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THE ARCHITECTURE OF SOCIETY AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE SOUL:
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I

By now it is a cliché that American authors have been wont to express deep and searching ideas through architectural symbols. In many American authors, however, the symbolism goes beyond mere house images and becomes inherent in an architectural style or in the contrasts between several architectural styles. Thus the Gothic style of Poe’s House of Usher (“Gothic” in both architectural and literary sense), the Dutch Colonial style of Irving’s Van Tassel farmhouse, and the French architecture of Faulkner’s Sutpen Hundred all have connotative significance. In Walden Thoreau compares his simple hut with “a house in the Grecian or the Gothic style” and even with the Neoclassical United States Bank in Philadelphia and Gothic Trinity Church. Fitzgerald sets Gatsby’s Château’esque nouveau-riche monstrosity against the traditional American Colonial Revival style of the Buchanans’ seaside “cottage” and against Nick’s modest bungalow with its Midwestern connotations. Similarly, no one can read Howells’ great novel of Boston, The Rise of Silas Lapham, without being struck by the finesse with which Howells uses buildings and styles—South End row house, speculative Back Bay brownstone, red-roofed Nantasket cottage, Brookline stone residence, traditional Beacon Hill Georgian, and new Beacon Street Colonial Revival—to objectify the cultural nuances of the city’s neighborhoods and the novel’s differing characters.

Both Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville stand firmly within this peculiarly American tradition of architectural imagery and symbolism, and both are sensitive not only to the significance of buildings but to the connotations of specific styles. Indeed, anyone who thinks over the buildings in Hawthorne’s novels cannot fail to be struck with his meaningful use of them. One need only name them: in The Scarlet Letter the prison house, the governor’s mansion, Hester’s cottage outside the village, the scaffold (if indeed a scaffold is a building); in The Blithedale Romance the dormitory and farm at Blithedale, the hotel in Boston, Hollingsworth’s imaginary house for criminals; in The Marble Faun, the catacombs, the church of the
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Capuchins, the Cenci palace, Hilda’s tower in Rome with its white doves and statue of the Virgin subtly contrasted with Donatello’s ivy-grown “pagan” tower at Monte Beni. His stories and sketches, too, are rich in significant buildings: the Old Manse, a quiet hermitage beside the barely moving river; the dark, gloomy old mansion in Padua whose window opens upon Dr. Rappacini’s poisonous garden; the lime kiln in “Ethan Brand” with its fiery door an entrance, like that in Pilgrim’s Progress, into Hell; Peter Goldthwaite’s ruinous house; the shabby Province House, still with its grand, ghost-trodden staircase; the Hall of Fantasy, a strange admixture of Grecian, Gothic, Oriental, and Moorish styles—more different styles, Hawthorne satirically remarks, than even an American architect would be apt to combine. Think too of Melville’s many significant buildings. The Spouter Inn, the Whalmen’s Chapel, Hosea Hussey’s boarding-house the Try Pots, Captain Peleg’s wigwam on the deck of the Pequod, the bower in the Arscicides in Moby-Dick; the vine-covered cottages of Staten Island, the old ruined fort by the Narrows with green pastures in its heart, the areaway in the Liverpool slums, the charming cottage outside the city, the ornate gambling den in London in Redburn; the plan of the narrator’s walled-in office, Gothic Trinity Church, the Egyptian Revival Tombs prison in “Bartleby”; the Bunker Hill Monument, the Templars’ ancient secret cell of penance in Squire Woodcock’s Elizabethan Country house, the London sewers in Israel Potter; the Renaissance campanile in “The Bell Tower”—all these and many other examples testify to Melville’s lifelong fascination with architectural imagery. Indeed, even the patterns of construction of his ships—particularly of the Neversink in White Jacket and the Bellipotent in Billy Budd—have obvious meanings: the hold and the foretop are two different worlds, the one hinting at the Pit, the other of Heaven.

Instead of entering on an exhaustive analysis of the connotations of specific buildings and architectural styles in the fiction of the two authors, I should like in this essay to suggest that the uses of buildings and architectural style in the two may indicate something about the basic concerns of each. My thesis is that Hawthorne’s buildings reflect a primary concern with men and women in society while Melville’s, in contrast, are more often representative of the individual soul or psyche. Hawthorne’s architectural symbolism generally looks outward, Melville’s generally inward. For such a study the best texts by far are Hawthorne’s The House of the Seven Gables (1851) and Mel-
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evile's Pierre (1852) and "I and My Chimney" (1856). The House of the Seven Gables is not only centered in a house image but also intricately plays against the architectural style of that central image a rich variety of other styles in order to make primarily social comment. In contrast, as Vicki Halper Litman has indicated in her excellent article on Melville's use of the stereotypical connotations various kinds of buildings held for early-nineteenth-century Americans, Melville most fully exploits architectural symbolism in the novel Pierre and the short story "I and My Chimney." The buildings, as Litman shows, through their conventional symbolic "language" of architectural shape, materials, and color reveal traits of character. Even more importantly, I suggest, they themselves stand as externalizations—what Melville terms "shrines"—of the inner psyches of the men and women whom Melville has created. They type the soul.

II

Though The House of the Seven Gables centers in the decaying old Pyncheon mansion itself, it juxtaposes around that central image buildings in other architectural styles, each of which has telling and indeed sometimes witty or satirical significance in relation to the others. Too many critics have analyzed the symbolism of the House itself for me to need to do so at any length. Its lovingly sketched but not entirely authentically Elizabethan or Jacobean architecture has meaning on several levels. It is the "Gothic" of the romances of horror and blood, of portraits that live, ghostly music, and secret cupboards. Its ancient style, now old-fashioned and decayed, suggests the Pyncheons' aristocratic heritage. The Gothic house is not only a house in the physical sense but also a family or "house" in the same sense as Poe's House of Usher. In a more pedestrian way its dark, somber, age-stained rooms, its dusty little shop, its dry rot and damp rot, its high arched window looking out on the street, its barred doors, and its cloistered garden represent the tarnished pride, isolation, and decayed fortunes of its inhabitants. Hawthorne is never tired of insisting on these meanings.

