Whose Old Home?

England and the Question of Homecoming in the Late Fiction of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville

This seems a Home –
And Home is not –
But what that Place could be –
Afflicts me –

Emily Dickinson

Before July 6, 1853 – the day Nathaniel Hawthorne left Boston Harbor to take his place as United States Consul in Liverpool – England had never played a significant role in his work. Even in those of his tales set in the old continent, the landscape served mainly as a background, a useful picturesque setting not particularly essential to the plot. During his five-year stay in Liverpool, Hawthorne’s official duties prevented him from writing fiction, as he often stated in the letters to his friends and his publishers; however, he kept notebooks in which he annotated detailed observations and thoughts, drawing many sharp comparisons between England and America. The English Notebooks are the source for Our Old Home, the collection of sketches about England Hawthorne eventually published in 1863.

The idea of America’s complex and ambivalent relationship with England flamed Hawthorne’s imagination while he was abroad. Between April and May 1858, during a sojourn in Rome, he set on to write a romance set in England, The Ancestral Footstep: in the author’s original purpose, the book should have featured the story of Middleton, an American traveling in England in search of his ancestral origins, who eventually learns that he is the legitimate heir of an old aristocratic family and the owner of an ancient mansion, presently occupied by one Eldredge, an English lord with an ambiguous past. An early version of “Consular Experiences”, the first sketch of Our Old Home, would have originally constituted the “Custom-House”-style introduction to The Ancestral Footstep, as Hawthorne wrote in one of his notes:
It begins, as an integral and essential part, with my introduction, 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, on first coming over; a description of him must be given, with touches that shall puzzle the reader to decide whether it is not an actual portrait. 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. (AF 87)

However, after jotting a brief series of diary entries in a copybook, Hawthorne set the narrative aside in order to work on his Italian novel, The Marble Faun (1860). Later on, back in the USA, he took up again the English theme and wrote other fragments of the so called American Claimant Romance, though the plot took a very different direction. Nonetheless, he never brought the narrative to a full conclusion.

After a survey of Hawthorne’s ambivalent feelings towards England, I will mainly focus on The Ancestral Footstep, the narrative fragment written in Rome, since it constitutes Hawthorne’s first attempt at an English Romance, and it contains the germs of the narrative in all the forms it will subsequently take. Starting from a comparison between The Ancestral Footstep and “Consular Experiences”, I am going to investigate how concepts such as “home” and “homecoming”, old and new world, democracy and aristocracy, shifted in Hawthorne’s imagination during his years abroad, first triggering the idea and then preventing him from writing an organic narrative on the international theme. Taking the cue from a casual mention of Herman Melville’s novel Israel Potter (1855) in “Consular Experiences”, I will then consider the ways Hawthorne and Melville differently related to the ambivalent idea of England – and, by reflection, to the question of homecoming.

Why did Hawthorne ultimately fail to write his English Romance? The majority of the early readers – Henry James in primis – dismissed the fragments as irrelevant and not worth studying; as Donald Swann sums up, «[t]he conventional explanation for the failure of The Ancestral Footstep is that Hawthorne simply did not know where he was going and what he was trying to do» (Swann 1991, 143), whether because of his failing health, which caused an impairment of his authorial powers, or because at the end of his career he had willingly decided to abandon fiction. According to Richard H. Brodhead, «the impairment of his authorial powers has less to do with political or psychological changes than with the change he experienced in the cultural status of the writer’s work» (Brodhead 1986, 70).

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1 For a thorough chronology of the rather intricate composition history of the English Romance, see Swann 1991, 133.
2 In his seminal work on Hawthorne, James referred mainly to the last fragments, stating: «Even if we possessed the novel in its complete form, […] I incline to think that we should regard it as very much the weakest of Hawthorne’s productions. The idea itself seems a failure» (James 1879, 179).
Swann’s theory is far more convincing: in his opinion, the structure of Hawthorne’s English Romance was fatally impaired by the social and psychological implications of the American Civil War:

Hawthorne needs there to be a single (if complex) entry called America not only for the structure of his Romance but also if it is to have the authority of mimesis. If the Romance is dependent on the idea of a representative American in Europe […], then there is a necessity for there to be an America to represent. […] America needs to seem a place that one would want to go to. (Swann 1991, 136.)

This is the same reason Hawthorne himself gave for his failure in the preface to Our Old Home, but I suspect that something more is at stake. Not only America, the object of the Romance, had changed, but also the Romancer himself: after more than seven years abroad, Hawthorne had become a cosmopolitan – or, better, «a citizen of somewhere else», as he called himself in the famous preface to The Scarlet Letter (SL 44). In this regard, I argue that the author abruptly interrupted his first attempt at an English Romance also because he was more or less consciously influenced by ideas about America and the American identity – as well as about narrative structure – expressed by Melville in Israel Potter and in his last published novel, The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade (1857).

