The Scarlet Letter is a moral tale in a Christian setting, but the imaginative method of the book is not distinctively moral or religious. It is distinctively historical, and historical in a rather complex way. The issues of the story and the experiences of individual characters are projected in the peculiar terms of a specific epoch; Hester Prynne, the people of Boston, Dimmesdale, Chillingworth, and Pearl are shaped by and give shape to the meaning of their time. Yet the epoch is not simply "Puritan." It is also more generally "modern," despite the
provincial locale and the idiosyncratic culture through which it is rendered. In many respects, Puritan manners and morals here become a modern instance, a test case of life in the "new" (that is, post-medieval) world. And this modern life was Hawthorne's as well as the life of his characters. The author of *The Scarlet Letter* looks back through time, but he exists in historical continuity with the world he describes. The book is most profoundly historical because it is not only about but also written out of a felt historical situation.

We need not suppose that Hawthorne had any theoretical idea of "modernity" (he had few theories of any kind, and none of much interest). What he had was the nineteenth- and twentieth-century experience of radical solitude, which he sought to encompass by externalizing it, taking it as his imaginative subject. Possibly his twelve years in the lonely chamber at Salem, for which he could "assign no reasonable why and wherefore," were motivated less by a desire for privacy than by an impulse to dramatize his spiritual isolation. He could escape it only by publicly acknowledging and expressing it. In any case, this was a characteristic maneuver of his literary imagination—as he put it, to render in "the style of a man of society" what would otherwise be "the talk of a secluded man with his own mind and heart." Yet "to open an intercourse with the world" in this way was not enough if the world was really a non-world, a society of isolatoes, as his experience drove him to depict it. Nor could he simply assert in the face of his experience that a "magnetic chain of humanity" was always open to the loving heart. The only adequate ground he had for communication and for faith in human community was paradoxical: alienation as a historical datum. Hawthorne turned to American history, the history of alienation, as the basis of his communion. What isolatoes had in common, their magnetic chain, was precisely the spiritual history of their isolation.
Hawthorne became the historian of the historically disinherited. The Puritans conceived alienation as the cause and consequence of sin, and up to a point it is so represented in The Scarlet Letter. Hester’s pride of self is the essential crime within her crime and the essential aberration within her later secret heterodoxy. Much the same might be said of Dimmesdale and Chillingworth. But if alienation is equivalent to sin in the perspective of Hawthorne’s seventeenth-century Boston, and if Hawthorne himself never wholly abandons that perspective, he also pictures a Puritan society that positively fosters an alienated individualism. Hester Prynne, her lover, and her husband are as much sinned against as sinning in their social isolation; they have been thrown back upon themselves by an inorganic community, a culture that substitutes external law for immediate relations. And if this is so, if the Puritan mind itself is in one sense guilty of the crime it abhors, in a further sense the book does not deal with crime as such but with a moral predicament, a style of thought. Though Hawthorne often echoes the Puritan language of moral reprobation, and though he often turns round and condemns the Puritans themselves for lack of humanitarian sympathy, he is always fully aware of a historical context for these moral stances—a world view that molds the Puritan consciousness as well as his own.

These people have experienced a disintegration of God’s world into God-and-nature, a collapse of the secular world into nature-and-man, a fragmentation of the human world into community-and-individual, and a division of the private world into body-and-mind. Obviously there is nothing novel about such disjunctions in the long history of Christian theology and morals; but in the universe of The Scarlet Letter they have taken on a primacy that is striking and new. This disjunctive structure has become a metaphysical presupposition, a reality to be assumed rather than an actuality to be deplored. Moral
existence is no longer a pursuit of the Good; it is experience in the goods and evils of a dichotomous world. The official creed of Massachusetts Congregationalism is one configuration of that world—an attempt to find coherence by making the most of disjunction. Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth devise and suffer other versions of the modern consciousness, worlds of profounder terror and hope. The imagination of Hawthorne, partaking of the condition it projects in the book, moves through the pages in a speculative, inquisitive, experimental mood. Like his characters—but on a much larger scale, since his vision is more inclusive—Hawthorne seeks the center of a world where centers do not hold.

His symbolic method, though he himself was among the first to complain of it, is thoroughly in keeping with his historical premise. If the stuff of actuality is thin in his fiction, it is because he renders an actuality consumed from within, attenuated by a problematic reality that feeds upon it. In The Scarlet Letter, people know themselves by means of revelatory “images” that inform mind and body, and they apprehend other human beings as powerful “shapes” impinging upon them. Nature is portentous, the everyday scene is starkly structured, and a dream-figure like Mistress Hibbens walks the streets. While this atmospheric “significance” recalls the medieval allegorical universe, it disintegrates instead of supporting the substance of things. The voices of God and Devil are heard in human discourse, and “Providence” presides over the action; but the supernatural voices are the riddles of natural man, and the providential design is something to be discovered, not assumed. The immanent Word has become completely immanent; the only sacramental form is the empty vessel of the letter A, whose content alters and grows with time. Correspondingly, the images inherent in the social scene and private experience are fugitive and multivalent. The author collects
alternative interpretations; his tone shifts; his opinions are con­tradictory; his knowledge of fact is often uncertain. Beneath the measured speech and ceremonial behavior of the Boston theocracy is a vast realm of the publicly unsaid and even unsayable—the esoteric community of Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth. The demands for utterance that punctuate The Scarlet Letter ("Speak out the name!"—"What does this . . . letter mean?") are unanswerable theoretically as well as practi­cally; for outside the official consensus no one knows exactly what to call himself or how to construe the significance of the central symbol.

Yet Hester Prynne, who is officially cast down into the underground world of "secrets," comes closest to positive vision and speech, as she comes closest to the substance of fictional character. Deprived of a public voice and reduced to a gray shadow, Hester lives out the problematic situation that everyone in the book knowingly or unknowingly experiences. Deliberately living it out, she emerges on the other side of it. She converts disinheritance into freedom, isolation into individuality, excom­munication into a personal presence that is actual and commu­nicable. To do this without denying the negative burden of history—her own and that of her time—is her moral achievement. It is analogous to Hawthorne's aesthetic achievement in the book as a whole. He must undergo his story if he is to tell it at all; The Scarlet Letter is imposed upon him, much as the letter itself is imposed upon Hester. But his narration is active; and out of the negative world that he inherits he constructs an image of positive human enterprise.

In "The Custom-House: Introductory to 'The Scarlet Let­ter,'" Hawthorne has nothing explicit to say about such matters as the modern consciousness; indeed, the essay at first seems
designed to have as little as possible to do with the story it introduces. But Hawthorne's stance here is wholly consonant with his method in *The Scarlet Letter*; his preface functions as a modest suggestion of the nature of his art.

Reality in "The Custom-House" is history—history in various forms that play upon one another, deny and reinforce each other, until a dense historical world surrounds us. It is a history that moves in chronological sequence from past to present to future, but it also endures. It is unchanging and changing, active and decadent, predetermined and indeterminate, vacuous and full of meaning. Above all, it is both private and public—a reality experienced individually and socially. Though the scarlet letter is discovered at the climax of a personal narrative, it is a public emblem apparently signifying some "rank, honor, and dignity, in by-past times" (appropriately, the letter and its attendant documents are found amid the archives of the Customs, "materials of local history"). Conversely, the symbol communicates its social meaning only to the inner sense of the lonely Hawthorne, not to his analytic and rational public mind, and the documents are "not official, but of a private nature," written by an eighteenth-century predecessor "in his private capacity." When Hawthorne places the letter against his breast, two dimensions of history come into contact. This is a moment of social revelation on the one hand and self-discovery on the other:

... It strangely interested me. My eyes fastened themselves upon the old scarlet letter, and would not be turned aside. Certainly, there was some deep meaning in it, most worthy of interpretation, and which, as it were, streamed forth from the mystic symbol, subtly communicating itself to my sensibilities, but evading the analysis of my mind.

While thus perplexed, ... I happened to place it on my breast. It seemed to me ... that I experienced a sensation
not altogether physical, yet almost so, as of burning heat; and as if the letter were not of red cloth, but red-hot iron.

It is not primarily a moment of conscience, for Hawthorne carefully avoids any explicit reference to the theme of adultery or even to the idea of sin. As a single letter, the most indeterminate of all symbols, and first letter of the alphabet, the beginning of all communication, Hester's emblem represents a potential point of coherence within a manifold historical experience.