But other buildings less overladen with symbolic meaning also play vital roles in the significance of the romance. They too are based on actual Salem prototypes, some of them indeed more closely than the House itself. They too are carefully chosen, and their styles also have implicit symbolic values all the more effective, perhaps, because
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less insisted upon.

The most clearly symbolic of the buildings other than the House itself is probably the Judge’s “elegant-country-seat” a few miles outside of Salem to which at the end of the novel all the main characters remove. From the darkness and gloom of the past, from the shadow of the Judge and his ancestor the Colonel, the now united Pyncheons and Maules, reconciled by love, come to what Hawthorne calls an “excellent piece of domestic architecture.”3 Hawthorne does not specifically identify its architectural style, but since he is writing in 1851 and sets his story “at an epoch not very remote from the present day” (p. 6), it is not unreasonable to imagine the Judge’s elegant new-style country retreat as being built in the Italianate villa style popularized by the landscape architect Andrew Jackson Downing in his influential book The Architecture of Country Houses,4 published in 1850, only a year before The House of the Seven Gables. Modern, light, cheerful, set among landscaped grounds, it is the antithesis of the gloomy old House squeezed on its narrow city lot and embodies a typical 1850’s architectural reaction against both the dark sternness of Puritan Gothic and the chilly rationality of Salem’s eighteenth-century Federal style. It has a scent of gardens about it; Alice Pyncheon would have loved it. It combines luxuriousness and foreign sophistication with naturalness and grace. In it, though he does not precisely specify architectural style and no particular house near Salem can be definitely identified as its model, Hawthorne as effectively uses nineteenth-century architectural idiom as he more explicitly uses seventeenth-century in the old House. The villa has meaning not only as counterpoint to the ancient House but in its own stylistic right too.

Though there is no actual model for the villa, there is for the railroad station through which Hepzibah and Clifford pass in their pathetic abortive flight from the old House and its blood-smeared corpse. The “large structure of gray stone” with “arched entrance,” “a spacious breadth,” and “an airy height from floor to roof” (p. 255) is emphatically the Salem railroad station, a few still extant parts of which are visible in Salem today. Built in 1847 to designs by the well known Gridley Bryant, architect of the old Boston City Hall, it was practically brand new when Hawthorne was writing.5 Though today its two high crenelated towers of polygonal granite masonry flanking a flattened arch over the tracks would seem odd and old-fashioned, in 1851 to Hawthorne and his first readers its impressive, monumental facade must have appeared the acme of modern progress and indus
try. With its hints of Norman and even ecclesiastical Gothic, it was a Temple of Modern Progress. Through its mighty arch, Hepzibah and poor Clifford embark upon the swift and pointless railroad journey in which, echoing the earlier radicalism of Holgrave, Clifford descants crazily yet meaningfully on the need to give up the idea of settled hearth and home and return to man’s early nomadic state. Modern technological progress, however, symbolized by train and station, takes the two old people nowhere. Giving up radical ideas of flight from the burden of the past, they must return to the old House and come to terms with the past which it represents before they can escape to the charming new country house. Not by modern progress, however grand its Temple, but by a return to love through Phoebe and Holgrave can life become again natural and good. Impressive though it be, the modern railroad station is not (as Hawthorne indicates in “The Celestial Railroad” also) the entrance to the Heavenly Kingdom. Though it seems to represent movement and swift change, its heavy granite battlemented towers also symbolize that immovable permanence of stone or brick to which in his radical days Holgrave objects. Even the radical Fourierist phalanx, built at Brook Farm after Hawthorne’s departure and obliquely referred to in the description of Holgrave (p. 176), unfused with spirit can, as The Blithedale Romance shows, become a prison rather than a heavenly mansion.

In addition to the obviously symbolic small ruined “wasteland” church which confronts the two elderly fugitives when they alight at the isolated way-station (p. 266), there are three other buildings whose styles are skillfully given meaning. The first is old Matthew Maule’s hut. Situated on the site which grasping Colonel Pyncheon covets for his mansion, it is variously called a “hut,” “rude hovel,” and “cottage.” It is built of logs and roofed with thatch (pp. 6-7). Though later research has shown that real log cabins were not generally built in early New England and that the first settlers’ houses were more apt to be dug-outs excavated in hillsides and roofed over with branches and sod, Hawthorne’s description is basically not an inaccurate one. It is certainly a symbolic one. Matthew Maule merely swept away the forest leaves, cut his logs, and when his hut was finished wove the thatch as a roof. Nature under it, nature around it, nature over it, this unsophisticated hut was indeed an early settler’s first dwelling, but it was also, set beside a crystal stream of pure water, a bower in Eden. Alas, greed destroys the Edenic cottage, embitters the spring, and
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builds a cursed house on the spot. Again the architectural elements have meaning.