Home Bitter Home

In “Consular Experiences”, the first sketch of Hawthorne’s Our Old Home, the author’s persona is sitting «in the gateway between the Old World and the New» (OH 11), while performing his duty as a consul. Every day he receives the visit of «all sufferers, or pretended ones, in the cause of Liberty, all people homeless in the widest sense, those who never had a country or had lost it, those whom their native land had impatiently flung off for planning a better system of things than they were born to» (OH 10). Many of them, as the narrator soon finds out, are delusional fools, malicious impostors, or cunning con-men, so he has to use his own instinct and intelligence to discern the true needful beggars from the swindlers. Among such petitioners, the narrator singles out an old man, who claims to have been «wandering about England more than a quarter of a century», and who is desperately trying to get back to his home in Philadelphia. In relating the man’s story, the narrator says: «Herman Melville, in his excellent novel or biography of “Israel Potter”, has an idea somewhat similar to this» (OH 13).

Actually, the idea was not Melville’s; Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile (first serialized in Putnam’s Monthly Magazine from July 1854 through March 1855, and then immediately published in book form) was loosely based on the revolutionary hero’s biography, set out by Henry Trumbull
in 1821. In Melville’s novel, Israel Potter is taken prisoner after the battle of Bunker Hill and brought to England, where he has a series of extraordinary adventures and meets remarkable historical people, such as Benjamin Franklin, John Paul Jones, Ethan Allen, and King George the third. In England, the «honest rebel» Israel helps the cause of America, always displaying strong patriotic feelings, and a pure, if naïve, Yankee spirit. After the war, Israel eventually descends into poverty and ends up living forty-five years in London as an exile. At the end of the novel, when he finally manages to get back to America, he finds that his name is completely forgotten: his homeland not only fails to acknowledge his status of patriot and war hero, but has no use for him, so that he dies a beggar. On this account, Hawthorne’s narrator in “Consular Experiences” refuses to pay the beggar’s journey home, certain that in America «nothing awaited him» except the «worst disappointment» (OH 15): a welcoming home, indeed!

Hawthorne’s entries in the English Notebooks apparently show an intensely patriotic Americanism, not much dissimilar to the Yankee attitude displayed by Israel Potter in Melville’s novel. Hawthorne is often curious about the peculiarity of the country, and in some way fascinated by it, but he bitterly criticizes aspects of English climate, attitudes, persons, and habits, as well as the English political, economic, and social systems, stressing, whenever possible, the superiority of all things American to the people and the ways of life in England. He was aware that his disapproval was sometimes too harsh and hardly acceptable by the English public: in 1856 he confessed to William D. Ticknor, his American publisher, that though the notebooks «could easily make up a couple of nice volumes […] they would be much too good and true to bear publication. It would bring a terrible hornet’s nest about my ears» (L1 493). An echo of such a bitter criticism surfaces even in the mitigated ideas expressed in the sketches included in Our Old Home, so that in the preface the narrator feels the need to justify himself for his national antagonism.

No wonder that, after the publication of Our Old Home, many reviewers, on both sides of the Atlantic, fastidiously acknowledged the author’s ambivalent feelings toward both nations, by describing him as, alternatively, too much English- or American-oriented: F. B. Sanborn wrote on the Boston Commonwealth that Hawthorne «is eminently English, and it is this perhaps, which has made him so popular in England» (Idol – Jones 1994, 281); in a similar vein, the anonymous reviewer of the English Reader wrote that «In his writings we find none of the grotesque braggartism of thought, word, and metaphor, none of the Mississippi-bred eloquence, which disgusts us so often in the writings and speeches of some even of his most celebrated countrymen» (Idol – Jones 1994, 283). On the contrary, Henry F. Chorley wrote in the English Athenæum that «a more charming, more unpleasant book has never been written concerning England than this» (Idol – Jones 1994, 285): he was particularly annoyed by Hawthorne’s harsh depictions of English women,
inspired, according to him, by «a morbid and perverse irritability» (Idol – Jones 1994, 287). Henry Bright, of the London Ex
aminer, suggested that Hawthorne «loves England so much, that he cannot endure those who possess her as their country» (Idol – Jones 1994, 288-289), and the anonymous writer of the English Punch accused him openly: «You have written a book about England, and into this book you have put all the caricatures and libels upon English folk, which you collected while enjoying our hospitality» (Idol – Jones 1994, 289).

Nonetheless, a growing discontent with America necessarily originated an intermittent longing for England. As Hawthorne soon found out, one’s ideas about his/her own country and countrymen change when observed from a foreign point of view. In the notebooks, he wrote that his friend Hiram Powers’ long absence from America «has made him think worse of us than we deserve; and it is an effect of what I myself am sensible, in my shorter exile» (FI 280). In “Consular Experiences”, the narrator’s feelings towards American petitioners hover between ironic dismissal and benevolent pity. He recognizes what he calls «the peculiar insanity» that lies «deep in the Anglo-American heart», «this diseased American appetite for English soil», lamenting that «after all these bloody wars and vindictive animosities, we have still an unspeakable yearning towards England» (OH 18). Yet he acknowledges that this «foolery lurks latent in the breast of very sensible people», and finally admits: «I should not be at all surprised to find that I am myself guilty of some unsuspected absurdity» (OH 20). In the preface, he had already talked about «a work of fiction, of which the plan had imperfectly developed itself in [his] mind» (OH 4). The reader is led to think that the abortive English Romance may be Hawthorne’s own «unsuspected absurdity», a private way to release in fiction his hesitant feelings towards England.

