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NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE:

A SURVEY OF CRITICAL STUDIES

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by
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A recent book on Nathaniel Hawthorne calls him one of the giants of American literature whose "reputation has never been higher than it is today."¹ A century after his death, this American, the first "who dared to devote himself to the life of the imaginative artist,"² is evoking many such enthusiastic estimates. A chronological review of the criticism of this controversial man of letters reveals, however, that his countrymen were not always willing to point proudly to him as one of the great fathers of their literature. In fact, such a study illustrates that this well-known American writer, who had enjoyed a position of prominence in his nineteenth century and who is currently inspiring a host of panegyrics like those quoted above, experienced an almost total eclipse during the early decades of this century. Critics of recent years, giving his works closer scrutiny and more probing analyses, have found there deeper meanings and greater artistry and have again lifted him to a position of great importance among our literary men.

¹Edward Wagenknecht, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Man and Writer(New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 3.

²Edward Wagenknecht, Cavalcade of the Novel(New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1952), p. 57.

The explanation for Hawthorne's loss of favor during the early part of the present century lies unquestionably in the change of literary taste which was occurring at this time. The twentieth century was a time for realism, and the men of this century lost interest in Hawthorne because they were unable to find in his romances the social significance they desired.

However, the reasons for his re-emergence are perhaps more complex. Many factors have undoubtedly combined to explain the tremendous esteem in which he is now held in all circles. Surely readers of this generation are no less determined to find a significant social message in their fiction. It is undoubtedly the present-day respect for symbolism in all areas of learning that has inspired critics to probe more deeply and uncover in Hawthorne's fiction some very real themes of universal significance. Thus the same allegories with which men formerly lost patience have today become a stimulating challenge.

It is obvious that men of his own century hailed him because he was the first truly native American writer. It was he who lifted the American novel to a position of importance. Though interest in him declined temporarily, today's readers hail him even more enthusiastically than his contemporaries. Perhaps it is, as some critics have indicated, a growing sense of our national importance that has made us eager to pay tribute to all who have contributed

to our growing literary tradition.

Certainly one of the marks of a fine artist is that his work is ahead of its time. Great work demands a vision which stretches across the ages to men in other years and other places. Studied in the light of our literary history, Hawthorne initiated the great tradition of American fiction. Clearly, in the light of modern criticism, he stands second to none who have followed him.