Against this hut encountered at the very beginning of the novel are set two other buildings, both of them homes, or possible homes, of old Uncle Venner, another wise and prophetic old man whose age and innocent insight also at first seem to have brought him only poverty and hardship. The first of these is that building which Uncle Venner affectionately yet pathetically talks about as his “farm.” He will have to go to his “farm” when he no longer can care for himself. He looks forward, he frequently says, to joining his friends at his “farm.” In reality, of course, he means the Salem poor farm, workhouse, or Alms­house. Any New Englander of Hawthorne’s day would have known what the town “farm” meant. But, like the Salem railroad station, the Salem Almshouse of Hawthorne’s time was unusual. It had been built in 1816 to designs by the famous architect Charles Bulfinch, designer of many of the finest and most aristocratic buildings of Boston. Though modern architectural historians have disparaged it as ungainly and Bulfinch himself decried it, it was long considered one of the sights of the city, and when President Monroe visited Salem in 1817, he was taken to see it. A “great brick house” vaguely Georgian colonial in style, in many respects it ironically resembled the great mansions by McIntire on magnificent Chestnut Street. Thus had he gone to his “farm,” Uncle Venner would ironically have risen to the most aristocratic of architectural styles and lived in a building designed not by a mere local McIntire but by the premier architect of Boston, the builder of the State House itself. Hawthorne is thus half­sartrically, half-seriously playing with the cold Georgian “grandeur” of the poor house. At the same time he may be making fun of his wealthy Salem neighbors whose mansions resemble—the almshouse! Are they too not in some sense mendicant Uncle Venner’s wheeling their gilded wheelbarrows through the streets to beg table scraps for their hogs? There are many satiric changes one may ring on these themes.

But old Uncle Venner, a thoroughly Dickensian character in a thoroughly Romantic novel, of course does not go to the Almshouse, Bulfinch Georgian though it may be. Instead he gladly gives up his great “mansion” to take up his abode in “the prettiest little, yellowish­brown cottage you ever saw; and the sweetest-looking place, for it looks just as if it were made of gingerbread” (p. 317). This cottage is situated in Holgrave’s and Phoebe’s garden and is a picturesque
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outbuilding, characteristic of the time, of their new estate, the Judge's country house. The typical Victorian yellowish-brown color, the mention of "gingerbread" (which also recalls the voracious little urchin at the beginning of the novel), and the emphasis on its "prettiness" and "sweetness" establish almost certainly Uncle Venner's new home as one of those delightfully fantastically curlicued garden carpenter Gothic "cottages" pictured in Downing? and so highly favored by builders of country estates in the 1840's and 1850's. Everyone built them. But here in the last chapter of Hawthorne's novel the style of this Gothic garden cottage has great significance. On one level, especially in its being called a "cottage" and in its setting in a garden where the water is not bitter and the once stunted chickens grow large, it harks back to Matthew Maule's thatched hut. Indeed, some nineteenth-century garden houses actually were thatched. But though close to nature, this is no "rude novel." It is a conscious, sophisticated return to simplicity—not to the simplicity of primal Eden but to the ornamented, "gingerbread," picturesque simplicity of a nineteenth-century garden. This, as Phoebe says, is "our new garden" (p. 317; my italics). It is Eden Regained in a cultivated, partly humorous, partly sentimental, self-conscious Romanticism that is aptly symbolized by the playful Gothic Revival style. The architecture, ultimately based partly on Ruskinian theories of a conscious return to natural form, fits effectively.

On another level, moreover, its Gothic plays against the somber seventeenth-century Jacobean American Gothic of the House of the Seven Gables. It is cheerful, fanciful, amusing, light, comfortable. There is indeed the seriousness of Greek tragedy standing behind the frequent sentimentalism of Hawthorne's novel: Uncle Venner will soon die. But the exterior of the rest of his life will be cheerful. From the deep gloom (as Hawthorne feels it) of the early colonial Gothic, with its Gothic-novel overtones of supernatural horror, inherited curses, strange death, and beauty-killing imprisonment, the novel has advanced through early-nineteenth-century Georgian, Italian villa style, and the new, partly Romanesque granite railroad style to a new Gothic of picturesqueness, sentiment, and half-humor, a Gothic largely disburdened of its sad old overtones yet keeping enough true feeling and seriousness to be more than mere dancing around a may-pole in Merrymount. We have thus made a full circle but have arrived at a different place. "All human progress," Clifford has said on the train,
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is in a circle; or, to use a more accurate and beautiful figure, in an ascending spiral curve. While we fancy ourselves going straight forward, and attaining, at every step, an entirely new position of affairs, we do actually return to something long ago tried and abandoned, but which we now find etherealized, refined, and perfected to its ideal. The past is but a coarse and sensual prophecy of the present and the future. (pp. 259-260)

Whitman or Yeats could not have said it better: we “perne in a gyre.” Uncle Venner has a new Gothic cottage in a new Eden; Holgrave and Phoebe have a new Italianate villa not in the old fields of Etruria but in a now more cultivated, more cultured, and sunnier America.

Though it is not embodied in an actual building playing a role in the story, one more use of architectural style in the novel should be noticed. It occurs in Chapter 15 when the Judge, hearing that old Clifford has returned, with malign purpose comes to confront him and is met by Hepzibah. Hawthorne there describes in architectural terms the whitened sepulcher, the “sculptured and ornamented pile of ostentatious deeds,” the “tall and stately edifice” of good “done in the public eye,” that the Judge has hypocritically reared over the “half-decayed, and still decaying” corpse of his secret guilt. This metaphorical palace of pride, with its “splendid halls and suites of spacious apartments… floored with a mosaic-work of costly marbles,” its windows of “the most transparent of plate-glass” “the whole height of each room,” its high gilded cornices, “ceilings gorgeously painted,” and “lofty dome” (p. 230) is obviously in the Renaissance or Baroque style so harshly attacked by implication in The Stones of Venice for its coldness and flamboyant dishonesty. Hawthorne, though perhaps also influenced by the Oriental horror-novel such as Beckford’s Vathek or by Tennyson’s “The Palace of Art,” had clearly been reading Ruskin. Again architectural style takes on unspoken significance.