If in the notebooks Hawthorne celebrated America, in his letters he often criticized his country, attacking especially American politics: already in March 1854 he revealed to Horatio Bridge: «It sickens me to look back to America. I am sick to death of the continual fuss, and tumult, and excitement, and bad blood, which we keep up about political topics» (L1 188); to Ticknor he confessed in 1857: «If it were not for the children (who pine for America) I should consider myself a citizen of the world, and perhaps never come home» (L2 38). And again, in 1858: «I wish I were a little more patriotic; but to confess the truth, I had rather be a sojourner in any other country than return to my own. The United States are fit for many excellent purposes, but they certainly are not fit to live in» (L2 140). At a certain point, Hawthorne also denied the very ideas of democracy and progress, the manifest destiny America has always been proud of: writing to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in 1854, he appropriated a sentence written by the poet, because it exactly described his own feelings: «I have had enough of progress – now I want to stand stock still» (L1 250). Or, as he
even more explicitly (and somehow inconsistently) wrote to Ticknor on February 10, 1860, he went so far as to relinquish his own political rights, hoping for the outbreak of a civil war:

I long to be at home; and yet I can hardly anticipate much pleasure in returning, when I consider the miserable confusion in which you are involved. I go for a dissolution of the Union; and, on that ground, I hope the Abolitionists will push matters to extremity. [...] I have come to the conclusion that New England is the healthiest country in the world. Everybody here has one sort of sickness or another; [...] I shall be rejoiced when we leave England. [...] All the advantages of residing in England are concentrated in London. Leave out that, and I would rather be in America – that is to say, if Presidential elections and all other political turmoil could be done away with – and if I could but be deprived of my political rights, and left to my individual freedom. The sweetest thing connected with a foreign residence is, that you have no rights and no duties, and can live your own life without interference of any kind. I shall never again be so free as I have been in England and Italy. (L2 227)

It is clear that Hawthorne was dissatisfied with both America and England: none of the two countries could make him feel at home anymore; or, as he confessed to James T. Fields on December 30, 1859: «As regards going home, I alternate between a longing and a dread» (L2 214).

A thorough reading of the letters Hawthorne wrote during his European sojourn (1853-1860) reveals that he was obsessed with the idea of the homecoming, to such an extent that his thoughts often shifted quite mechanically from the idea of his homeland – New England – to his literal old home, the Wayside, which he eventually came to feel as inadequate to his own needs. Already on January 31, 1857, he wrote Ticknor:

I wish I had a better house to live in, when I come home. It will be necessary to repair and enlarge it; and I sometimes think it would be well to sell the place, and look out for a more inhabitable one. [...] The fact is, I do not take root anywhere, and never shall, unless I could establish myself in some old manor-house like those I see in England. (L2 14)

Almost three years later, on October 6, 1859, he wrote:

I must confess that I have outlived all feelings of home-sickness; [...] I doubt whether I shall ever again be contented to live long in one place, after the constant changes of residence for nearly seven years past. I am much troubled about our house in Concord; it is not big enough for us, and is hardly worth repairing and enlarging. (L2 192)

And again, on April 6, 1860, he stated:

For my part, I already begin to count the days that intervene between now and our departure, and we are all restless and feverish with the thought of home. I cannot promise to be
contented when I get there, after becoming habituated to such constant change; but I mean to try to settle down into a respectable character [...].
I shall begin to make an addition of two or three more rooms to my house, as soon as we get back. It was small enough, in all conscience, when we left it [...]. I really don’t see how we are to live in it; but we all have an attachment to the spot, and have looked upon it always as our ultimate home; so that, poor as it is, I should prefer it to a better one. (L2 263)

To his friend Horatio Bridge he confessed on the first of December 1859: «I wish I had a better house, and I should enjoy far greater pleasure in the idea of coming home» (L2 207).

When we talk about “home”, we usually refer to the house, the town, the country, or the family we grew up in; but, of course, “home” is also an abstract idea: it is a place where we can always find comfort, security, belonging; something we work hard to achieve and then preserve. In choosing the title for his collection of English sketches, Our Old Home, Hawthorne took an explicitly American point of view: the “our” in the title refers, of course, to his compatriots, so that England is the “old home” of Americans. In the English notebooks, just before leaving England, he wrote: «What a wonderful land! It is our forefathers’ land; our land, for I will not give up such a precious inheritance» (EN 260). Moreover, as his letters clearly testify, deep in his mind Hawthorne was also troubled with his actual Concord home. As Thomas H. Pauly rightly observes, for Hawthorne «the psychological ramifications of the buildings which housed him stretched beyond the sentimental conventions», so that «the place where he resided served as a source of literary inspiration and a necessary vehicle for self-revelation and self-definition» (Pauly 1976, 272).