There is another Hawthorne in "The Custom-House," one who is not inclined to take such apocalyptic moments very seriously. He is an image largely projected by style—frank, good-humored, a man of feeling, but urbane, sharp-eyed, something of an ironist. This cultivated and self-assured gentleman is somewhat complacent; and he belongs to a stable, secure public world of ready categories and easy communication. We might call him the Cosmopolitan. As readers, we quickly identify ourselves with him; we are all gentlemen together. Salem, the Custom House and its denizens, the Surveyor himself with his literary ambitions, are the objects of our sophisticated interest. We are capable of reflecting that Hester Prynne, though she may have been an angel on earth for some of her contemporaries, was probably a mere "intruder and . . . nuisance" for others. We accede to the game while our whimsical author spins his tale of mysterious documents and grandly offers to show them to us. This is the social situation that Hawthorne invokes at the very beginning of his essay, when he assures us that he will speak as a man in company addressing "a kind and apprehensive, though not the closest friend." He is a strong exponent of propriety, ensconced in a conventional but comfortable mid-world where the private man and the social forms may come into easy relation. He neither would give unseemly publicity to intimate matters nor (since he will be
only the "editor, or very little more," of *The Scarlet Letter*) would he give intimacy to public matters. He would speak in such a way as not to violate "either the reader's rights or his own."

In the part of his mind that always greatly distrusted whatever he had written, Hawthorne obviously wanted to relieve the "gloom" of his book by a jaunty preface. As the Cosmopolitan, he is untouched by the experiences through which he has passed. He views his "autobiographical impulse" as a kind of harmless seizure, and at the end of his discourse he still speaks as from a secure position outside of time. He tells the story of a "well balanced" man in an essentially secure comic world; though he is thrown out of office, no real harm can come to him. But this self-projection is essentially dramatic; and in the essay as a whole, the Cosmopolitan turns out to be the least important of Hawthorne's roles. He is relatively naive and imperceptive; he maintains his balance by excluding some unpleasant truths.

Throughout the opening paragraphs we feel the presence of an uneasy person within the suave personage who confronts us. Though he arrives at a reassuring formula, we can see him casting about for "the truth" of the matter—his "true relation with his audience," his "true reason for assuming a personal relation with the public," his "true position as editor." Within the gentlemanly consensus that he presupposes, there are factors that pull apart. He reveals them with startling clarity, if only to deny them. On the one hand, there is "the inmost Me behind its veil," the state of alienation when "thoughts are frozen and utterance benumbed." On the other hand, there is a dream of total interrelation, "the one heart and mind of perfect sympathy; as if the printed book . . . were certain to find out the divided segment of the writer's own nature, and complete his circle of existence by bringing him into communion with
it." The secure Hawthorne who is content with a social self and a conventional society, who is so much at home in history that he can ignore its tensions, is haunted by an alter ego whose "circle of existence" is painfully incomplete, for whom history is the vain pursuit of total communion by an isolated self.

This malaise is mainly represented through another self-projection, the Surveyor of the Customs, who mediates between the Cosmopolitan and the historical visionary brooding over the scarlet letter. True to his title, the Surveyor makes it his business to "watch and study," to measure his colleagues, himself, and the house they inhabit. He is at once a solitary man, a self-appointed surveyor whose public office is hardly more than a title, and a social man, very much a creature of the "customs" he surveys. Inquisitive but tentative, he wanders through the building or stands aside and observes his fellow officers. He enters into the narrative voice in much the same spirit of inquiry: careless of contradiction, he adopts various perspectives with equal feeling, as though to make an inventory of the possibilities of life. Like the Cosmopolitan, the Surveyor never disappears from view or lapses into silence; at the end of the essay, he is still addressing us. But only in the climactic moment of communion with the letter, when he is transformed, do we see a potential author of The Scarlet Letter or a ground on which he can take his stand.

The ground of the Custom House is shaky—not only because Salem has outlived its time, but also because time still moves on. There are two aspects of social history here, to which we are introduced by the long sentence that leads us up the wharf to a "spacious edifice of brick" and down "the track of . . . years" from the old days of bustling commerce to the present era of decay. The house, a stage for mere mock-activity, the "formalities of office" zealously pursued by the custom officials, is also Uncle Sam's going concern. Though Salem, in com-
parison with other ports, is fast asleep, there are still merchants here, "men of traffic" whose names Hawthorne tells over. There are days when "affairs move onward" and a bustle disturbs the torpid old retainers. There is even a "man of business" among them. The house itself, as opposed to its functionaries, often represents a commercial and political life full of action and change. The past counts for nothing in Uncle Sam's work. His old records are thrown aside as "rubbish," and the labor that went into them is wholly lost. What counts is the future. Uncle Sam changes his garments, from Whig to Democrat and back again, striking terror into the hearts of those who look for passivity and permanence. His emblem, the national eagle displayed over the entrance to the Custom House, signifies destruction as well as protection. It is the emblem of a "struggling world" that is wholly unstable and immediate, always building the future out of its own dissolution.

On the other hand, there is old and forever unfinished business in the Custom House, work that will never begin again. The building was "originally projected . . . with an idea of subsequent prosperity destined never to be realized," and a large room on the second floor, still unpaneled and unplastered, testifies to an arrest of time. The occasional activities of the customs are always "for the time being": they are present moments without a future, hollow re-enactments of the past. This quality of fixation characterizes the "permanent" officials as they sit in their row of old-fashioned chairs tilted against the wall. They live in a changeless present, keeping their "accustomed" places and ritualistically repeating their old yarns. The Collector, the most experienced of them all, is the most static; he stands on his past as on a pedestal. His life, like theirs, was once full of changes and chances; it was futuristic, like the world of affairs that now surrounds them. But it became a past life precisely by stopping short in a permanent present, a "new lease of existence"
that negates the movement of existence and even death. The past, as embodied in these old men, is time that has ceased to act and to evolve new content—time denatured. Therefore they retain none of the substance of their earlier lives and seem to have learned nothing at all from their long experience. The Inspector, who has spent all his adult years in the Custom House, is an utterly mindless animal, for without time man ceases to be; his memory is a parody of memory, a long vista of dinner tables ranged behind the dinner of the day.

Just as the futurism of Uncle Sam has nothing behind it and emerges from a dissolving present, so the past of the Custom House officers is history that has come to nothing in a static present. A problematic duality of traditionalism and futurism lies beneath the positive surface of the Custom House world, and there is a certain emptiness within the apparent substance of that world, whether it be backward-looking or forward-looking. This is a very different social milieu from the one projected through the style of the Cosmopolitan. The world of the Surveyor is not a sustaining medium, a rich present; it is vitiated by chronological time, which either comes to a dead halt or abdicates before the putative future.

The Surveyor is very much aware of his own chronology: once a writer at the Old Manse, he is now Surveyor of the Revenue whose "prophetic instinct" tells him that another "change of custom" is in store for him. Back of his sojourn in the Old Manse lie the temporal depths of Salem, his "native place"; beyond his eventual discharge from office lies the time at which he will be a writer again, six months later, and beyond that a further future when he will be "a citizen of somewhere else." His sympathies point in both directions; the intrinsic duality of the Custom House world reappears in him. He is an activist and a decadent, a futurist and a traditionalist.

As an exponent of healthy change, he delights in the Custom
House as a place of new experience for himself. Though his return to Salem has brought him back to his own earliest past and to the past of his race, his position there is a decided change from his more recent life. He has been wholly converted from a writer to "a man of affairs," and his name emblazoned on boxes of merchandise will go where no title page would ever carry it. In this perspective, his previous literary career becomes unreal—becomes, indeed, a traffic in "unrealities." For the futurist Surveyor, literature is not only an archaic activity, out of date in Uncle Sam's new world, but doubly insubstantial, since it is associated with his own outmoded self. It also pertains to the side of him that continues to dabble in the social past, foolishly trying, amid "the materiality of . . . daily life," to go back into another age and create "the semblance of a world out of airy matter." Literature ceases to be suspect only when it ceases to be past-centered and embraces "the reality of the flitting hour." When the Surveyor bids us farewell, he speaks as the realistic author of "A Rill from the Town-Pump," and the flitting hour is carrying him on to other realities. The Custom House "lies like a dream behind me"; Salem is now "no portion of the real earth, but an overgrown village in cloud-land"; and he foresees the time when "the great-grandchildren of the present race" will conceive of him (quite properly) as a "scribbler of bygone days" known only to the village antiquary.

