiment in West Roxbury, Massachusetts, hoping to find a bucolic situation for himself and his betrothed, Sophia Peabody. He arrived in spring with snow falling. In the six months from April to October, he worked the fields, milked cows, and spread mountains of manure. In the early weeks, he signed his letters "Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ploughman." But he quickly discovered that agricultural labor and intellectual pursuits don't
necessarily mix. Writing to Sophia, he moaned, "A man's soul may be buried and perish under a dung-heap or in a furrow of the field, just as well as under a pile of money."

In the short months he spent at Brook Farm, Hawthorne did gather much of the material that appears later as The Blithedale Romance. Blithedale, a fictional but thinly disguised Brook Farm, is the stage set for the novel. The poet-protagonist, Miles Coverdale, meets two women there: Zenobia, daily adorned with an exotic hothouse flower, and Priscilla, who reminds him of "plants that one sometimes observes doing their best to vegetate among the bricks of an enclosed court, where there is scanty soil, and never any sunshine." Weeds, symbolic and real, grow at Blithedale, and Coverdale's enthusiasm for the project is "exhaled, together with the perspiration of many a hard days toil." Coverdale concludes, "Burns never made a song in haying time. He was no poet while a farmer, and no farmer while a poet." At the end of the story, Coverdale packs his bags and departs from his tarnished Arcadia, just as Hawthorne took his leave from Brook Farm.

After marrying in Boston the following year, Sophia and Nathaniel rented the Old Manse in Concord. The property boasted an ancient apple orchard installed by Emerson's stepfather, a Unitarian minister. They could hear apples falling, "from the mere necessity of perfect ripeness." Their vegetable garden had been planted by Thoreau. Ralph Waldo and Henry David were regular visitors, and the latter, describing the Hawthornes' home, said, "They had taken their Eden furnished." During their Concord sojourn they had their first real garden. Their daughter Una was born, the first of their three children. Hawthorne wrote many stories, collected and published as Mosses from an Old Manse. It includes "Rappaccini's Daughter," a tale in which evil, mad-scientist father Signor Rappaccini hybridizes his daughter with a poisonous shrub. "Flower and maiden were different, and yet the same, and fraught with some strange peril in either shape."

In the introduction to Mosses from an Old Manse, he gives us a glimpse into his own garden routine, much more benign than Rappaccini's.

"My garden, that skirted the avenue of the Manse, was of precisely the right extent. An hour or two of morning labor was all that it required. But I used to visit it and revisit it a dozen times a day, and stand in deep contemplation over my vegetable progeny with a love that nobody could share or conceive of, who had not taken part in the process of creation.

This fertile Concord ground also yielded Hawthorne's first and arguably most famous novel, The Scarlet Letter. Action opens in front of the seventeenth-century Boston prison door. A wild rosebush blooms. The rose "may serve, let us hope, to symbolize some sweet moral blossom,
A postcard rendering of Nathaniel Hawthorne's Wayside, on Lexington Road in Concord, Massachusetts. His portrait is inset.

that may be found along the track, or relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow." Hester Prynne, wearing her embroidered scarlet A and carrying her daughter, Pearl, emerges from the prison to encounter her cowardly secret lover, Minister Arthur Dimmesdale, and her long missing husband, Roger Chillingworth. These four characters are locked together throughout the novel. "Let the black flower blossom as it may!" Chillingworth intones.

Hawthorne, ever critical of the Puritan hierarchy, pokes fun at it by describing the Governor's garden, where Hester and Pearl encounter Governor Bellingham in conversation with Dimmesdale and Chillingworth.

The proprietor appeared already to have relinquished, as hopeless, the effort to perpetuate on this side of the Atlantic, in a hard soil and amid the close struggle for subsistence, the native English taste for ornamental gardening. Cabbages grew in plain sight; and a pumpkin-vine, rooted at some distance, had run across the intervening space, and deposited one of its gigantic products directly beneath the hall-window; as if to warn the Governor that this great lump of vegetable gold was as rich an ornament as New England earth would offer him.

After the publication of The Scarlet Letter in 1850, the Hawthornes moved west to the Berkshire Mountains to a small farmhouse "as red as the Scarlet Letter" called "Tanglewood." It was on a Lenox estate, now
a venue of the Boston Symphony Orchestra's famous summer music festival. Hawthorne "planted vegetables enough to supply all Salem." Sophia planted a flower garden overflowing with tiger lilies, peonies, and columbine.