Perhaps it is not a coincidence that at some point Hawthorne imagined the secret sought by Middleton in England hidden inside «an old cabinet […], one of those tall, stately, and elaborate pieces of furniture that are rather articles of architecture than upholstery»; when Middleton opens its «doors, which like the portal of a palace, stood between two pillars», he finds inside «a mirror, that opened a long succession of mimic halls, reflection upon reflection, extending to an interminable nowhere» (AF 27). And since a legend told of some family documents hidden in a secret chamber of «a certain magnificent, almost palatial residence», Middleton is forced to understand how «that palace to which tradition, so false at once, and true, had given such magnitude and magnificence» in the American lore, is actually «a palace of four feet high» (AF 28), a doll’s house, «a dream-land» instead of «an old house of stone and timber» (AF 35-36). At a later point, Middleton wanders through the house, «going through tortuous passages, up and down little flights of steps […], twisting about, in short, in a labyrinth calculated to put the head into a delightful confusion» (AF 46): the real-and-imagined “old home” haunts and confounds Middleton just like his author, who cannot resolve for an apt solution to the riddle.
Of course, England’s “home” is old because Americans do not belong there anymore; after
the Revolution, they severed links with the motherland. But Hawthorne’s home in Concord was old,
too, as he often stated in his letters; yet not too old to be unworthy of repair and amelioration: as
soon as he came back from England, he commissioned the improvement and enlargement of the
building. On December 17, 1860, he wrote to his English friend Francis Bennoch:

Time is burying up my English life, throwing month after month upon it, as a sexton throws
shovelsfull of earth into a grave. I lose England without gaining America; for I have not really
begun to feel at home here, though I have been building a tower, in the hope that the burthen
of it upon my back will keep me from wishing to wander any more. (L2 352)

Not even the physical renovation of his old house could make Hawthorne feel at home again; at
most, the new tower could be useful to anchor the uprooted cosmopolitan in a place. He also added
«a little bit of a library and adjacent sleeping-room» to the old building, calling it «Bennoch’s
room», so that, if his friend wanted to visit him, at least he would feel he was «coming home» (L2
352). Interestingly enough, in this very period Hawthorne began working again on his English
Romance, since in the same letter he claimed to be now «meditating on a new Romance, which
ought to be the most elevated of my productions, since I shall write it in the sky-parlour of my new
tower»; the so-called tower, as he explained in the following paragraph, was in fact «a pine-built
structure of very humble pretensions, and in good keeping with the old cottage to which it is
attached» (L2 352). Even after renovation, in Hawthorne’s mind the Wayside would always remain
his “old home.”

However, in the title of Hawthorne’s last published book, “old” can also be intended as a
characteristic, just like “Old England”, as compared to New England. Yet, in The Ancestral
Footstep, when Middleton, the American claimant, takes up residence in England, the narrator
states about the landscape: «So old it was, that it seemed to him the freshest and newest thing that
he had ever met with» (AF 33). On the other hand, at the beginning of the outward journey, when
the ship was leaving America, Hawthorne had heard his children chant a made-up song: «Go away,
tiresome old land!» (Mellow 1980, 426): the “oldness” and “newness” of places depend on the
observer’s point of view; “old” and “new” are categories Hawthorne, once having lived abroad,
could no longer easily and definitely attribute to America or to England.

The same is true for the concept of home. Hawthorne uses the word “home” ambivalently
throughout The Ancestral Footstep, from time to time referring to America, Middleton’s country,
and to England. At the beginning, Middleton sees England as a paradise, a birthplace lost in time
and space: in the past, his family migrated to America in order to found a new ancestry; but now, in
England, «He and his wife become the Adam and Eve of a new epoch, and the fitting missionaries of a new social faith» (AF 58). Middleton is a politician; but like his author, he is disgusted by American politics, and has come to England to rest: home is where you can find repose. Middleton has «a strange thrill of pleasure» when he thinks that «through these ages he had been waited for, sought for, anxiously expected, as it were» (AF 62): home is where you are always welcome. The narrator states that in America every new generation neglects and forgets the former, while in England families are kept together, even if only by the “fiction” of heraldry and genealogical trees: home is where you can reunite with your family. It is clear that Middleton is looking for both his lost origins and a new beginning, the home of his forefathers, and a new home for himself and his family.

Nonetheless, since the very beginning, Hawthorne makes it clear that Middleton will eventually reject both his title and his claims to the English estate; he will refuse his old (or new) home, «as not belonging to his country, nor to the age, nor any longer possible» (AF 85). Throughout the fragment, the narrator throws many hints suggesting that Middleton should not aim at a too intimate connection with England: «A Republican should care little for the title» (AF 16); «An American should not be one with Englishman» (AF 72). Moreover, the narrator states that it is «better to leave old secrets underground!» (AF 53), so that, as Hawthorne writes, the moral of the romance should be: «Onwards! Let the past be!» (AF 56). In the very following paragraph, Alice, the English woman Middleton eventually falls in love with, advises him: «You can do nothing better than to go back» (AF 56). It seems that in order to go on, one has to go back!