What had brought him to the Custom House, however, was not a quest for new experience but a "strange, indolent, unjoyous attachment" to his birthplace and to the old Salem behind the new one. He has a "home-feeling with the past," a sense of more reality in it than in "the present phase of the town" or his own actual existence. The "earnest and energetic men" who founded his family and helped establish Salem have greater moral validity, "both good and evil," than the activists of the dissolving present. If his relation to them is profitless, it is because their reality annihilates his present life, just as the
old active life of the custom officers has terminated in a rigid posture, an empty form. The traditionalist decays because he is fixed; with "oyster-like tenacity" he "clings to the spot where his successive generations have been imbedded." He feels his past as a doom. And if he is a writer, his role is as much diminished in his own eyes by his ancestors' contempt as by the condescension of his readers' great-grandchildren. The old Puritans looking over his shoulder see the future (any change from their pattern) as necessarily decadent; and for them literature, which is wholly a thing of the future, is mere idleness. The backward-oriented mind of the Surveyor can only share their view of himself. As a degenerate "writer of story-books," he takes a feeble vengeance upon them for their tyranny over him: his triviality is their punishment, and he even undertakes, "as their representative," to enter a jocular apology for their sins.

In sum, the chronological world is a trap. If the Surveyor welcomes the Custom House as a "change of diet," he knows all the while that it is a stagnant place, thoroughly detrimental to manly character and to his literary powers. It will change him into permanence ("make me permanently other than I had been"). And if he chooses, with equal paradox, to regard the stagnation as a "transitory life" and look toward "a new change of custom," what can he have in view? Merely an opportunity to "recall whatever was valuable in the past"—in the aesthetic life that his futurism always belittles. Not surprisingly, a literary and intellectual torpor overcomes him. Though he mainly blames it on the inactive, dependent, static life of the customs, which destroys his sense of actuality, his impotence is equally a result of the surrounding practical activity, "actual circumstance," in which his traditionalism can see nothing of value. The two aspects of his world meet only to negate each other; the personal existence of the Surveyor is canceled out by the negative world he surveys.

Superficially at home in the Custom House, the Surveyor
is truly in the alienated condition that the Cosmopolitan mentions and blithely passes over: his "thoughts are frozen and utterance benummed." In his moonlit room late at night—between darkness and daylight, past and future—he longs for a more productive meeting of "the Imaginary" and "the Actual," personal vision and the public world. In utter solitude, he can conceive of perfect communion between a private imagination oriented toward the past and a public actuality oriented toward the future. But he can go no further in his role of Surveyor. Each factor refuses to "imbue itself with the nature of the other," and his midnight sessions come to nothing. He is finally content with a modus vivendi that simplifies his problem without solving it. He finds himself completely caught up in a futurist society; Providence, in the guise of a change of administration, saves him from his impasse. In a sudden flurry of activity, he is defined as the active man despite his apparent passivity. With his head cut off and his sensibility thereby simplified, he sits down to prepare the "Posthumous Papers of a Decapitated Surveyor." He looks back only with tolerant amusement; parodies the backward-looking documents of Surveyor Pue, whose own "mental part" had survived the centuries; and deplores the "stern and sombre aspect" of the The Scarlet Letter, in which there are unfortunate traces of his personal "turmoil" in the past.

Yet he notes the odd fact that he was very happy while writing The Scarlet Letter. The author of that book, who is quite another person, lurks within the Surveyor of the Customs, just as the latter haunts the Cosmopolitan. Indeed, the moment of revelation when Hawthorne confronts the letter is what the Surveyor is vainly trying to recapture in his moonlit room. This revelation is not a "transcendence." Hawthorne, the potential Author, is as partial to the past as the Surveyor (in the end) is to the future. He returns not only to the "sunless fantasies"
of New England legend but also to his literary "habits of bygone
days." And he is as solitary as the Surveyor, finally, is sociable.
It is in a "deserted chamber of the Custom-House" that his
mind returns to its "old track" and he receives his charge from
the ghost of Mr. Pue. Traditionalist and solitary, he is thor­
oughly immersed in the chronological condition. But he does
not succumb to chronological determinism, the past that always
threatens to come upon him as a doom and fixate him in an
empty present. He turns it about, conceives it as an enduring
past contained in and latently possessed by the present, as the
scarlet letter is "present" beneath the dead records and illusory
contemporary world of the Custom House. Nor does he accept
the barren role of alienated imagination, reduced to a sluggish
"fancy" by the senseless archives of the customs. He converts
his solitude into self-pursuit, an active state, which is identical
with pursuit of the "deep meaning" of the scarlet letter.

He had earlier felt a similar sense of duration in contem­
plating the statuesque Collector. Viewed with "affection," the
old general seemed to lose his fixity and become the living vessel
of a still-living past. Yet in this case, the would-be Author could
only arrive at loose generalizations; he could not find his way
through the ruins of time to the "real life" that he supposed
to exist within the old man's memory. The scarlet letter is a
different case because it not only gives Hawthorne a token of
duration but also includes him, alienated as he is, in the endur­
ing reality it radiates. Coming to him in solitude, it is relevant
to the meaning of his solitude; and he, poring over it, is saved
from solitude. He is in communion; he belongs in the succes­
ion of Hester Prynne, who first wore the letter, and of Surveyor
Pue, on whose mind it was so deeply branded. In a roundabout
way, he has found "the divided segment of . . . [his] own
nature," completed his "circle of existence."
If he is redeemed, he is also invested with a mission. Leaving behind his colleagues "seated . . . at the receipt of custom," he has been summoned "like Matthew . . . for apostolic errands." His mission is not to preach but to act—to appropriate the universe of discourse now open to him and thereby to "interpret" the reality of consciousness that "stream[s] forth from the mystic symbol." In *The Scarlet Letter*, the A will hang over the entire story, as in its greatest scene a portentous A hangs over and illuminates the persons of the drama: Hester, Pearl, and Dimmesdale on the scaffold, Chillingworth below them, and the surrounding town of Boston. Each of these five figures—for the Puritan town is an agent, not a mere setting—will acquire meaning from the universal center but reconstruct the meaning in a particular way. Thus the sphere of the book (which is full of references to "spheres" and "circles") will be progressively redefined as the emblematic letter is approached and shines out from one side or another. In this large sense, *The Scarlet Letter* will be the icon of a creative mind at work, not merely suffering or resting in its inheritance but actively seizing upon the history that made it. And something analogous to this, translated into moral terms, will be the dominant theme of the book—the major meaning derived from and projected upon the central symbol.

III

The book begins with a vignette of the people of Boston—a single sentence set off in a paragraph by itself: "A throng of bearded men, in sad-colored garments and gray, steeple-crowned hats, intermixed with women, some wearing hoods, and others bareheaded, was assembled in front of a wooden edifice, the door of which was heavily timbered with oak, and studded with iron spikes." Just as Hawthorne gazes at the symbolic letter, seeking the meaning in it, they stand "with their eyes intently fastened on the iron-clamped oaken door," out of which Hester
THE SCARLET LETTER

Prynne will come with the letter on her bosom. In effect, the prison door is their avenue to the meaning of the symbol; and these colorless men and women, though they stand outside the prison, have all the demeanor of prisoners. Any Utopian colony, Hawthorne declares, will soon find it necessary “to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison”; but these people embrace the necessity. Though they are “founders of a new colony,” they have based it upon the oldest facts of human experience—crime and death. Though they would cultivate “human virtue and happiness,” they have no faith in any direct approach to this end. The jail and its companion-place, the burial ground, are their proper meeting houses; the scaffold, situated “nearly beneath the eaves of Boston’s earliest church,” is the center of the society. Not once in the book is a church physically described or a scene actually staged within it. Their true religious exercise is the contemplation of Hester, their scapegoat and counterpart, set up before them on the scaffold. Even as they denounce her, they are fascinated by her as an emblem of the world they inhabit.

The ceremony in the market place is genuinely religious, not merely perverse, but it is oblique. The ministers do not urge Hester to seek divine support but only to suffer her punishment, repent her transgression, and name another sinner. If there were some “Papist among the crowd of Puritans,” this woman taken in adultery might recall to his mind the contrasting “image of Divine Maternity.” But the Puritans invoke no such image to relieve the horror before them; on the contrary, their faith positively depends on discovering a “taint of deepest sin in the most sacred quality of human life.” They would honor a transcendent God who enters this world mainly as law-giver and executioner. His mercy appears through his justice, his love through his power. His incarnation is the impress of his abstract supernatural code, which primarily reveals the evils of flesh
and the universality of sin. As administrators of the code, the ministers and magistrates on the balcony have no concrete human existence for themselves or others, and they have no perception of the concrete reality of Hester on the scaffold. "Sages of rigid aspect," standing in God's holy fire, they are blind to the "mesh of good and evil" before them. They see only the abstract Adulteress. As when Hester later views her image in Governor Bellingham's breastplate, she is "absolutely hidden behind" the "exaggerated and gigantic" abstraction that engrosses her accusers.