In this last passage the architecture does indeed have a personal and individual bearing: the baroque palace is an extended metaphor for the hypocritical soul of Judge Pyncheon. But it is only a metaphor in the mind of the author: it does not exist as an actual building in terms of the story. The other buildings of the story—those that do play actual parts in the fictional reality of the novel—reveal for the most part not their inhabitants’ inner states but their inhabitants’ relation or lack of relation to the society around them. It is true that Hawthorne paints the House of the Seven Gables itself with a human countenance (p. 5) and even as having “a great human heart, with a life of its own,
and full of rich and somber reminiscences" (p. 27). It is true also that in many respects, for instance in its massively heavy framework yet secret recesses, it represents, in much the same way as the baroque palace, its owners Jaffrey Pyncheon and his ancestor Colonel Pyncheon. But even it, though it is also (like Poe's House of Usher) a figure for the psychic decay of an old family and the ruined lives of Clifford and Hepzibah, basically expresses social values. The barred doors between the parts of the old mansion represent social isolation; its bloody portrait represents corrupt family pride; the bitter well and stunted chickens represent a fall from nature; its darkness and decay represent the passing of an aristocratic social system and the ultimate catastrophe that may come from an attempt to found a family line in America. Even its ghosts—embodied in the music of Alice Pyncheon's harpsichord and the wan figure of Clifford—have been torn from life not so much by moral as by social wrong, the one by her own class pride, the other by the Judge's greed for wealth and power.

The other buildings in the novel are even more outward-looking. Matthew Maule's rude thatched hovel built beside a pure spring in the virgin forest is a bower in Eden, a house in a Saturnian age, that innocent era before greed and perverted law had embittered the clear rills of the Garden. Colonel Pyncheon's seizure of Maule's land, judicial murder of Maule himself, and destruction of the hut is a social rather than an individual or moral crime. The gray granite railroad station with its great swallowing and disgorging arch and billowing smoke and steam is clearly the devouring dragon of the hectic new industrial age that has superseded the aristocratic past. The workhouse (if we can assume that Hawthorne was thinking of Bulfinch's Salem Almshouse) is in part the ironically grand and impassive face behind which society hides poverty and old age. Judge Pyncheon's fine new country mansion suggests, on the one hand (like Gatsby's beer-baron château), a conspicuous flaunting of corruptly gained wealth; on the other, when Phoebe and Holgrave move into it after the Judge's death, it seems to type the rejuvenation of a family by its return to nature and loving concern for others—a concept that Phoebe herself also represents. Uncle Venner's delightful Gothic cottage in the new Eden of the villa's garden both harks back to Matthew Maule's forest hut and also suggests by contrast with the Almshouse a better way of caring for the aged and poor. Even the perhaps subtly ironic hint that the now rich Holgrave is already coming to believe—just what when poor he had inveighed against—that the Pyncheon
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villa should have been built of stone rather than wood is, though ironic, a distinctly social comment. We can build for the future on the past: we need not always be nomads in time or in place.

III

In contrast, let us look at Melville buildings in Pierre and “I and My Chimney” and compare them with those in Hawthorne’s novel. In its technique of juxtaposing various buildings and building styles to create an intricately related group of symbols, Pierre closely resembles The House of the Seven Gables, which had been published only the year before. But here the primary stress of the symbolism is not social but personal. Though social elements such as pride of family and the plight of poor authors and (as also in The House) the general absurdity of too dogmatic reformers do enter and enter largely, the primary function of the buildings is to represent the characters’ inner states. The buildings are, to use Melville’s expressive term, “shrines” or inner sanctums of the characters’ psyches.

Saddle Meadows, the ancient high-gabled manorial seat of the Glendinnings, has elements both of Judge Pyncheon’s country villa and of the House of the Seven Gables. Embowered in blooming foliage, surrounded by landscaped grounds, approached by a linden walk, with its comfortable south-facing piazzas, its large windows, its open courtyard, and its stately stone portico, it clearly represents the Glendinning’s family’s proud heritage; on the surface it seems anything but secretive. More particularly, it stands as a “shrine,” Melville intimates, to the outwardly noble and generous character of Pierre’s gentlemanly father, who is perhaps typ’d by the great central chimney with its huge, hospitable fireplaces. Yet in it, as in Judge Pyncheon’s villa, despite its noble appearance, there is a touch of mystery, of corruption—here, however, not so much of an inherited family guilt as of a personal duplicity, a hint that the god behind the shrine may have feet of clay. For like the ancient Pyncheon house, this house, too has its secrets, its enigmatical portraits hinting of concealed sin, its memory of a dying voice not gurgling blood but crying out in the night the anguish of its secret guilt. Saddle Meadows is indeed Pierre’s handsome but strangely imprisoning father—a father who is both a high, guiding ideal whom Pierre must follow and a whitened sepulchre from whom he must flee.

Similarly, Mrs. Llanyllyn’s pretty white, sunlit, clapboarded cot-
tage on the friendly village street, its casement windows gracefully arboried by carefully cultivated, brightly flowered honeysuckle vines, is Lucy. Its innocence, its brightness, its modesty, its charm, even the slight touch of passionate crimson in its adorning flowers perfectly type her, whose name itself is light. It too is a shrine. When Pierre goes upstairs to Lucy’s bedroom to fetch her portfolio, he pauses at the door “with feelings of a wonderful reventialness”: “the carpet seemed as holy ground. Every chair seemed sanctified.” His “rubric” of love bids him bow down in “piety” in this “secret inner shrine,” particularly when he looks at the white bed itself and the white nightgown rolled up on it (p. 39).