In one of the sketched scenes, just as he is on the verge of discovering the hidden documents that would establish his claim and right, Middleton chooses not to read them. Towards the end of the fragment, when Middleton is finally settled in the ancient mansion, the narrator retraces the history of American conquest, and states:

He was now at home; yes, he had found his home, and was sheltered at last under the ancestral roof, after all those long, long wanderings – after the little log-built hut of the early settlement, after the shingled roof of the American house, after all the many roofs of two hundred years, here he was at last under the one which he had left. (AF 77)

But immediately after this passage, while Middleton is falling asleep, «it seemed more and more to him, as if he were the very individual – the self-same one throughout the whole – who had done, seen, suffered, all these long toils and vicissitudes, and were now come back to rest, and found his weariness so great that there could be no rest» (AF 77-78). Hawthorne cannot conclude his English
Romance, because there can be no satisfactory ending. For Middleton, as for Hawthorne, and for all Americans as well, there is no home to come back to.

This is not only metaphorically, but also literally true. Towards the end of the fragment, Middleton, like Hawthorne, «found himself strangely disturbed with thoughts of his own country, of the life that he ought to be leading there, the struggles in which he ought to be taking part», so that «the motives that had hitherto kept him in England seemed unworthy to influence him» (AF 73). while Hawthorne is writing, in 1858, the Southern states are threatening a secession, and the author is aware that when he will come back, the United States of America may no longer be united.

Exiles and Cosmopolitans

Such a situation brings us back to Melville’s Israel Potter. If in “Consular Experiences” Hawthorne mentioned a petitioner resembling Israel Potter, whose story «seemed to [him] almost as worthy of being chanted in immortal song as that of Odysseus or Evangeline» (OH 14-15), at some point Melville’s character, or at least someone strongly resembling him, was even supposed to appear in The Ancestral Footstep, as Hawthorne wrote in his notes:

A knot of characters may be introduced as gathering round Middleton, comprising expatriated Americans of all sorts; the wandering printer who came to me so often at the Consulate, who said that he was a native of Philadelphia, and could not go home, in the thirty years that he had been trying to do so, for lack of money to pay his passage. (AF 58)

When Melville set out to write his novel in 1854, he made significant changes to the original narrative that was his source. One of the most important was to change Israel’s birthplace from Craston, Rhode Island, to the Berkshire region near Pittsfield where Melville inhabited and spent his childhood – and where he first met and befriended Hawthorne. The novel’s first chapter is a poetic reflection on the Berkshire country, a lyrical recollection of Melville’s “old home”. In describing the birthplace of the «devoted patriot, Israel Potter», the narrator stresses the labor of the early settlers, praising the «best stone-wall builders» and the «best wood-choppers» (IP 5) who colonized the region and shaped the country.

Then, in the second chapter, he describes Israel’s emancipation from his family: «Oppressed by his father, and bitterly disappointed in his love, the desperate boy formed the determination to quit them both, for another home and other friends» (IP 7). So Israel willingly leaves the paternal house, setting in motion the events that will bring him to enlist in the army and to fight in the battle of Bunker Hill, where he will be taken prisoner and brought to England. Like Hawthorne’s
Middleton, he was dissatisfied with his own situation and left his house in search of «another home», eventually ending up in England.

In a sense, both novels feature an American in England, who, for different reasons, cannot (or cannot resolve to) go back to the USA. In writing his novel, Melville faced a dilemma similar to Hawthorne’s consul’s: why does Israel find himself in England in the first place? Of course he was taken prisoner, but he was also driven there by his rebellion toward his father, and by his patriotism as well. Most importantly, why did he not manage to repatriate earlier? If Middleton in England looks for a home and a family, Israel, after the end of the war, cannot go back to America because of his family: the narrator explains that, while in London, Israel was treated «with such kindliness by a Kentish lass, the shop-girl, that in the end he thought his debt of gratitude could only be repaid by love. In a word, the money saved up for his ocean voyage was lavished upon a rash embarkation in wedlock» (IP 162). The very generous spirit that led Israel to England in the first place condemned him to live forty-five years abroad. But is this a true exile? After all, home is where your family is.

So, both Hawthorne’s *The Ancestral Footstep* and Melville’s *Israel Potter* challenge the reader with momentous questions: what right has an American to go and live in England? Is England really his legitimate home? On the other hand, is America still his home? In the case of Israel, America has deeply changed during the fifty years of his absence, during which he was literally dead:

> But the exile’s presence in these old mountain townships proved less a return than a resurrection. At first, none knew him, nor could recall having heard of him. Ere long it was found, that more than thirty years previous, the last known survivor of his family in that region, a bachelor […], had sold out and removed to a distant country in the west; where exactly, none could say. (IP 168)

When Israel eventually comes back, he narrowly escapes being run over by a patriotic triumphal car during a procession; when he goes searching for his father’s homestead, he finds out that it burned down long ago; and finally, he cannot even obtain a pension «by certain caprices of law», and so he dies a beggar, «his name out of memory» (IP 169).