If they were merely self-righteous and sadistic, these Bostonians would be much less formidable. They are impressive because their doctrinaire moralism has a metaphysical basis: they purge their town in token of a universe where only God is really pure and only purity is of any account. Hawthorne does full justice to the moral seriousness, the strength of character, and the practical ability that their way of thinking could foster. He affirms that the Puritan society "accomplish[ed] so much, precisely because it imagined and hoped so little." And in various ways his Puritans, though eccentric, are old-fashioned folk, not radical innovators. In comparison with the "heartlessness" of a later era of sophisticated moral tolerance, the punishment inflicted on Hester, however cruel, is dignified by moral principle. In comparison with later democratic irreverence, the respectfulness and loyalty of the Massachusetts citizens to their leaders are still close to the feudal virtues. In comparison with their genteel descendants, the merciless harpies of the market place still have a moral as well as physical substance, "a boldness and rotundity," that derives from the old England they have put behind them.

But in all fundamental respects Hawthorne's Puritans are both problematic and unprecedented. They are men responding to an extreme intellectual predicament by extreme measures, and
their predicament is one with their disseverance from the old world. The pompous forms and dress of their great public occasions, like the aristocratic menage of Governor Bellingham, are nostalgic and imitative, not characteristic. The old order vaguely survives in their consciousness because they stand at the beginning of a new epoch, but it survives much as memories of King James' court flit through the mind of the Reverend Mr. Wilson. It is true that Europe sometimes figures in the book as "newer" than the Puritan colony: the "other side of the Atlantic" is a place of intellectual and social emancipation, to which Dimmesdale and Hester might flee and to which Pearl betakes herself at the end. But Europe is a refuge because, whether old or new, feudal or modern, it signifies no struggle of consciousness, no necessity to reckon with the foundations of the new era. New England is the place where men must confront the founding questions of their time, which are set forth in the topography, the intellectual landscape, of The Scarlet Letter.

Above them stretches the heaven of supernatural revelation, where "any marked event, for good or evil," is prefigured in "awful hieroglyphics." The physical heavens are also spiritual, a medium of the divine word. But no civilized society was ever so directly in contact with brute nature. The settlement is encircled by the teeming "Western wilderness" on one side and the open sea on the other. Though the townsmen studiously abjure this "wild, heathen Nature . . . , never subjugated by human law, nor illumined by higher truth," it invades their prison-fortress. Savage Indians and even more savage sailors are a familiar sight in their streets. And physical nature is equivocal in relation to man. While it reduces him to "animal ferocity," it also sanctions "human nature," the life of feeling, and the virtues of the heart. The possibility of a humanistic naturalism lurks in the wild rosebush growing out of "the deep heart of Nature" beside the prison door. The possibility becomes
actual in the person of Hester Prynne on the scaffold and later in her cottage on the outskirts of the town between the sea and the forest. What is more, Hester represents a positive individualism, alien to Puritan society but capable of creating a human community of its own. By her refusal to play out her appointed role on the scaffold, she becomes doubly an outcast from Boston; and yet, standing there in all her concrete individuality, she seems to claim a general truth, a concrete universality. She tacitly challenges the abstract city of their abstract God.

The challenge is momentous because she activates problems that their rational is designed to anticipate and lay to rest. And similar questions rise to the surface, make themselves manifest, in ironic turns of the Puritan mind and behavior. Hawthorne persistently describes the spiritual abstraction of these people in terms of inanimate physical nature. The "rigid aspect" of the sages on the balcony corresponds to "the grim rigidity that petrifie[s] the bearded physiognomies" of the congregation in the market place. These are "iron men," as Hester later says; their creed is an "iron framework," aptly reflected in the "iron-clamped oaken door" on which their eyes are fixed and in the "contrivance of wood and iron," the pillory, that stands on the scaffold. It is as though their aspiration toward abstract supernatural truth has ironically brought them around to an abstract natural automatism, a world of law that is closer to the inorganic forms of stone, metal, and dead timber than to the mind of God. On the other hand, the ferocity of the women in the market place is as lawless and as natural as the lust they denounce, and it complements the rigid natural law that dominates their men. For all of them, "civilized life" consists of putting nature into prison; but the prison itself, the "black flower" of their town, partakes of the subhuman nature they contemn and obsessively scrutinize. The black flower blossoms apace, as Chillingworth observes. Meanwhile, natural affection, the red flower, lives on,
unwanted and disclaimed, in the heart of Mr. Wilson and in the potential "heart of the multitude." Two voices of that heart, one of personal sympathy and one of faith in natural virtue, arise unaccountably amidst the chorus of reprobation. They are barely individualized, simply a young wife with a child and "a man in the crowd," but they testify to a community of individuals within this authoritarian society. The official "community" depends on a consensus of power and submission, a free election of individuals chosen to suppress individuality. But the scene in the market place, with elevated individual dignitaries opposed to a shapeless "throng" below, intimates a latent failure within the Puritan social system. The way is open for the "multitude" to gain shape through respect for its own multiple individuality. Puritanism contains and secretly invites its opposite, as it contained Anne Hutchinson from whose footsteps the wild rose bush may have sprung.

In this sense, the Puritans of *The Scarlet Letter* are deeply involved in the dialectic of modern freedom. They themselves are creatures of the early modern era with which Hawthorne explicitly associates Hester—that moment when "the human intellect, newly emancipated, . . . [took] a more active and a wider range than for many centuries before." In Europe, "men of the sword [have] overthrown nobles and kings," and "men bolder than these [have] overthrown and rearranged . . . the whole system of ancient prejudice, wherewith was linked much of ancient principle." The mind of Hawthorne's Puritans is a negative version of this same libertarianism, which has cut loose the secular world from God, mankind from nature, and individual men from universal Man. In them, freedom appears as *deprivation*: a world removed from God and definable only in terms of that distance—a mankind at war with nature and able to create value out of it only by denying its intrinsic value, as God denies the value of man—and an individual alienated from
humanity, who can rehabilitate himself only by self-annihilation before an external public law. In their prison-worship, the Puritans define modern liberty as a fearful freedom, and they make the most of fear, the terror of deprivation, in order to regain an idea of universal law, however abstract, unnatural, and inhuman. What dogs them, and confronts them in the person of Hester, is the other face of freedom—an affirmative individualism, humanism, and naturalism. The proscribed individual regenerates their society; they unwittingly are moved, for good and evil, by the nature they vilify; and a multiform, emergent divinity speaks in the forest or shows his features in Hester’s elf-child.

By and large, in the course of the book, the Puritan version of the modern consciousness gives way to this positive version. Hester comes to dominate the landscape not only as a character in the eyes of the reader but also as an agent of transvaluation for her contemporaries. The natural affections of the “multitude,” oriented toward her, escape from the abstract law of the ministers and magistrates. The final scene in the market place is very different in tonality from that of the first three chapters. There is variety, color, and movement in the picture; the darting figure of the antinomian Pearl weaves through the crowd. And yet we are reminded that “the blackest shade of Puritanism” still lies in the future and that its effect will linger on for two centuries. The populace gathered for this New England holiday are intent on the sign of sin and once more condemn Hester to “moral solitude.” The climactic death of Dimmesdale in utter self-negation recalls the basic negativity of the Puritan vision which underlies the solemn procession of dignitaries and his own eloquent sermon on God’s work in Massachusetts. For, given Hawthorne’s historical method, he can have no intellectual right, and indeed no desire, to represent a complete and irreversible transformation of Puritan orthodoxy. It is the Puritan
mind that proposes his subject, postulates the scarlet letter; he can move beyond this negative frame of reference only by keeping it in view. If the letter were not potentially more than a doom and a sign of doom, he could not turn back upon it and repossess it; but if it did not continue to have power to burn, he would not be trying to discover its meaning.

Emerging from the prison, Hester forthwith rejects the "Puritanic code of law" that has put her there. The town beadle, with sword and staff, officially draws her toward the door; but "on the threshold," we are told, "she repelled him, by an action marked with natural dignity and force of character, and stepped into the open air, as if by her own free-will." There is more than bravado in her action, though she is full of shame and uncertain of her ground. She walks out of the prison as representative of an ideal pointedly opposed to "the righteous Colony of the Massachusetts, where iniquity is dragged out into the sunshine." She is converting the isolation of a criminal into the free self-determination of an individual, and she is pitting her "natural" dignity and force against the abstract dignity and force by which the Puritans attempt to annihilate nature. Similarly, the scarlet letter that she wears has been deliberately transformed into a "fitting decoration" for the natural individual. The "fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy" manifested in her gold-embroidered letter, together with the "wild and picturesque peculiarity" of her gown, express both a "desperate recklessness"—what the Puritans condemn in her—and also a creative spirit—the other side of her "impulsive and passionate nature." Thus reinterpreted, the unholy flesh emphasized and stigmatized by the letter becomes a unique physical presence, a "lady-like . . . state and dignity." The spell of the letter, "taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and
inclosing her in a sphere by herself,” is not cast by Puritan law but by her own sense of its positive meaning; it “transfigure[s]” her into an individual because she has transfigured it into an emblem of individuality.