In contrast, the small, low dark Ulver farmhouse three miles from the village, whither Isabel summons Pierre, is covered with far different vines, with wild, uncultivated vines trailing untaught up the old chimney. It is dark and wild and sad—as Isabel, her dark hair falling unconfined around her head and shoulders, is herself dark and wild and mysteriously melancholy. Moss covers its north-facing front; three gigantic lindens shadow it. Its gloomy red color hints of passion and perhaps guilt and suggests “the strange reddish hue” of Isabel’s letter to Pierre—a color “as if blood and not tears had [prophetically] dropped upon the sheet, . . . the fit scroll for a torn, as well as bleeding heart” (pp. 64-65). Whereas in Saddle Meadows bright chandeliers illuminate the grand shrine to Pierre’s father and in Mrs. Llanyllyn’s cottage the bright sun shines into Lucy’s white bedchamber, here only miserable rushlights struggle vainly against the gloom of the oaken recess of the double-casement window where Pierre sees Isabel kneeling, prostrate in the “vestibule of some awful shrine, mysteriously revealed through the obscurely open window” (p. 149). Illuminated only by flashes of heat lightning in the dark night sky and by sparks of electricity from her own dark hair, she is a mysterious witchlike creature weaving in this dark house a haunting and fateful spell. Overhead in the room above, the ceaseless rhythm of “fallen” and “imprisoned” Delly’s mournful footsteps hint of irremediable passion, sin, and despair. How different these houses of the heart, these “shrines” of the soul, from Uncle Venner’s charming Carpenter-Gothic garden cottage with its playful social implications!

But the Ulver cottage is not the only building representative of Isabel. Two houses she tells of in her fragmentary, dreamlike account of her past life also symbolize elements in her. One is the ruinous château which is the earliest home Isabel can remember; the other is
the strange great house in which she lived later, after she had come to America. Both are strange, menacing, terrifying. But they are far more than mere Gothic houses of mood: they are architectural objectifications of Isabel’s mind, and as such they are closer to Poe’s House of Usher than to Hawthorne’s House of the Seven Gables. The wild, dark château, half-ruinous, set in a clearing in a ghostly forest of stunted pines, shadeless in summer, with many windows boarded up, echoing corridors, empty rooms, great shattered fireplaces, cracked hearthstones, a splintered threshold, and a mysterious, never-entered haunted chamber, forms a marvellously expressive metaphor both for Isabel’s childish feelings of abandonment and loneliness, and for her present mental and emotional state. The exact architecture—clearly French with its high, steep, hipped roof pierced by two rows of small dormers—is probably less important than the “Gothic” connotations and the Poe-like psychological intonations.

The other house of Isabel’s past—the weird, sad, large house full of odd people—also is shadowy. Obviously a madhouse, it is peopled by a great number of persons of various ages who live separately (in cells) but at times gather together in a large room. Some laugh wildly, some shriek, some are so violent that they must be dragged off to dungeons. Most leave only after death, in their coffins. Isabel lives upstairs in a cheerless, furniture-less room or cell into which she is frequently locked. But again the weird building, with its aura of madness and confinement, is more than an outward habitation; it is also the mind in which she lives. Of the buildings in Pierre it can best be compared to Hawthorne’s Almshouse, which must in actuality have been not much different. But how different the two authors’ basic intentions: Hawthorne is making in the Almshouse, Uncle Venner’s “farm,” a social comment on society’s treatment of old age and on Uncle Venner’s cheerful acceptance of what will be for him a necessity—going to the poorhouse; Melville’s madhouse, however, is not a real building playing a social role but a psychic edifice. Its twisted minds, sense of imprisonment, and hidden dungeons not only are elements of Isabel but also foreshadow symbolic patterns of madness and confinement which Melville develops later in the novel.

As the action of the novel moves to New York City, the buildings continue this inward-looking symbolism. Whereas Hawthorne’s Salem Railway Station symbolizes the clatter, confusion, and bustle of the modern Age of Steam (an image of society), the first significant building that Pierre encounters in New York—the Watch House of the
ward—embodies elements of his own state of mind. Though in part, of course, it represents city as opposed to country, yet in its identification with violence, lawlessness, and particularly with sexual sin—prostitution—only barely restrained by ineffectual law, it even more forcefully externalizes the lawless sexual desire and eventual desires of Pierre himself. The doubtful conflict between his animal sexual desires and his moral standards is seen in metaphor in the chaotic incursion into the police station of the unruly mob of harlots and their patrons from the brothels—a mob which threatens, as on one level Pierre himself does, sexual assault on Isabel. This demonic confusion, of course, was not what he had foreseen. He had expected to be greeted hospitably by Glen, a Glen represented by the “Cooery,” a little old-fashioned country cottage secluded in a quiet part of the city, full of quaint old woodwork yet with the convenience of city water. Glen in former times had indeed offered this urban rustic cottage to Pierre for his honeymoon. But now Pierre finds that Glen has abandoned and locked up that part of his personality; and when in desperation Pierre hurries frantically to Glen’s present abode, he finds that the building succinctly portrays the owner. For “large and handsome” though it is, Glen’s fine, probably Georgian, New York row house, like the Salem Almshouse, is coldly conventional and deceptive. Its doorway, only one step up from the street, appears to offer hospitality; but hidden inside is a long straight flight of stairs which one must ascend to reach the profusely lighted drawingrooms where Glen, careless of his cousin’s plight, is dancing with his fashionable friends.