Similarly, in *The Ancestral Footstep*, we presume that Middleton would eventually return to the USA, but Hawthorne did never resolve to write such a scene. In the middle of the fragment, the narrator asks himself:

> What real right had he – an American, a Republican, disconnected with this country so long, alien from its habits of thought and life, reverencing none of the things which Englishmen
reverenced – what right had he to come, with these musty claims from the dim past, to disturb them in the life that belonged to them? (AF 42)

In “Consular Experiences”, the narrator refuses to pay the beggar’s journey home, because he has probably read Melville’s novel, and so

dared not incur the moral responsibility of sending him across the sea, at his age, after so many years of exile, when the very tradition of him had passed away, to find his friends dead, or forgetful, or irretrievably vanished, and the whole country become more truly a foreign land to him than England was now, and even Ninety-second street, in the weed-like decay and growth of our localities, made over anew and grown unrecognizable by his old eyes. (OH 15)

Hawthorne the narrator is convinced that «[i]n America, nothing awaited him but that worst form of disappointment which comes under the guise of a long-cherished and long-accomplished purpose, and then a year or two of dry and barren sojourn in an almshouse, and death among strangers» (OH 15). It seems that both Hawthorne and Melville thought that an American has no right of living abroad, but, once there, a homecoming is no longer possible.

Melville had already written a semi-autobiographical novel about a young American, an impoverished aristocrat, who went to England and came back bitterly disappointed: Redburn: His First Voyage (1849). According to Arnold Goldman, by writing the novel Melville «has discovered that there is no England for an American, that England is not the father of an American man, that its uses are all ironic» (Goldman 1978, 73). Four years later, in Israel Potter, Melville invented «a natural democrat who could not bring himself to function spiritually in that British context when chance thrusts him into it», so that «Israel’s failure […] is also symbolic of a national potentiality, a tendency to refuse to be at home other than in the ideal place» (Goldman 1978, 83). Actually, Israel’s failure is more an impossibility than a refusal. The very idea of democracy, as it was imagined and defended by Melville and Hawthorne, prevented them from finding a home in England – from totally embracing the British habits and customs, the fascinating but antidemocratic ideas of aristocracy and heredity. Nonetheless, both writers were attracted by English refinement, by the magnificent estates with their legends of a mythical past and the complex ‘fictions’ of the family trees hanging on the walls.

In 1849, during his brief stay in London, Melville was invited by the duke of Rutland to pass a week in Belvoir Castle, but the writer was running out of money and he was already expected at home. He debated the problem in his journal:

I am in a very painful state of uncertainty. I am all eagerness to get home – I ought to be home – my absence occasions uneasiness in a quarter where I most beseech heaven to grant repose.
Yet here I have before me an open prospect to get some curious ideas of a style of life, which in all probability I shall never have again. I should much like to know what the highest English aristocracy really & practically is. [...] If I do not go, I am confident that hereafter I shall upbraid myself for neglecting such an opportunity of procuring “material”. (C 41)

Finally, he made up his mind and decided to go directly back home. In a very brief recollection of Melville’s early life written after his death, his wife Elizabeth Shaw remarked that during his eleven-week stay in England he «took little satisfaction in it from mere homesickness and hurried home – leaving attractive invitations to visit various distinguished people» (Sealts 1974, 169). Probably enough, in the following months and years Melville often resented what he came to consider as a lost opportunity. However, just before coming back home, Melville bought the ancient map of London that would serve him as the basis for the story of Israel Potter. Maybe the impossibility to savor the taste of English aristocracy prompted him four years later to write his own version of the English Romance: his frustrated longing and his bitter disappointment towards both England and America led Melville to the narrative of the naïve American patriot exiled in England.

On the other hand, the feeling that American mysteries might find their solutions in England fascinated Hawthorne; while abroad, he visited many castles and estates, enquiring about local histories and folklore, until he heard the legend of the bloody footstep in Smithills Hall that would eventually trigger the writing of his English Romance. In The Ancestral Footstep, Alice warns Middleton (and his author as well):

> There is much that is seductive in English life; but [...] I should think ill of the American, who, for any causes of ambition – any hope of wealth or rank – or even for the sake of any of those old, delightful ideas of the past, the associations of ancestry, the loveliness of an age-long home – the old poetry and romance that haunt these ancient villages and estates of England – would give up the chance of acting upon the unmoulded future of America. (AF 72)

Even if, as James Hewitson states, the English romance was originally conceived to «highlight the inadequacies of the English social system» and to «establish the superiority of American character and customs, as well as the greater possibilities that the nation afforded its citizens» (Hewitson 2009, 28), then it failed because, during his period abroad, Hawthorne was forced to utterly re-evaluate his ideas of America. The decade Hawthorne spent in Europe made him both a curious tourist and an exile, a fervent patriot and a dissatisfied expatriate, a jingoist and a detached observer; as he himself often declared in his letters, ten years abroad made him a cosmopolitan; but if a true cosmopolitan is a citizen of the world, a lover of all nations and creeds,
then Hawthorne ended up as its opposite, a stateless man without a place in the world he could claim as his home.