The naturalism and individualism dramatized by Hester in this scene point toward the “freedom of speculation” that Hawthorne later attributes to her—and beyond that to the scene with Dimmesdale in the forest, for which her “whole seven years of outlaw and ignominy . . . [are] little other than a preparation.” When she appears at Bellingham’s mansion, she is “so conscious of her own right, that it seem[s] scarcely an unequal match between the public . . . and a lonely woman, backed by the sympathies of nature.” The effect of her estrangement, intended to mark her bondage to evil, has been “to set her free.” Her liberated “intellect and heart” move through the world of her consciousness like “the wild Indian in his woods.” Her appeal to Dimmesdale is calculatedly couched in the language of natural and personal “possibility.” The forest-track leads to a point where all tracks disappear: “There thou art free!” The “broad pathway of the sea” opens out into a cosmopolitan civilization where freedom is taken for granted. Both betoken the individual’s capacity for endless self-invention—the power to “begin all anew,” to give up an old name and “make . . . another.”

Hawthorne remarks that Hester’s judges, had they known of her free-thinking, “would have held [it] to be a deadlier crime than that stigmatized by the scarlet letter.” But in fact Hester’s sexual crime hardly exists for the reader as something distinct from her posture on the scaffold and her later philosophic libertarianism. Not that we are led to suppose she committed adultery for theoretical reasons; but we are interested in her deed mainly for thematic reasons. It contains the same sort of ambivalence as she imports into the idea of nature and
the idea of the individual. The adultery of Hester and Dimmesdale, subverting the communal law, produces the only real community in the book. This is presumably her meaning when she says to Dimmesdale that "what [they] did had a consecration of its own." The proof of the consecration is precisely in the communion they attained by ignoring the sacrosanct community: "We felt it so! We said so to each other!" Pearl, dressed to personify the scarlet letter, stands between her parents to form "an electric chain" binding them together. She is the immanent word they have freely created. A similar dream of personal immediacy, according to Chillingworth, was what led him to marry Hester. The wrong against her that he confesses is his sin against this dream, the "false and unnatural relation" of a merely external marriage. The wrong that he feels was done to him, as he hints, is not so much possible exposure to public dishonor as a personal affront for which he will seek a personal revenge. Ironically, then, these three members of an adulterous triangle commune more profoundly in their dissociation and even in their antagonism than do any of the spokesmen of society. The monolithic state surrounding them is not only ignorant of their secret but also unacquainted with the kind of relation, the intimate good and evil, that they experience. In this sense, it is the official society, much more than Hester, that is excluded from the "common nature" of men.

Yet Hester's "freedom"—the creative nature, the individuality, and the antinomian community she represents—is inherently dialectical. In order that the letter may be "transformed into something that should speak a different purport," she must feel it as "too deeply branded" for anyone to remove. A prevailing image for her situation throughout the book is that of a lonely being encircled by "a thousand unrelenting eyes . . . concentrated at her bosom." Though she is separated from these observers as by a great void—whether a "magic circle of ignominy" or a
self-generated circle of freedom—her meaning depends on her "intense consciousness" of what she means to them. The values associated with her have no existence except as transformations of Puritan values. And her self-effacing role after she is released from her prison term, her apparent humility and public conformity, indicates that her business is not an external battle against the established order but an internal struggle to assimilate that order by translating it into her own language. Her consciousness becomes the stage of a lifelong dialogue between the voice of Puritan negation and the voice of that positive freedom which is evinced by the very fact of her lively consciousness.

The process begins while she is still on the scaffold. When she summons up "phantasmagoric forms" from the past in order to escape from the "cruel weight and hardness of . . . reality," the past leads her back to the crushing present, the inescapable product of all she has been; but her identity is being dramatized all the while in the energy of her thought and the vividness with which she conceives the entire present moment, including herself. This dialectical vocation is what keeps her in Boston, despite the fact that she might easily follow the path she later offers to Dimmesdale, into the forest or over the sea. Her self-respect is bound up with her shame, her freedom with her bondage: "her sin, her ignominy, [are] the roots which she [has] struck into the soil." Her perennial gray costume, resembling a prison uniform, expresses the annihilation of self that the scarlet letter is intended to inflict; it has "the effect of making her fade personally out of sight and outline." Yet simultaneously she is "brought . . . back from this twilight indistinctness" by the embroidered letter, her handiwork, which "reveal[s] her under the moral aspect of its own illumination."

Therefore the movement of her experience—the freedom she enacts, as distinguished from the absolute, ideal freedom she sometimes proposes—is tormented, difficult, full of doubt.
Hester’s agony of consciousness is greater than the particular agony of her shame, the “penance” imposed by Puritan law (just as the exercise of her consciousness, the enactment of her freedom, is the only redemption she will ever know). She moves back and forth between aberrant extremes; and in her very effort to conceive a via media, she falls into traps of thought.

Almost immediately after her release from prison, Hawthorne notes a kind of tergiversation—“something doubtful, something that might be deeply wrong”—in her attitude toward her sufferings. She cannot adopt the Puritan rationale of sin, penance, and repentance without an oblique assertion of her own self-determining and passionate nature. She imagines herself as proceeding through humiliation and ostracism to a triumphant state of saint-like purity; and the persistence of her “rich, voluptuous, Oriental . . . taste for the gorgeously beautiful” is revealed by the very severity with which she chastens it. On the other hand, her latent idea that what makes for “sin” can also make for good is confused and perverted by a Puritanical concept of evil. From the beginning she has had some notion of a communion of sinners. The passionate nature that in one sense alienates criminals from the community of law can serve in another sense to unite them in sympathy: “. . . Would that I might endure his agony, as well as mine!” At a later stage, she acts on her belief that the “link of mutual crime” establishes mutual responsibility between persons who have “cast off all duty towards other human beings.” But the communion of sinners, seen in a Puritan perspective, becomes a communion of sin. When a sympathetic eye (perhaps Dimmesdale’s) falls upon the scarlet letter and makes her feel “as if half of her agony were shared,” she conceives the moment as a renewal of evil affection, not a transmutation of evil into good. Unable to surrender her faith in final union with her lover, but preoccupied with the Puritan view of their love as wholly evil, she
is driven to picture a communion of the damned, "a joint futurity of endless retribution." She struggles against the "sympathetic knowledge of . . . hidden sin" that the letter gives her, for it seems to imply a world of common sin rather than a community of sympathy. Her only recourse is to repress her vision of reunion with Dimmesdale—"bar it in its dungeon"—and try to "believe that no fellow-mortal [is] guilty like herself."

The terrible phenomenon of Chillingworth objectifies and confirms Hester's vision of an evil communion. He foresees and tells her of the perverse "sympathy," the sudden shudder of recognition, by which he will know her lover through the affinity of sin for sin. Doubtless he is present in her mind when the "electric thrill" of the scarlet letter seems to reveal to her a multitude of companions in evil. When she seeks him out again to reaffirm her loyalty to Dimmesdale, the letter burns ironically in token of her relation to Chillingworth, who has become a devil in a world that he envisages as wholly devilish. The bond that she swore with Chillingworth, as she now perceives, was the devil's bond: her sympathetic assumption of Dimmesdale's agony has brought about a perverse intimacy of fiend and victim that mocks her idea of passion self-redeemed in love. Chillingworth destroys her faith in the potential good of the letter she wears, leaving only the mark of universal sin, "the truth of red-hot iron," and a natural world "quickened to . . . evil purpose." The question whether Dimmesdale should be exposed becomes unimportant, for in any case "there is no good" for him or anyone concerned. The path of her speculation is now a "dismal maze." As Chillingworth turns away from her, she revels in her hate of him, accepting the inverted reality that he represents. Seven years of penance not only have "wrought out no repentance" but also have destroyed the new sense that she was trying to lend to the word.