Two other important buildings appear in the novel. Both bring together images and ideas that Melville has earlier introduced in his architecture. The first is the hundred-year-old gray stone Church of the Apostles. With its two “rows of arched and stately windows” and its high, sturdy tower pierced by narrow lancet lights, this is clearly Gothic—a style which to the early nineteenth-century Ecclesiologists and other architectural theorists represented religious faith, though here it also has tinge of literary “Gothic.” But, symbolically, the old congregation has departed, and the sanctuary has been debased by having been divided up into offices peopled by shady lawyers. Pierre’s faith has also gone. On the dead past of the former Christian burying ground an ungainly seven-story addition has been erected, not, like the old church, of stone but symbolically of brick. The ironically denominated “Apostles” who now inhabit the cloister-like courtyard and top floors of this annex are “miscellaneous, bread-and-cheese
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adventurers, and ambiguously professional nondescripts in very genteel but shabby black, and unaccountable foreign-looking fellows in blue spectacles, . . . painters, or sculptors, or indigent students, or teachers of languages, or poets, or fugitive French politicians, or German philosophers—. . . Teleological Theorists, and Social Reformers, and political propagandists of all manner of heterodoxical tenets” (pp. 267-268). Among these believers in mad and revolutionary new creeds lives Pierre, sleeping on the cut-down bedstead of his heroic old warrior grandfather, still standing stubbornly amid changed fortunes for the Eternal and the True and the Right. Though it has strong social implications too, the defiled sanctuary is thus another “shrine,” a far-famed indeed for Pierre’s fatal and hopeless worship of Truth and Virtue; and its gray old stone tower, “an emblem to Pierre [Melville says] of an unshakable fortitude” (p. 271), is related closely to Mount Greylock, both the actual Greylock to which the novel is dedicated and that stark, ruinous, merciless, and chill Titanic Greylock of Pierre’s terrifying nightmare vision. Pierre, the rock, is himself Greylock and is himself figured in the dingy but still stubbornly strong church tower.

But the Church embodies more than Pierre’s eccentric and fatal dedication to impossible chronometric truth. It is also (as the House of the Seven Gables also is) to a much slighter extent a prison and madhouse, figuring forth both Pierre’s Bartleby-like sense of imprisonment and isolation and the world’s vision of him as insane. As such it alludes both backward and forward in the novel. Its unusually thick, strong, gray stone walls and its donjon-like tower hark back to the ruinous old French chateau in which the lonely child Isabel was kept secluded. Like Saddle Meadows, it imprisons Pierre—but in how different a way! How different these “stone walls” that Pierre summons to close in and crush him and his bare, cold room from which “there is nothing to see but a wilderness of tiles, slate, shingles, and tin” from the great hearths and “delectable alcoves of the old manorial mansion” (p. 271)! Indeed, the narrow slits of the old tower that houses the ambiguously honest lawyers and the cell-like rooms rather look forward to the prison at the book’s end. The “long wards, corridors, and multitudinous chambers” of the church’s annex, thronged with eccentrics urging crackbrained philosophies, reproduce almost exactly the separate cells, the “much larger and very long room” and mad population of Isabel’s lunatic asylum; and Pierre’s bare, unfurnished room, into which he locks himself to write what his publishers
angrily term an insane book, is a close replica of Isabel's old cell. To "sane" and worldly observers such as Glen Stanley and Lucy's brother, how utterly mad Pierre, Lucy, and Isabel all seem! Even Pierre himself thinks of the insanity that killed his mother and of the sin-grief madness of his dying father and ponders on his own "hereditary liability to madness." And as the novel draws to its tragic and corpse-strewn end, by his use of language drawn from Jacobean dramas of blood and insanity Melville further emphasizes the hectic lunacy into which Pierre's granitic ideals have brought him. Both in its ineffaceable dignity and its hints of imprisonment and madness, a building or "shrine" (here ironically an actual church edifice) once again represents the inner state of a character or characters.

So too the final prison, which is clearly the old Egyptian-style Tombs prison Melville uses so effectively at the end of "Bartleby," also draws together past threads of the novel and, more importantly, figures forth Pierre's final psychic situation. In Hawthorne's The House of the Seven Gables Clifford's imprisonment through the machinations of Jaffrey Pyncheon is primarily a social act. It grows out of a suppression of evidence which results in the unjust conviction of Clifford and the consequent transfer of the family estate to Jaffrey. The actual legal imprisonment we never see at all: we see only its blighting effect on Clifford. But in Melville's novel it is essentially not an outside force but Pierre's own character and ideals and his own maddened state—the ambiguously mingled virtue and vice that led to his "rescue" of his supposed sister Isabel and the final frantic quality of his doubt of his own real motives—that in the end imprison and destroy him. His prison is himself; its walls are built from the stone of his own mind and soul and name. All the mystery, ambiguous meaning, spiritual imprisonment, and madness that have gone into making Pierre what he now at last is are summed up in the building. The barred slits (which also figure so forcefully in "Bartleby") through which the dim light filters into his cell recall the lancet windows of the old church tower. The wet stone summons up from Isabel's experience (which has been subsumed into Pierre's) the "low foundations of greenish stone" and "yellow mouldering sills" of the French chateau. The "dim-lit," "long tiers of cell-galleries," and the "long honey-combed rows of cells" suggest both the lunatic asylum and the annex to the Church of the Apostles. The "stone cheeks of the walls" are weeping the grief of Pierre's despair. But this prison, we must remember, is the Tombs, and its Egyptian style summons up the dark
hermetic mysteries and ambiguities that Melville's age found in the pyramids and ancient temples of Egypt, mysteries particularly of death, as the fictional use of Egyptian decor in Poe's "Ligeia" and the actual use of Egyptian Revival architectural style principally for tombs and cemetery gates clearly indicate. And The Tombs is indeed, as the pun in "Bartleby" enforces, a tomb. Its low, stone ceiling seems to be resting on Pierre's brow, the weight of its stone galleries to be crushing him. It represents the "stony" fate and the stonily cruel heavens that have destroyed him, but that fate and those heavens are within him. The prison is his inmost spirit (his "shrine"), from the dungeon of which only his death can release him and on the "altar" of which he sacrifices Isabel and Lucy. The social theme of family that looms so large in The House of the Seven Gables and to a lesser extent in "The Fall of the House of Usher"—the fact that in slaughtering his cousin Pierre has "extinguished his house"—is only a side issue here. The tragedy of this prison, although it involves the deaths of Lucy and Isabel, essentially is Pierre's alone. In the prison-madhouse-tomb of Pierre, Pierre has buried Pierre.