On his part, Melville missed the occasion to experience firsthand the pomp of the British aristocracy. A man of the world himself, who lived among cannibals and traveled around the globe getting in touch with men of disparate cultures, creeds, and races, he was always suspicious of the refinement and the affectations of European courts. According to John Bryant, «in Europe the cosmopolitan was an intellectual beacon» while «on the frontier he was suspected of mendacity, opportunism, and misanthropy» (Bryant 1984, 289). Nowhere the figure of the cosmopolitan as a trickster acquires a more crucial meaning for the shaping of American identity than in Melville’s last published novel, *The Confidence-Man. His Masquerade* (1857), written shortly after *Israel Potter*.

When Melville’s left America on October 11, 1856 for his journey through the Mediterranean and the Holy Land, he went first to Scotland, in search of his familial roots: according to Hershel Parker, he «had asked some Scots on the steamer about his Great-grandfather Melvill’s ancestral home, Scoonie, and did some research ashore (checking lists of the clergy) before giving up [...]. In tribute to his Melvill ancestors and to Sir Walter Scott […] he went straight to Stirling, where he could ascend to the castle» (Parker 2002, 296). Then, on November 10, after his unsuccessful research, he went to the Consulate in Liverpool, and was invited by Hawthorne to stay with him during his brief sojourn.

Though it is unlikely that the author carried with him the manuscript of the novel he had just completed when he met his old friend in Liverpool, as Melville’s wife stated in her recollection, nonetheless we know that Hawthorne signed for him the contract for the publication of the book in England, acting as Melville’s agent. Just as he read and appreciated *Israel Potter*, Hawthorne probably read Melville’s following novel, *The Confidence-Man* as well – after it was published, or even before, if he had perused the corrected proofs he presented to the English publisher. Moreover, critics have suggested that one of the characters in the novel, a con man called Charlie Noble (or his interlocutor, Frank Goodman), represents Melville’s satirical depiction of Hawthorne. Unfortunately, the card which Hawthorne apparently sent to Melville in appreciation of the novel is now lost. However, it is highly probable that Melville’s reflections on the fate of *Israel Potter*, as well as Melville’s report on his recent failed quest for his Scottish lineage, along with the novel’s treatment of the cosmopolitan as the quintessential American confidence man, influenced Hawthorne’s reflections on America and its “old home” – and, consequently, the writing of his English romance.
Maybe it is only by mere chance that Hawthorne began writing *The Ancestral Footstep* on the first of April – the very day in which the events in Melville’s *The Confidence-Man* take place – and that after a few pages Middleton echoes Melville’s narrator by describing his quest as «a foolish secret that makes me employ this little holiday time, which I have stolen out of a weary life, in a wild-goose chase!» (*AF* 12). It is a fact, however, that Hawthorne’s notes about Eldredge’s attempt on Middleton’s life insist on the oneiric quality of the key scene: «It will have a dreamlike effect; so that Middleton shall hardly know whether he is awake or not» (*AF* 82); the legend of a similar murder in the past «must be some very ingenious and artificially natural thing, an artistic affair in its way» (*AF* 83). Most importantly, Hawthorne took great pain to characterize his Romance in an experimental, uncanny, half-humorous and half-tragic way, not much dissimilar to Melville’s “masquerade”:

I do not wish it to be a picture of life; but a Romance, grim, grotesque, quaint, of which the Hospital might be the fitting scene. It might have so much of the hues of life that the reader should sometimes think it was intended for a picture; yet the atmosphere should be such as to excuse all wildness […] there should be a tinge of the grotesque given to all the characters and events. The tragic, and the gentler pathetic, need not be excluded by this tone and treatment. […] It must be a humorous work, or nothing. (*AF* 58)

In the end, however, Hawthorne refused to transform Middleton in a cosmopolitan similar to his English rival, Eldredge, who describes himself with these words:

I am hardly more an Englishman than yourself; bred up, as I have been, in Italy, and coming back hither, at my age, unaccustomed to the manners of the country, with few friends, and insulated from society by a faith which makes most people regard me as an enemy. (*AF* 75)

Hawthorne made it clear that Eldredge must have «something sinister about him», and that Middleton will refuse his claim and title also because he comes to understand that in England he won’t be accepted as a real aristocrat, but would always be considered an outcast and an impostor, just like his rival: «Eldredge’s own position, as a foreigner in the midst of English home life, insulated and dreary, shall represent to Middleton, in some degree, what his own would be, were he to accept the estate» (*AF* 85). The fragment of *The Ancestral Footstep* abruptly ends at this point, with Eldredge who, «like a man of the world», invites Middleton to his home, while the narrator states: «Here things shall ripen themselves for Eldredge’s attempt upon his life» (*AF* 89).

