

The Consular Service and US Literature: Nathaniel Hawthorne Abroad

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It is a remarkable fact of literary history that a number of authors in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries served at some point in their careers as either a US minister or a US consul. Some of the most famous examples: Joel Barlow, neoclassical poet and Connecticut Wit, was US consul to Algiers, James Fenimore Cooper was US consul to Lyon, and Washington Irving was US minister to Spain. Nathaniel Hawthorne was US consul to Liverpool, and William Dean Howells was US consul to Venice. The poet James Russell Lowell was US minister first to Spain and then to Great Britain, and the California humorist Bret Harte was US consul to Crefeld, a small German town; unhappy with this appointment, he agitated ceaselessly for a better one and was ultimately transferred to Glasgow. Frederick Douglass was US minister to Haiti, and James Weldon Johnson was US consul to Venezuela and Nicaragua. A similar list could be made of US artists—the consulship of Rome, for instance, was traditionally reserved for a prominent painter.

At the turn of the twentieth century, these literary ministries and consulships came to an end. The foreign service was professionalized in 1905 in response to growing attacks on the patronage system in government; as a result, consulships became available only to those who had taken and passed civil service exams. Ministries had already been abolished in 1893 as part of an earlier attempt at civil service reform. The last author, then, to be touched by this phenomenon was Thornton Wilder, who grew up in Hong Kong, where his father was consul.

These literary ministers and consuls fall into three groups. The members of the first group were men of letters who drew no sharp distinctions between their official and their literary lives. Like the other author-lawyers who flourished during the years of the early republic, Joel Barlow saw little difference between, for instance, writing the first epic poem about the United States, *The Vision of Columbus* (later expanded and renamed *The Columbiad*), and sailing to Algiers to serve as US consul in negotiations with the Barbary pirates. So successful were these negotiations that he was subsequently made plenipotentiary for France and sent to negotiate a commercial treaty with Napoleon. Frederick Douglass and James Weldon Johnson are latter-day versions of Barlow, with their literary work part of their broader public life.

In contrast to Barlow, Douglass, and Johnson, James Fenimore Cooper was expected to do no official work at all. After Cooper had become famous for such novels as *The Pioneers* (1823) and *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), the governor of New York wrote to the secretary of state and asked whether the US government had some honor worthy of bestowing on such a writer—something akin to the knighthoods that the British confer. The secretary of state replied by offering Cooper the position of US minister to Sweden, but Cooper declined. He intended to devote his time in Europe to traveling, and he feared that the ministry might inter-

ferre with that. So the secretary arranged for Cooper to be made consul to Lyon and reassured him that there would be a vice consul to actually run the consulate. This purely ceremonial consulship provided Cooper with precisely what he wanted: a title of his own with which to meet the nobles and landowners of Europe on equal ground.

But while Barlow, Douglass, and Johnson thought of their literary and official work as continuous, and Cooper had hardly anything to do with his office at all, the rest of the authors mentioned here worked as officials in order to further their literary work. That is, they were given ministries or consulships precisely because they needed the money to support their writing. This is true of young authors at the beginning of their careers, such as Howells and Harte, but also of older established ones, such as Hawthorne, Irving, and Lowell. In this way, the patronage system that would become such a notorious feature of the so-called gilded age occasionally assumed the more benign function of patronizing the arts. Nor was this patronage limited to the foreign service. If Hawthorne was US consul to Liverpool, he had earlier been a weigher and gauger in the Boston Custom House and the surveyor of the Custom House at Salem. And Herman Melville had sought similar positions in New York, while the young Mark Twain was offered the postmaster generalship of San Francisco (he turned it down) and later the office of secretary to the Nevada secretary of state (he accepted). In all these cases, we can see the US government recognizing, if only on occasion, an obligation to support the arts.

Barlow, Irving, Cooper, Hawthorne, Howells, Lowell, Harte, Douglass, and Johnson: it is not a particularly long list, but it is a remarkably famous one, so the phenomenon of authors as consuls and ministers seems worth exploring. Until now, however, the phenomenon has been discussed only in relation to individual careers: biographers dutifully chronicle the years their authors spent abroad, and critics very occasionally suggest that these years might have had an effect on a given author's writings. But what I want to do is to start thinking about this phenomenon as something that unites a number of otherwise quite disparate careers—indeed, I want to suggest that the existence of these literary consuls and ministers might have had an important influence on nineteenth-century US literature more generally.