IV

The artistic strategy which Melville employs in "I and My Chimney" differs radically from that which he employs in Pierre and Hawthorne uses in The House of the Seven Gables. The two novels attain their effects by juxtaposing against one another a number of symbolic buildings of differing architectural styles. "I and My Chimney," in contrast, brilliantly suggests its meanings by concentrating with minute historical accuracy on a single building in a single style. Furthermore, the imagery in the novels is fundamentally static, the "motion" of the significance lying only in the developing juxtapositions of the buildings. That in the story is dynamic. The building itself has changed and may change.

This is not to say that there are not meaningful juxtapositions in "I and My Chimney." Even though all of the outward action of the story takes place in the narrator's old New England farm house, Melville works by allusion: the narrator tells us of other buildings; we do not actually "see" them. Thus the narrator contrasts his central-chimney house with the equally common end-chimney ("double-house") farmhouse; he compares the single flue of his old chimney with the many separate flues honeycombed through the walls of
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newer buildings; he contrasts his comfortably low and wide rural house with the tall, narrow city houses that stand in each other's light. Through his amusing description of Mr. Scribe's pretentious modern mansion, with its chimney tops absurdly constructed to look like griffins, he makes a satiric comment on the architect and a favorable one on his own simpler dwelling. He wittily balances his American farm house against Madame de Maintenon's Grand Trianon in Versailles, the ancient Elephant and Castle inn in London, and jolly old ivy-clad Elizabethan manor houses with musicians' galleries, the styles of all of which thus take on meaning. The chimney itself—that premier image in the story—is compared with even deeper symbolic intonations to such "shrines" as the Pyramids of Egypt (which, as Moby-Dick abundantly illustrates, held so many mystic connotations for the nineteenth century), Joshua's stones at Gilgash, Druidical Stonehenge (another favorite nineteenth-century metaphor), the Cretan labyrinth, the Bunker Hill monument (which figures so importantly in Israel Potter), and the Grand High Altar of St. Peter's in Rome.

But it is not these comparative allusions that give primary substance and power to the story's symbolism. Rather it is Melville's superb symbolic treatment of precise, detailed, and historically accurate delineation of one specific architectural style. More than anywhere else in his work he here skillfully combines the roles of allegorist and architectural historian. Though Litman (pp. 631-632) notes that it is in some respects the stereotypical cottage of the "language" of architecture and that several of its aspects have meaning in that language—its pyramidal chimney representing love, its width and lowness indicating absence of pride and depth of vision—the house of the story is fundamentally an accurate rendering of a typical eighteenth-century New England farm house. Melville knew his architecture. Based on Melville's own "Arrowhead," which was built in 1780, the narrator's house is a wide, low, two-story, central-chimney rather than end-chimney, clapboarded, framed house with attic and cellar. The wide, centrally placed front door leads into a small square landing place from which the principal staircase "by three abrupt turns, and three minor landing-places, mounts [against the face of the chimney] to the second floor, where, over the front door, runs a sort of narrow gallery, leading to chambers on either hand." Thus the tiny entrance-place is two stories in height. "At the second landing, midway up the chimney, is a mysterious door, entering to a mysterious..."
closet” cut into the chimney itself. Neither on first or second floor are there any passageways or halls; every room must be entered through another room. In the dining room in the rear—what would have been the original kitchen—are nine doors obviously opening into the other chambers, the pantry, and back stairs, both up and down. The chimney itself, though humorously exaggerated to emphasize its symbolism, is also historically correct. Built of large, flat bricks, it rises from a partially vaulted twelve-foot-square base in pyramidal form to emerge through or directly against the ridgepole, where it has decreased to four feet square. All the fireplaces on both floors are in it. In addition to numerous little cupboards and shelves, it contains a supposedly secret room—something that many of the great chimneys of the time contained though usually not for hiding valuables but for drying clothes. Throughout the house, as the wife protests, the mantels are very high. Every detail of Melville's description of house and chimney could have come out of a textbook on architecture.

Melville’s greatest artistic triumph in the story, however, does not lie in this superbly apt embodiment of his meaning in a highly exact and vivid but static delineation of an architectural style. Rather, it is inherent in his compelling use of architectural change and alteration, of past remodeling and plans for future remodeling. He here injects a dynamic quality rarely hinted at either in Hawthorne’s or his own other architectural imagery.

In The House of the Seven Gables, it is true, Hawthorne makes cogent use of Hepzibah's opening up once again the long-closed shutters of the little cent shop that some hard-pressed Pyncheon of long before had built into the old mansion. The change in the house represents the Pynceons' effort to reach out of their proud isolation to make contact with common mankind. Particularly in “Old Esther Dudley,” Hawthorne contrasts the past grandeur of the Province House with its present decay and in “Peter Goldthwaite's Treasure” makes the piece-by-piece destruction of Peter’s house a parable of the disaster that can fall upon the foolish speculator. Melville more often uses dynamic architectural imagery and uses it in general with less social but more personal reference. The collapse of Bannadonna’s bell tower is an example, as is also, in one respect, the sinking of the Pequod. Litman (p. 634) also points out that Melville in Pierre introduces another form of change in a building: the building itself may not change, but a character’s perception of it may. Thus after his disillusionment with his father, Pierre sees Saddle Meadows no longer as genially pastoral
but as bitterly aristocratic. A more concrete form of alteration in that novel is the change in the Church of the Apostles from its original conventional Christian state to its present debased state—its sanctuary divided into offices, its churchyard trampled down by the ungainly annex, its old faith transformed into strange and revolutionary heterodoxies. But on the whole these treatments are only incidental.

