

## Twice Told Tales

*N.Hawthorne*

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These constitute a collection of Hawthorne's short stories. As such they have a distinctive Colonial touch. By that I mean that they remind you of Colonial paintings of the late 18th century. Stiffly if earnestly executed, charming if ultimately exasperating by their ineptitude. Those may be harsh words considering the accomplishment of Hawthorne's prose notwithstanding being overly adorned and elaborated, at least to Modern taste, which nevertheless wonderfully serves its purpose, whatever that may be, because in those stories the author appears a little a bit at a loss what he is about to achieve. The often beautiful if ponderous prose, once again speaking from the point of view of a Modern reader, seems to promise more than it is able to deliver. The stories seem to arise a bit sluggishly as if divesting themselves of initial inertia, then to gain momentum, only to peter out as a balloon inflated beyond its capacity, rising slowly from the ground only to leak and fall back again. In each case the story seems to be based on some idea peripherally glimpsed and inciting a slow fire in the author's imagination. If we disregard plot and dramatic structure, what is left is mood, and as initially indicated, the mode of earnest but inept Colonial paintings. A mood that harks back not so much to contemporary New England as experienced by Hawthorne himself, as the dark history that preceded it. The New England of the 17th and 18th century. Thus the tales are in the nature of ghost stories, calling forth a time that for his readers, or better still, his apt listeners at a fire side, must have appeared to them almost spectral. It is a past not of sober dates but counted instead in the intrinsic units of human lives. We are invited to imagine the youths of people, now still alive but of far more ancient statute than the three scores and ten usually granted, and thus shrouded in dusty cobwebs. We are accustomed to great and divisive technological changes in daily lives just within the span of two generations, in those times daily lives did not change very much from one generation to another, which meant that the passage of time had to be conveyed more subtly and hence felt more deeply.

One way of looking at those stories is to look at them not to read them. Reading takes place in time, while looking is instantaneous, at least ideally. Thus one should look at them the way one looks at pictures, taking everything in, especially the mood that is conveyed, more or less in one go. In the story 'The ambitious guest' we become privy to a family living close to the cliffs of a notch high up in the White Mountains where a stranger a young man finds a temporary repose by their warm hearth only to perish along with his hosts as they abandon their cottage to escape a slide which nevertheless buries and kills them, incidentally leaving their abode intact. You can easily imagine the picture. The dark night, the snow, the devastating destruction caused by the slide, and the unharmed cottage. Standing in front of it your imagination may be jogged and you may reconstruct the story in your mind, just as Hawthorne may have done, if not as artfully as he. As a painting it works beautifully, because a painting does not have a plot, but as a story it appears anti-climactic in spite of the dramatic ending, because the ending seems

so fortuitous and meaningless, and that very fortuity and meaninglessness seems better conveyed by a picture than a narrative.

One could go on like this and inspect each story in turn, and one would see basically the same phenomena in play. Artful as the stories may be, it is almost as if the initial spark that inspired each of them would as easily stand by itself. Take the example of Mr Wakefield, maybe one of the better known of Hawthornes short stories, who one day leaves his wife and takes up residence a block away and remains absent for twenty years or so until he one day returns to his home, as if nothing had happened. The point being that the act was not premeditated it just happened because it could happen, there were no reason why the absent husband should act on the basis of reason and not be overwhelmed by sudden impulse and paralyzing inertia. The story is encoded in those very lines and in this case the elaboration does not really add very much, in fact it almost distracts. How did Mr. Wakefield support himself, how was he able to evade discovery for so long. Those are prosaic questions which do not enter in the abstractness of the sketch but become inevitable in an elaboration. Yet, once again, one may see it all encoded in a picture or perhaps a diptych. The case of Peter Goldthwaith's treasure we see the embryo of an actual conclusion and moral. A man obsessed by the conviction that a treasure is hidden in his dilapidated house proceeds to gut it from the inside in his quest, abetted by his old housekeeper who burns the wood to keep them warm during the season of destruction. When the chest is finally found, it is revealed that it contains nothing but old bills and letters of credit which time has rendered worthless, a timely remainder that the worth of money is contingent upon social contracts which are never cut in stone.

August 7, 2016 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se