In Lenox, Hawthorne befriended Melville and began work on *The House of the Seven Gables*. The gabled house with its elm "of wide circumference" holds a curse from the days of the early Puritan settlement. Its inhabitants, retiring and impoverished sister and brother, are Hepzibah and Clifford Pyncheon. They are joined by young, "blossoming," country cousin Phoebe.

Phoebe finds the garden. It fascinates, with its ancient rosebush and several "species of flowers growing there in a wilderness of neglect, and obstructing one another's development [as is often the parallel case in human society] by their uneducated entanglement and confusion." But someone is tending an assortment of summer vegetables there. "It being her first day of complete estrangement from rural objects, Phoebe found an unexpected charm in this little nook of grass, and foliage, and aristocratic flowers, and plebian vegetables." She discovers that the tenant, a daguerreotypist named Holgrave, is the secret gardener. Her cousin Clifford, recently and of course unjustly incarcerated, revives under the influence of the flowers, bees, and hummingbirds.

*The House of the Seven Gables* contrasts the garden with the decaying house. Hawthorne, while writing the novel, also contrasted his mood with the task at hand.

The summer is not my natural season for work; and I often find myself gazing at Monument Mountain broad before my eyes, instead of the infernal sheet of paper under my hand. However, I make some little progress; and shall continue to lumber along with accelerated velocity; so I should not much wonder if I were to be ready by November. If not, it can't be helped. I must not pull up my cabbage by the roots, by way of hastening its growth.

Even with Monument Mountain and the attractions of the western Massachusetts landscape, Hawthorne managed to finish his book that year. But his wanderlust resurfaced. He missed the sea. "Oh that Providence would build me the merest little shanty, and mark me out a rood or two of garden-ground near the sea-coast," he wrote to a friend. And so the Hawthornes moved again, not, as it turns out, to the sea. Eventually they bought their first property, "The Wayside," the former Concord home of Bronson Alcott.

It turned out to be a temporary wayside, since the next year his friend and fellow Bowdoin alumnus Franklin Pierce was elected President of the United States and appointed Hawthorne U.S. Consul to England. Off the
Hawthornes went, bag and baggage to Liverpool. In addition to his duties, Hawthorne enjoyed excursions to English gardens such as Blenheim. But for the next four years his literary output was almost nothing. Evidently the diplomatic service sapped his pen just as much as farm labor. After his term as Consul expired, Hawthorne chose the route of many artists in midcentury and transferred his household to Italy.

In Florence, the Hawthornes occupied the ground-floor suite of the Casa del Bello. It had a garden, "a little wilderness of shrubbery and roses," Sophia wrote, with a terrace and summerhouse where her husband could sit "dreaming of a story." His study overlooked the garden. The next year they lived in Rome and spent time strolling the villa gardens of the Medici and the Borghese. In Italy, Hawthorne conceived his final novel, The Marble Faun. In its introduction he notes, "Romance and poetry, ivy, lichens, and wall-flowers, need ruin to make them grow."

The Marble Faun, like all of Hawthorne's fiction, asks the reader to suspend disbelief. In this case, we are asked to accept the young Count Donatello as an actual descendant of a faun, a sort of demigod. This faun, and the artist-expatriates that surround him, stroll through many famous Italian sites, including the Medici garden:

The grounds are there laid out in the old fashion of straight paths, with borders of box, which form hedges of great height and density, and are shorn and trimmed to the evenness of a wall of stone, at the top and sides. There are green alleys, with long vistas overshadowed by ilex-trees; and at each intersection of the paths, the visitor finds seats of lichen-covered stone to repose upon, and marble statues that look forlornly at him, regretful of their lost noses. In the more open portions of the garden, before the sculptured front of the villa, you see fountains and flower-beds, and, in their season, a profusion of roses, from which the genial sun of Italy distills a fragrance, to be scattered abroad by the no less genial breeze.

This description, written in the late 1850s, predates the observations of Charles Platt and Edith Wharton, who popularized the Italian villa-style garden in America at the turn of the century.

From Italy, Hawthorne moved first to England and then back to Concord, rounding out the travelogue that is his biography. Still he enjoyed his plants and gardens. In his final collection of stories and observations, Our Old House, Hawthorne, whose language has always struck me as vaguely archaic, sounds like an ecologist quoted on yesterday's New York Times science page. "Perhaps if we could penetrate Nature's secrets we should find that what we call weeds are more essential to the well-being of the world, than the most precious fruit or grain."

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