In “I and My Chimney,” to the contrary, change is central to both action and symbolism. In imagining both the past changes in the house and the present plans to remodel it, Melville again closely follows architectural history. Many years before the narrative begins, we are told, a temporary proprietor had “hired a band of woodmen, with their huge, crosscut saws” to saw “clean off” “the old gable roof” along “with all its birds nests, and old dormer windows.” He then replaced “the original gable roof” “with a modern roof, more fit for a railway woodhouse than an old country gentleman’s abode.” Such a change actually was made, probably at the end of the eighteenth or beginning of the nineteenth century, to a number of old seventeenth- or early eighteenth-century houses such as the Whipple house in Ipswich. The steep old gambrel roofs were lowered and the gables and dormers removed to make the ancient houses conform to the newer Georgian style.12 Furthermore, if one assumes that the narrator is relating the story in 1856, his objection to the new, flatter, simpler roof as inappropriate to a gentleman’s country seat and suitable only to a railway shed is also historically valid. The designs in such books as Downing’s The Architecture of Country Houses (1850) and Calvert Vaux’s Villas and Cottages (1863) clearly demonstrate that by the mid-nineteenth century taste had swung back from low, simple roofs to higher, steeper, and more picturesquely elaborate ones. Similarly, the plan of the narrator’s wife to cut through or wholly remove the great central chimney is also exactly in line with the taste of Melville’s day. Alteration of old farmhouses into gentlemen’s residences was then very much in the wind, and contemporary architectural handbooks showed how it should be done.13

But though the artistic strategies differ sharply, the thrust of the symbolism in “I and My Chimney” is the same as that in Pierre. Whereas Hawthorne in two of his tales involving single buildings—“Sights from a Steeple” and “Peter Goldthwaite’s Treasure”—expresses himself on general topics—in the first musing on the stance of the artist, in the second reciting a parable on the foolishness of
speculation—Melville once again makes a building stand for an individual psyche. In the tale he addresses, it is true, the problem of marriage (as he does also in "The Paradise of Bachelors" and "The Tartarus of Maids," two other architectural tales). But even if one does not read autobiography or Freudian psychology into the tale, it is clearly concerned principally with the psychic assault by the narrator's wife on the narrator's individuality, his manhood. Litman has persuasively argued (pp. 635-638) that the whole house is symbolic. Indeed, it is so closely related to the narrator and his inner world that for seven years he has not left it. But the key symbol is, of course, the great central chimney. This is the narrator's innermost self, his High Altar, his "shrine." Already the chimney has been "razeed" fifteen feet; unsatisfied by that "surgical operation," the wife is determined to take it out entirely so that she can walk without impediment right through the house and, one might say, right over new husband's conquered soul. In whatever special way one wishes to interpret the details, it is the wife's struggle to remodel, alter, or destroy the chimney and the narrator's struggles to defend and preserve it that give life, dynamic, and meaning to the story. The struggle is not a social one but a battle for a man's very identity. Every aspect of house and chimney bears on the character, values, and personality of the narrator. As Dillingham rightly observes, we have here "the architecture of...[a] mind," "a revelatory unfolding of the mind of a single character"; and all events take place "within a single mind, symbolized by the house." Every architectural detail has psychic meaning. This is not Hawthorne's architecture of society but the very finest of Melville's architecture of the soul.

NOTES


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Davidson’s study aids in the Riverside Literature Series edition of the novel first published in Boston by Houghton, Mifflin in 1883.

3 Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables* [Centenary Edition] (Columbus, O., 1965), p. 314. Subsequent references to this edition will be placed in parentheses in the text.


5 For the Salem railroad station see Carroll L. V. Meeks, *The Railroad Station* (New Haven, 1956), p. 54 and plate 39, and *Visitors’ Guide* to Salem (Salem, Mass., 1902), pp. 76-77. The *Guide* attributes the design to Captain D. A. Neal, the president of the railroad, but Meeks holds that Neal merely made suggestions to Bryant. Meeks, the *Guide*, and Davidson all reproduce pictures of the depot.


10 Compare in Ch. 41 of *Moby-Dick* the likening of the inner recesses of Ahab’s soul to the Halls of Thermes lying far below the Hotel de Cluny.

11 For comments on pyramids and “I and My Chimney,” see Finkelstein, pp. 141-144.

12 For lowering of roofs of old New England houses, see J. Frederick Kelly, *Early Domestic Architecture of Connecticut* [Tercentenary Pamphlet Series, Vol. 12] (New Haven, 1933) p.13. If one takes the liberty of changing in Melville’s text the phrase “original gable roof” to “original gambrel roof,” the passage makes even more historical sense and is even supported by the cutting and splicing of the rafters of Melville’s own house “Arrowhead,” an unusual construction that may possibly indicate the “Arrowhead’s” roof may once have been gambrel and only later changed to its present low-pitched gable form.
For instance, Designs 2, 8, and 18 in Henry Hudson Holly's well-known volume Country Seats (New York, 1863) all show before-and-after pictures of remodeled rural houses, all, by the way, showing alteration of roofs and chimneys. See also Design 32 in George E. Woodward, Woodward's Country Homes (New York, 1865). In 1863 the then famous "Ilk Marvell" (Donald G. Mitchell) published in My Farm of Edgewood his account of his remodeling of an old farmhouse outside New Haven. Even today, everywhere one goes in rural New England one sees in old farmhouses the pair of small chimneys set near together in the middle of the ridge that indicate the removal of an original large central chimney.

The most thorough treatment is that by the William B. Dillingham in Melville's Short Fiction, 1853-1866 (Athens, Ga., 1977), pp. 271-295. For well selected bibliography see Dillingham's footnotes. Merton M. Seals's stimulating treatment — "Herman Melville's 'I and My Chimney'," AL, 13 (1941), 142-154 — is biographical. For Litman, see n. 1 above.

Compare in Pierre Melville's use of the great chimney and hearths of Saddle Meadows to represent one aspect of Pierre's father.

I quote respectively from pp. 281, 278, 294.