In a sense, we could read Hawthorne’s first fragment of the English Romance as an attempt to come to terms with the impasse Melville had exposed in *The Confidence-Man*: if 1850s America, depicted as a ship of fools in Melville’s novel, is a patchwork of experiences and legacies –
inevitably composite, fragmented, multiple, and ultimately suspicious – then how can a federation be possible? Can the American artist remain faithful to his “home” while simultaneously escaping a blind exceptionalism or a naïve regionalism? On the other hand, can he embrace the world without losing his true identity? As Tony Tanner stated about Melville’s novel, «In an America which was showing itself to be inherently fissile and in which everyone was more or less a stranger, a figure emanating or preaching – or is it peddling? – ‘federation’ and the ‘fusing feeling’ should surely be welcome. But fusion can become confusion and have deeply ambivalent results» (Tanner 2008, xxi).

Melville ended his novel – and in fact his career as a novelist – with the puzzling statement that «something further may come of this masquerade» \( (CM\ 251) \). In turn, Hawthorne was not able to bring his English Romance to a satisfying conclusion, but he made it clear from the beginning that it should have had «an ending unexpected by everybody, and not satisfactory to the natural yearnings of novel-readers» \((AF\ 11)\). Some years later, he was criticized because of the supposedly truncated ending of \textit{The Marble Faun}, so that he was compelled to add a Postscript to the second edition of the book, which, as he wrote to Bennoch, «explains most of the mysteries, but I really think it is but a doubtful improvement of the book. It was one of its essential excellencies that it left matters so enveloped in a fog» \((L2\ 251)\). Unlike Melville, his literary fame obliged Hawthorne to write «something further», and to dissolve the uncertainty that should have characterized the Romance’s proper ending.

On the other hand, \textit{The Ancestral Footstep} ends with Middleton stuck between two roads he cannot take. Neither the author nor his character want to remain naïve Yankees like Israel Potter, intent on praising American values while living uncomfortably in a foreign country; nor they want to become immoral cosmopolitans, confidence men without a country, who trick others, and readers as well, into believing that every uncertainty, even those about one’s true home, can be safely resolved by showing a blind and vague confidence, like many politician suggested with regard to the question of abolitionism and the impending Civil War. Middleton will fatally remain, just like his author at the beginning of \textit{Our Old Home}, «in the gateway between the Old World and the New», unable to decide which one – if any – represents his true home.

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Paolo Simonetti currently works at the Department of European, American and Intercultural Studies, Sapienza University of Rome. Paolo does research in Anglo-American Literature, Literary Theory and World Literatures. The Sapienza University of Rome (Italian: Sapienza – Università di Roma), also called simply Sapienza or the University of Rome, is a collegiate research university that is located in Rome, Italy. Formally known as Università degli Studi di Roma "La Sapienza", it is one of the largest European universities by enrollments and one of the oldest in history, founded in 1303. The University is one of the most prestigious Italian universities and in the world, commonly ranking first in national rankings and in Southern Europe. In 2018 it ranked 1st in the world for Classics and Ancient history. The Sapienza University of Rome, founded in 1303 by Pope Boniface VIII, is one of the oldest universities in the world and a high performer among the largest universities in international rankings. Being the biggest Italian University, Sapienza is member of several national with the 2011-2012 academic year, the University inaugurated the School for Advanced Studies and evaluates candidates on the basis of educational merit, that provides students with courses and activities aimed at encouraging and developing their capabilities through scientific, cultural and interdisciplinary enrichment. It is in every regard a research and teaching university: Sapienza carries out outstanding scientific research in most disciplines, achieving impressive results both on a national and international level. Relations with the Community and the Businesses. Sapienza Research Infrastructure. Info and Support. Contacts | URP | Dichiarazione di accessibilità | Accessibility | Sitemap. © Sapienza Università di Roma - Piazzale Aldo Moro 5, 00185 Roma - (+39) 06 49911 - CF 80209930587 PI 02133771002. University email address. paolo.simonetti@unimi.it. Office hours. Office. Via G. Colombo, 60 (first floor) Milano. Modify. Help. Teaching - Programme courses. Identification of markers for the authentication of cranberry extract and cranberry-based food supplements / C. Gardana, A. Scialpi, C. Fachechi, P. Simonetti. - In: HELIYON. - ISSN 2405-8440. - 6:4(2020 Apr), pp. e03863.1-e03863.8. Details. Salt and health : Survey on knowledge and salt intake related behaviour in Italy / P.I. Idelson, L. D'elia, G. Cairella, P. Sabino, L. Scalfi, A. Fabbri, F. Galletti, F. Garbagnati, L. Lionetti, G. Paolella, P. Simonetti, P. Strazzullo. - In: NUTRIENTS.