In the wake of her interview with Chillingworth, Hester for
the first time denies that the scarlet letter has any meaning at all. If informing Pearl of the Puritan meaning of the symbol is “the price of the child’s sympathy,” it is more than she is willing to pay. For she has good reason to distrust any purported meeting ground between the sign of evil and human good; and she is turning toward a conception of unmitigated freedom, which she sets forth in the forest scene that immediately follows. She asks Dimmesdale to believe that he has left his sin far behind him, superseded by a “penitence . . . sealed and witnessed by good works.” Going further, she conjures away the very idea of penitence, tossing the scarlet letter aside: “The past is gone! . . . See! With this symbol, I undo it all, and make it as it had never been!” The wilderness around them responds with favorable auguries; the “mystery” of nature, the ambivalent joy-and-sorrow in which her whole history once seemed to center, has been resolved into a single “mystery of joy.” Hester is still thinking in these terms as she comes into the market place for the final scene. She contemplates wearing the letter “freely and voluntarily” but with secret disdain and the intention of discarding it forever—“in order to convert what had so long been agony into a kind of triumph.” Her attitude is strikingly opposed to her dialectical self-conversion and triumph in her first appearance in the market place; she has solved her problem by cutting the knot.

Yet her dialectical stance persists insofar as she is still trying to find a morality in freedom, not merely to enjoy the sensation of being free. And along her way there have been indications that nature and the individual, fully liberated, become impoverished and disoriented; liberation is ultimately as nihilistic as the presumption of guilt. Taken in either sense, “the scarlet letter [has] not done its office.” Thus Hester’s “freedom of speculation,” though theoretically sanctioned by natural freedom, is in practice contrary to nature. Her personality and appearance are
reduced to a "bare and harsh outline," and she is deprived of "passion and feeling" by her independence of mind. The cold abstractness of her free thinking isolates her as much as the public proscription that set her free. Nature, the only ground for her thought, suffers a reversal of meaning and becomes a "wild and ghastly scenery" that "image[s] . . . the moral wilderness" of her speculations. This is the way she pictures herself while waiting for Dimmesdale in the forest. The "dark labyrinth" of liberty is hard to distinguish from the "dismal maze" of deviltry in which Chillingworth left her. Having discarded the letter, seeing only evil in its "stern and severe, but yet . . . guardian spirit," she has entered upon another realm where values dissolve into nothingness. Her dream of an open future with Dimmesdale is ominously preceded and shadowed by the image of their first encounter in the dim wood. They meet as ghosts, awe-stricken at each other and at themselves. It is a true communion of individuals: " . . . the crisis flung back to them their consciousness, and revealed to each heart its history and experience. . . . The soul beheld its features in the mirror of the passing moment." But the hands they extend to one another are "chill as death" and barely convince them of their "actual and bodily existence."

If the world exemplified in Chillingworth, though it has the substance of evil, is ultimately without good, the world of absolute freedom is finally without substance, without "truth." It is the example of Dimmesdale that brings this home to Hester and thereby helps to restore her intellectual balance. For in her conversation with him she is fighting against this realization as much as she is combatting the claims of the scarlet letter. She denies that his private life, cut off from public truth, is "falsehood . . . emptiness . . . death." His public reputation, according to her, is a function of his private substance, and both demonstrate his real holiness. The private communion with
friend or enemy that he desperately imagines as a last resort is for her the solution of his problem. Re-established in his benign relation with her and cognizant of his malign relation with Chillingworth, he will be part of a world of personal good and evil that is more substantial than the external Puritan forms for which he yearns. But Dimmesdale, though he agrees to strike out for freedom with her, never accepts her contention that private freedom is more real than public order. The Election Sermon is on his mind as he returns from the forest; and when he passes Hester in the procession, he is “unattainable in his worldly position,” far removed from the personal communion of “their mutual world.” His voice from the church, telling unmistakably of a personal anguish, nevertheless speaks in the language of impersonal authority. As she stands at the foot of the scaffold listening to him, she is recalled from her dissolving private dream to the solid coherence of social reality: “There was a sense within her . . . that her whole orb of life, both before and after, was connected with this spot [the scaffold], as with the one point that gave it unity.”

Still, the coercive social reality that rushes back in the final chapter is not Hester’s proper home. It is one dimension of her personal universe, and it exists for her only in relation to her own naturalistic freedom. The scaffold is the center of her orb of life because the letter which society once imposed and she voluntarily assumed on that spot is the center of her dialectical consciousness. Through all her gradations of attitude this problematic center is implied as a reference point; it is the potential focus of her experience. It is also a very actual idea for her—one that she contemplates through the ever-present figure of Pearl. Hester is everywhere accompanied by the thought of her daughter, that “lovely and immortal flower” growing out of the “rank luxuriance of a guilty passion.” By dressing Pearl as a personification of the scarlet letter, identi-
fying "the object of her affection" with "the emblem of her guilt," she images the convertibility of terms like guilt and love, affection and passion. This concept of metamorphosis, though it is her own, at first puzzles her almost as much as it does the Puritan elders to whom she later propounds it. How can the "badge of shame" be "capable of being loved"? And how can such love fail to be merely a disguise for unrepentant lust? Her affection will quicken her torment, she tells them; she will be chastened by her sense of the distance between her feeling for Pearl and the shameful deed that brought Pearl into being. What is more apparent, however, is that she has introduced the positive idea of a quickening power into the negative Puritan concept of passionate human nature. The elders have reason to be startled. A direct consequence of this bold intellectual step is her confident "power to do, and power to sympathize," which lead the Puritan populace to reinterpret the "A" as "Able." The "unearthly ray" of the embroidered letter in the sick-chamber is cast by a "warm and rich" earthliness that she does not seek to hide.

As Hester embraces Dimmesdale at his death on the scaffold, she speaks in this dialectical mode. The other side of their common suffering for earthly love, the suffering that is all Dimmesdale now wants to feel or remember, is an "immortal life together." They have "ransomed one another"; if their "woe" implies the evil of passion, their passion reappears as redeeming affection. By a similar logic, Hester is drawn back to Boston at the end and lives out her days with the scarlet letter on her bosom. Here is "real life," for here is the locus of sin, sorrow, and penitence. But the letter is taken up—in a phrase recalling her first appearance in the book—"of her own free will." And her penitence is "yet to be"—for her it will always be unfinished. It can only be conceived and made manifest as a perennial conversion of the stuff of sin and sorrow.
into positive freedom—the creativity, individuality, and sympathetic community of natural men.

V

In response to Hester’s plea, the dying Dimmesdale delivers the most eloquent Puritan statement in the entire book. Though he is lying in her arms, he rejects her faith in their eternal union and maintains that in their love, far from redeeming one another, they “violated [their] reverence each for the other’s soul.” Sin alone should be in their thoughts, and salvation lies in the torture inflicted by an angry God. Dimmesdale displays his stigmatic letter to the multitude as a token of complete self-abnegation, or rather of a self finally rediscovered in “triumphant ignominy.” How did such a man ever come to wander “beyond the scope of generally received laws”?—and why, having wandered, was he not for the rest of his life “safer within the line of virtue, than if he had never sinned at all”? On the one hand, as we are told, his was “a sin of passion, not of principle”; and, on the other hand, as he himself declares and as Hawthorne often repeats, he lacks the courage of his convictions. But in this book passion itself is a principle, and moral cowardice is a symptom of moral embarrassment. In effect, Dimmesdale is as much a creature of his age as Hester and his fellow Puritans: he is a victim (until his final moments) of the divided universe in which they find opposite ways to live. His existence has been contorted into an “inextricable knot”—his simultaneous desire to repent and incapacity to do so—because he entertains conflicting interpretations of his deed. If his final sense of the letter he wears is unequivocal, for most of his career he has worn it as the very mark of equivocation, the sign of two voices warring within him.

His conflicts are more completely internal than Hester’s: in him, the disjunctive world is registered as alienation from self.
We first encounter him as “a being who [feels] himself quite astray and at a loss in the pathway of human existence, and . . . only . . . at ease in some seclusion of his own.” Moreover, his manner suggests a profound uneasiness even in his solitude—a combination of “nervous sensibility and a vast power of self-restraint.” His devotees associate his isolation with intellectual elevation, a “purity of thought” that gives him “the speech of an angel.” But in this first scene he is dramatically isolated as much by his sensibility as by his intellectual purity. He responds to the voice of feeling in Hester’s silence: “Wondrous strength and generosity of a woman’s heart!” Under the scrutiny of Chillingworth, his inner division appears as an alienation of mind and body, of his “spiritual” being and his “strong animal nature,” of his “soul” and “the hot passion of his heart.” Unlike Hester, who even in despair preserves some of her individual integrity, her concrete presence at once mental and physical, Dimmesdale falls apart. He is of all men the one “whose body is the closest conjoined, and imbued, and identified . . . with the spirit,” but only to express the body’s demand for dominion over the spirit and simultaneously the spirit’s utter rejection of that claim. This is the condition signified by his psychosomatic letter and deliberately fostered by Chillingworth.