So far, I see two ways in which literary consulships and ministries might have shaped US literature. First, the appointing of authors to the foreign service involved them in politics quite directly—and in several different ways. The very fact of the appointment reveals the extent to which nineteenth-century authors could be involved in party politics, since several consuls received their consulships in exchange for writing campaign biographies. Hawthorne wrote the biography of Franklin Pierce and was rewarded with the consulship at Liverpool, the richest in the consular service; Howells would later write the biography of Abraham Lincoln and would be rewarded with the consulship at Venice, which saved him from being drafted during the US Civil War.

At the same time, the appointment necessarily involved the minister or the consul in politics on an international scale. The specific forms that this involvement took differed for ministers and consuls. Ministers performed the functions that are now performed by ambassadors, while the functions of the consul have

changed significantly over time. Consuls have always been responsible for helping US travelers who run into trouble abroad, and they are now also responsible for the bureaucratic aspects of citizenship such as replacing lost passports and conducting immigration interviews. But when the consular service was established in 1792 they were primarily responsible for supervising and promoting international trade. The act that established the service, which remained in effect into the twentieth century, charged the consuls with regulating and defending US shipping into the port at which they were stationed and also with rescuing stranded sailors and arranging for them to be returned home. The differences between ministers and consuls throw into relief the different forms that international politics can take: with ministers we see the interactions of national governments through the channels of diplomacy; with consuls we see the interactions of businesses along the more dispersed networks of global trade, networks that connect Marseilles with Liverpool rather than Paris and London. We can see these differences most clearly during the years of the Civil War. While the US minister was busily persuading the British government not to recognize the government of the Confederacy, the US consul was equally busy impounding Confederate ships and thereby interrupting the trans-Atlantic trade that was even more crucial to Confederate survival than diplomatic recognition could be.

In this essay I focus on what I take to be the other consequence of these literary consulships and ministries: the effect they had on the emergence of a self-consciously national literature. The idea of a US literature developed only slowly and unevenly in the decades before the Civil War, and it was not until the decade after the war, with the publication of such manifestos as John De Forest's "The Great American Novel" (1869), that the majority of writers began thinking of themselves as American rather than regional authors. What I want to suggest is that the literary consulships and ministries played no small role in this process. This was in part because of the ordinary dynamics of travel, where an encounter with foreign difference can crystallize a nascent national identity. But it was also because of the specific experience of holding a federal office. In functioning as official representatives of the United States, these literary ministers and consuls were prompted to think of themselves as representing US literature as well—the more so because they held their posts by virtue of their contributions to literature. I sketch this argument here by using Nathaniel Hawthorne as my example.

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Hawthorne's most famous experiences of official life came, of course, in the Custom House. His essay about this experience, titled "The Custom House," shows that he is aware that his work as a federal official attaches him to the national state: he describes the American eagle that hangs over his desk, and he refers with mock reverence to the strong arm of Uncle Sam on which all officeholders depend. But despite his role as a representative of the United States, Hawthorne continues to think of himself in solely regional terms. Indeed, it was during his time in the Custom House that he reflected most deeply on his family's longstanding ties to Salem and began writing his great novel of Boston, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). Only much

later, when he held an office abroad, did Hawthorne begin thinking of himself as an American. But his identity as an American proves to be more complicated than we might expect. We can see this in his consular writings, both the journals that he kept while he was in Great Britain, which were published after his death, and the essay he wrote upon his return, titled "Consular Experiences" (1863). In these writings we can see Hawthorne moving beyond his identity as a regional author and adopting a national one. But he alternates, I will show, between two kinds of national identity: one grounded in the customs and traditions, culture and commitments that make up the nation and another grounded, more surprisingly, in the official apparatus of the national state.

This first kind of national identity is experienced by Hawthorne as opposition. He believes that the "English do cherish . . . an unfriendly feeling toward the Americans" (EN2 38), but the unfriendly feeling is more than reciprocated by him. He finds English aristocrats to be ordinary and Englishwomen to be fat, and he smells in English city streets what he calls "the stench of the old order." But while he can define his national identity in terms of what it is not, his efforts to do so positively run into an unexpected problem: much of what he values in US culture is actually, he finds, more broadly Anglo American. When he visits the British museum, for instance, he reflects that the English have produced no statesman so illustrious as George Washington or Benjamin Franklin. But this typically nationalist moment is undermined when he learns that the founding fathers are also revered in England, or at least by Englishmen of a certain type. He is invited to dinner at the Reform Club, and he finds a copy of the Declaration of Independence hanging proudly on the wall. And the very existence of the Milton Club pays tribute to the Puritanism that unites some aspects of England to his own Massachusetts. Soon Hawthorne is identifying examples of these political inheritances for himself. Twice he pauses in his journal to argue that the feudal English holiday of Whitsuntide must be the origins of the election day holiday in his own Massachusetts.