In one aspect he knows himself as “a true priest, a true religionist,” whose inner peace depends on the “iron framework” of his creed. His subjective correlative to the prison-world of Boston is a “constant introspection” by which he seeks to keep his sin in sight and thereby to rise above it. In accordance with the Puritan paradox, he would convert his flesh to spirit by dwelling upon the total disparity of his “sinful” natural body and his intelligent mind. As he marches in the procession, he almost seems to have achieved his goal of “purity.” The entire world of sight and sound has ceased to exist for him; he is
pure thought. But, all the while, his very striving for selfhood implies a different valuation of himself from any that his Puritan creed would allow. By subjectifying his punishment, making himself at once prisoner and judge, he demonstrates an esteem for his own individuality even while denouncing the natural man within him. And he is fully aware, in certain moods, that the idea of the unique individual counts for as much to him as the ideal of purification. He perplexes Mr. Wilson by declaring it a wrong to "the very nature of woman to force her to lay open her heart's secrets in such broad daylight, and in presence of so great a multitude." In discussion with Chillingworth, he holds that forced confession is not only wrong but impossible in principle; there is no public language for private secrets; and even voluntary confession may be impossible to some "by the very constitution of their nature" or by reason of a desire to redeem evil through good works. These arguments for individual value are not merely self-justification but evidence of a sense of self that brings him close to Hester's naturalism. When Hester at the Governor's mansion explains the meaning she attaches to Pearl, Dimmesdale thoroughly understands and seconds her revision of the idea of evil.

His own sermons illustrate the "truth in what Hester says," for his burden of sin and sorrow gives vitality and efficacy to his words. Like the embroidered letter and the letter doubly "endowed with life" by Pearl, Dimmesdale's "Tongue of Flame" is energized by the earthly passion that his Puritanical self despises. He speaks the language of doctrine, but there is an emotional language of "tone and cadence" interwoven with "the direct purport of the words." Coming back from the midnight vigil in which he renews his sin, he preaches more powerfully than ever before; and he writes his masterpiece, the Election Sermon, with strength acquired from Hester in the diabolic wilderness. The extraordinary communicative power of these
sermons must be weighed against his retreat from public confession and his consequent self-contempt. The kind of truth he achieves as the greatest preacher of his time is precisely what makes him an "untrue man" in his own Puritan eyes. His heart speaks immediately to "the great heart of mankind"; he establishes a "sinful brotherhood." In this sense, he has already made confession, and from this standpoint mere self-humiliation would be a perverted "repentance." The very anguish he suffers because of his moral failure by orthodox standards contributes to his moral success as "the voice . . . of suffering humanity."

But he always comes round to "the contrast between what I seem and what I am." Not being the pure spirit that his congregation think they see and hear, and not having shown himself in the guise of a worthless sinner, he conceives himself to be nothing at all. And he is right, according to Hawthorne, to the extent that he claims the identity of a Puritan minister; the only reality in him is his awareness of his unreality. To the extent that he claims identity as Hester's lover, he is equally insubstantial. This is Pearl's reproach: "Thou wast not bold!—thou wast not true!" Though "false to God and man" in his professional role, he has enjoyed a momentary truth of another sort on the scaffold at midnight and in the depths of the forest. He has known the reality of "sympathy" that he expresses in the poignant undersong of his sermons. Unable to go further and declare for personal freedom as the ground of sympathy—unwilling to stand in the market place at noon as he stood at midnight—he is "false" once more. Whether as minister or as lover, he can only look forward to the truth of Judgment Day, when "the dark problem of this life [will be] made plain."

If he does not actually wait until Judgment Day, but finally conceives and displays himself unambiguously as "the vilest . . .
of sinners,” it is because he has undergone the experience of spiritual isolation to a far greater degree than Hester. As he tells her, “open ignominy” is what makes possible her “open triumph over . . . evil.” Since her shame is public, her transmutation of the shame is public, though she arrives at it by private processes. Her life, whatever phases of nihilism and despair she may pass through, is anchored in the society she would transform into sympathetic community. Therefore she is scarcely aware of Dimmesdale’s basic problem. She does not perceive that by sparing him the isolation inflicted on her, by trying to preserve intact his individual dignity and freedom, she has actually isolated him completely. Even without the cruelties of Chillingworth, for which she feels responsible, Dimmesdale would have been tortured by a rootless subjectivism, a self-negating freedom. He comes to live in a solipsistic world of visions; in contrast to her train of images on the scaffold, his “spectral thoughts” have no termination in reality. We see him as a creature of the night, always “walking in the shadow of a dream.” And this radically subjective world veers toward the deeper psyche; he makes acquaintance with perversities and blasphemies that never trouble Hester Prynne. The “dark transfiguration” that overcomes him for a moment in the forest is a symptom of what he knows to be potential in himself.

By the time Hester goes to meet Dimmesdale, determined to offer him the only truth she knows, he is no longer capable of assimilating individual freedom in the spirit in which she conceives it. She herself goes beyond the proper boundaries of her world by rejecting the letter entirely; but this access of freedom transforms her into an earth goddess, however dream-like and illusory. In him it works as a poison. The “profounder self” that she awakens in him desires “to do some strange, wild, wicked thing or other”; and the world about him, rendered wholly mutable, drifts toward the demon-ridden forest of
Mistress Hibbens. He can only experience his liberation as a pact with the devil, a yielding "with deliberate choice . . . to . . . deadly sin." He has reached the nadir of freedom, a sense of "eternal alienation from the Good and True." At the same time, however, he has stepped over into another universe. By his conviction of mortal sin, he takes his place in the orthodox world where the reality of evil, the fact of alienation, is the very ground of civil and cosmic order. When Dimmesdale in the final scene moves toward the scaffold, he translates a personal existence that has become wholly insubstantial and subhuman into terms of a public world that can make sense of private devils. He is not only confessing a sin but also professing a truth that fulfils his consciousness of himself. He turns to Hester with a very pointed question: "Is not this better . . . than what we dreamed of in the forest?"

Chillingworth can hardly believe that his victim has escaped him; and indeed there is only a difference in emphasis between the experience of evil that leads Dimmesdale to a vision of God and the vision of evil that leads Chillingworth to adopt the role of Satan. The minds of both these cultivated gentlemen, so long resident together, come to rest in the conviction of sin. The letter with which Dimmesdale involuntarily marks himself, and which he eventually displays in token of a reality founded on it, is the same that Chillingworth obsessively imagines and finally unveils with the wonder of a philosopher discovering the key to the universe. This is why the scaffold is the one place in the world where Dimmesdale could elude his pursuer: it is the locus of their similarity, where their difference must be established. Chillingworth once laid claim to it at midnight when his diabolic smile or scowl lingered on a darkness wherein "all things else were . . . annihilated." Now, though defeated, he appropriately claims his place on the platform beside the man who has escaped him by passing through nothingness to the reality of God.
His former power over Dimmesdale also depended on other premises—ones that he shared with Hester (in a sense, Dimmesdale has escaped them both). Like Hester, though obviously in a parodic way, he appears from the beginning as a naturalist, individualist, and humanist. He arrives in Boston out of the wilderness, dressed in a mixture of "civilized and savage costume" and accompanied by an Indian. Usually solitary, this "individual, of singular aspect," wanders the borders of the settlement in search of natural medicines. Even after his hideous transformation, he can admire the "great elements" of personality and of natural good in Hester. These two are the secret free thinkers of Boston, a subversive pair at work within the rigid structure of Puritan ideology. Their secret community is intuitive, subrational—confirmed by the verbal bond they swear in Hester's prison cell, but initiated in a silent exchange of glances in the market place, where "all . . . objects in the visible world [seem] to vanish, leaving only him and her." Their silent interview, while it is intensified by Hester's fear, anticipates the non-verbal, "sympathetic" mode of communication that is characteristic of Chillingworth throughout the book. As he tells Hester, he will abandon his public name not only out of pride but also "for other reasons"; actuated by the "strange secrecy in his nature" that Hester later counts upon, he is bent on "new interests" and a "new purpose" in a personal universe. Similarly, though less deliberately, he abandons abstract, "geometrical" truth in order to "know" in a much more intimate way. He is not an inductive scientist; he proceeds by intuitive affinity. And though his first intent is to mock friendship by keeping Dimmesdale in ignorance, he is even more pleased by Dimmesdale's instinctive awareness of his hostile presence. For he dwells by choice in an underground world of immediate knowledge, an almost sexual "knowing." It is a perverse form of the world of Hester, who alone knows and seeks to know as much as he.
The perversity of Chillingworth lies in the peculiar way in which he combines Hester's sense of natural freedom and community with Dimmesdale's sense of the fact of evil. He envisages a communion of sinners like the one Young Goodman Brown beholds in the forest—united "by the sympathy of . . . human hearts for sin." He himself is cast in the role of grand master of the secret order. The love he once sought with Hester is realized in the hate of his new relationships. His "human heart," no longer lonely, is expressed in the deeds of a "fiend." Shocked as he is when he sees this "frightful shape . . . usurping the place of his own image," there is a fantastic logic in his transformation. To have "violated, in cold blood, the sanctity of a human heart" is not a gratuitous act if all hearts are wicked and all communion is anti-communion. It is the coherence of Chillingworth's vision that reduces Hester to despair, and the logic of Chillingworth is what gives him his power over Dimmesdale. For he sees that if good is impossible, a communion of "evil" is really a communion beyond good and evil. He intimates this to Hester when he first projects his plan: "... Elsewhere a wanderer, and isolated from human interests, I find here a woman, a man, a child, amongst whom and myself there exist the closest ligaments. No matter whether of love or hate; no matter whether of right or wrong!" Chillingworth imagines and takes his place in an amoral world of sheer power. He passes beyond the role of the perverse friend, "the Pitiless, . . . the Unforgiving," to that of a supreme mechanist controlling the "engine" of Dimmesdale's life. As a black magician, he achieves his greatest feat not merely in promoting the wickedness of the enemy he embraces but in reducing Dimmesdale to the level of an inhuman natural phenomenon, a force overcome by a greater force. This is the union that Chillingworth finally accepts in lieu of his lost hope of love.
When he declares, "Thou and thine, Hester Prynne, belong to me," he is Satan as the deity of mechanical power.