In much the same way, when Hawthorne is invited to a dinner of London's leading literary men, he discovers that he and his works are already well known—and so are the works of his countrymen. At the dinner, the conversation touches on William Thackeray, Charles Dickens, and Charlotte Brontë, but also on Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Lowell, all of whom are already read by the London literary elite. Indeed, so familiar are these authors that their reputation extends beyond the elite: when Hawthorne is later introduced to the famous Jenny Lind, she knows enough to pretend that she has read *The Scarlet Letter*, just as Hawthorne knows enough to pretend that he has heard her sing. In moments like these, Hawthorne is forced to recognize that the political and literary culture that has shaped him is not national but rather transnational. And by the end of his term as US consul, it is this specifically Anglo American identity that he claims as his own. He has come to feel that Great Britain and the United States are best understood not so much as rivals but as the joint inheritors of longstanding political and literary traditions. "What a wonderful land," he exclaims just before leaving England. "It is our forefathers' land." But then he corrects himself at once, saying "our land, for I will not give up such a precious inheritance" (EN2 260).

But while Hawthorne's English journals describe a national identity that is ultimately superseded by a growing awareness of transnational ties, his consular writings also attempt to describe something less familiar: a national identity that is defined entirely by the national state. Such an identity is not felt from within but rather imposed from without. In Hawthorne's own case, it is imposed by an act of address. Again and again, he complains, he was visited by traveling Americans who had come to the consulate precisely in order to address him as "my consul" (OO 11). They would often follow this act of address with a ritual that further identified Hawthorne as an official representative: they would shake his hand and then inquire quite closely into the financial affairs of the consulate. Hawthorne is here making a complaint that he had made more strongly in his notebooks: in a democracy the people are the sovereigns and the officials are the servants. But he is more importantly describing what is for him an unsettling process of interpellation. Hawthorne is addressed as consul, he performs the rituals of the consulate, and in doing so he comes to think of himself as something other than what he once was. He comes to feel, he confesses, as if he had "somehow lost the property in his own person" (OO 11). But he gained something in the process as well: an identification with the national state far stronger than he had ever felt in the Custom House. It is through moments like these that Hawthorne becomes a citizen of the United States.

As US consul, Hawthorne is interpellated not only as a US citizen but also as a US author. This point is made most neatly in an episode he records in his notebooks. He was invited to a public dinner, which was followed, as was customary, by a long series of ceremonial toasts. One was made in Hawthorne's honor. Custom required that Hawthorne respond with a toast of his own in which he was expected to take up and elaborate the themes that had been introduced by the toast made in his honor. But in this case, Hawthorne had no idea what to say: the room was large, the speaker had been quiet, and Hawthorne hadn't heard a word of the toast. And so he did not know whether he was being addressed, as he puts it, "on my own basis, or as representing American literature, or as Consul of the United States" (EN2 206-07). In this anecdote, Hawthorne captures the general phenomenon I am describing, reminding us through this incongruous juxtaposition of roles that he would not have thought of himself as "representing American literature" were it not for the fact that he had served as "consul of the United States."

Thus the consequences of Hawthorne's time in Liverpool for his conception of his own identity. His effort to recognize that identity to others is somewhat more vexed. In the *English Notebooks* and again in "Consular Experiences" we see Hawthorne struggling to come to terms with naturalization, that most obvious case of an identity imposed by the state. At times he is skeptical that a state-based identity could override the accidents of his birth. Describing his encounter with a Frenchman who had become a US citizen, he confesses, "I do *hate* a naturalized citizen; nobody has a right to our ideas, unless born to them" (EN1 145). At other times, however, he is willing to imagine that naturalization might be capable of creating a new identity. Here he is thinking of the other visitors who filled the hallways outside his office at the consulate: not the traveling Americans, come to inspect their government abroad, but what Hawthorne calls the "exiles for liberty," the Hun-

garians, and Poles, and Cubans, and French Republicans, who have abandoned or been cast out of the nation of their birth and appear at the US consul in the hope that the "representative of America" might also serve as "their representative" as well (EN1 171). Hawthorne does not completely decide whether these exiles for liberty might be able to change their identity and become Americans in their own right—when he reflects on them in "Consular Experiences," he sometimes refers to them as patriots and sometimes as conspirators, sometimes as refugees and sometimes as bandits. But it is clear that their repeated act of addressing Hawthorne as the "representative of America" confirmed his own identity as an American author who was an American author because he had been a US consul.

Works Cited

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