As such, he remains the villain of the piece, but he is also a kind of victim. His heterodox thought, as he himself comes to see, is dominated by Puritan concepts. When Hester tells him that he might yet re-establish good among them by forgiving the sin against himself, Chillingworth counters her appeal by falling back on the Puritan language of original sin and abstract wickedness. His world, where a "dark necessity" compels every "germ of evil" to grow into a "black flower," is the orthodox Puritan world but without the God against whom the Puritans measured it and by whose power they believed it might be saved as well as damned. His "old faith," in this truncated form, has been with him all along; it is, after all, the practical faith of a people whose town center is "the black flower of . . . a prison" and who have surely "let the black flower blossom" in the case of Hester Prynne. Moreover, the amorality of Chillingworth, his world beyond right and wrong, derives from the negatively liberated, disjunctive world of Puritan theology. The rule of dark necessity, as he points out, would imply that human beings are "evil" only in a manner of speaking: "Ye that have wronged me are not sinful, save in a kind of typical illusion; neither am I fiend-like, who have snatched a fiend's office from his hands. It is our fate." What can one do but act? And in this perspective he cannot and does not claim any special power of action. His own force, his apparent freedom, is no less illusory than good and evil; for in a community of sheer power even the most powerful are determined by the blind forces of the universe, the purposeless workings of natural energy.

VI

The Puritan mind in The Scarlet Letter follows a logic of
negative freedom. The antithetical good and evil of Puritan morality reflect a universe that is polarized into external relations on every level, so that good can be conceived only as an external order imposed by God on a fallen world, by man on a fallen nature, and by society on a fallen individual. Hester Prynne does not abandon that framework of thought but conceives and enacts a dialectical relation between evil and good based on a dialectical conversion of negative into positive freedom. She is creative in the face of destruction, and she is constantly making an idea of creativity—of individual value, organic community, and natural divinity—out of the tough negations of Puritan doctrine. Dimmesdale is torn apart, rendered insubstantial, by this dialectic, which gives substance to Hester even while it torments her. Unlike her, he experiences the ambiguity of freedom in a primarily negative form; and at the end of his life he commits himself to the negative Puritan rationale. Chillingworth, perverting both the Puritan vision and Hester's, takes evil as his good and thereby ultimately destroys the meaning of such terms as well as the meaning of liberation itself. His amoral world beyond good and evil is also beyond freedom, whether negative or positive.

In one way or another all these persons lay claim to the child that Hester clutches to her when she first appears on the scene. The Puritan elders would instruct Pearl "as to her soul, its present depravity, and future destiny." As the child of sin, she is their human archetype. Dimmesdale, pathetically treasuring the memory of her moments of affection for him, sees her as his hope of life, but infected with the doubtfulness of his hope. Looking at her with eyes accustomed to staring at himself, he cannot say whether one whose only "discoverable principle of being" is "the freedom of a broken law" may yet be "capable of good." Chillingworth, pursuing his amoral drive for power, is struck by Pearl's indifference to "human ordinances
THE SCARLET LETTER

or opinions, right or wrong”; and he would use her, the embodiment of an amoral letter, as material for another such exercise of experimental power as he practices upon Dimmesdale. But the child evades them all, literally by skipping away and figuratively by eluding their conceptions of her. She partly evades even Hester, for whom she is identical with the moral dialectic within the embroidered letter. Pearl is not completely seized by any of the claims made on her—and from the reader’s standpoint, she can never be fully grasped as a fictional “character”—because she represents something latent in all who observe her but incapable of being completely objectified in a single human form.

Pearl is the very principle of freedom, the essence of her time. She dances among the graves “like a creature that [has] nothing in common with a bygone and buried generation, nor own[s] herself akin to it.” Since she seems to have been “made afresh, out of new elements,” she “must perforce be permitted to live her own life, and be a law unto herself, without her eccentricities being reckoned to her for a crime.” In this sense, Pearl’s freedom is not a moral principle; she is prior to moral categories (though not, like Chillingworth, “beyond” them). The only good she affirms is the “boldness” of her “truth.” And her truth consists wholly in her multiplicity, the “infinite variety” of her possibilities, the “many children” she intrinsically is. Hester looks in vain for “the master-word that should control this new and incomprehensible intelligence,” for all the major terms of the book are applicable to it to some extent. Pearl is sheer energy, as Chillingworth perceives, and aware of her power; but her passionate, impulsive, capricious emotions are not primarily aggressive. She is by turns malicious and affectionate, as Hester and Dimmesdale discover, but never fully intimate in either way. Often she seems an entirely negative principle of “disorder,” whose “freedom” is synonymous with the “broken
law” that gave her birth. In her attitude toward other children, she accepts the role of “a born outcast.” But more often she shrugs off all such Puritan concepts. Though she disclaims a heavenly father, she can deny that the Black Man will ever catch her, for her home is in the benign “wildness” of the “mother-forest.” Yet even her naturalism is problematic: if she resembles a pagan nymph or dryad, her beauty and grace also suggest a prelapsarian child of Adam, a throwback to Eden before the fall.

For lack of a focus, a single “point of variety and arrangement,” Pearl sometimes seems to disappear into a fluid, insubstantial ideality. She is attracted by the “visionary” counterpart that she finds in a pool on the shore, “beckoning the phantom forth, and—as it decline[s] to venture—seeking a passage for herself into its sphere of impalpable earth and unattainable sky.” But she soon concludes that “either she or the image [is] unreal,” and she craves reality as much as freedom. If her multiplicity tends to make her vague and indistinct, the “truth” in her tends away from the “remoteness and intangibility” of an “airy sprite” toward the substance of “a human child.” Pearl’s truth can become substantial, her freedom can become moral, only through a sacrifice of multiplicity—specifically, through the discipline of “grief.” Her incarnation as “a noble woman,” foreseen by Hester, will be a conversion of her “infinite variety” into human freedom by means of the suffering that is the sign of human limits. While this gives her definition, it will also open possibilities of a new kind, personal rather than impersonal, concrete rather than abstract. The “grief that [will] deeply touch her, and thus humanize,” will “make her capable of sympathy.” It will bring her into the sphere of free individuals in personal relationship.

So extreme is Pearl’s sense of absolute freedom that all the drama of Dimmesdale’s final agony is needed to complete her
THE SCARLET LETTER

transformation. In some sense, of course, she must already have entered the human world, the world of sorrow, in order to feel his loss at all. Her earlier affection for him, the man with his hand over his heart, like her obsession with Hester's letter, indicates her nascent awareness of suffering and her correlative "humanization." But in the final episode she flits about the marketplace in utter independence and joy as though to affirm her infinitude for the last time. She must be drawn down to earth by a principle as strong as her own. Dimmesdale's "great scene of grief . . . develop[s] all her sympathies," commits her to "human joy and sorrow," because he has reached an extreme of negation that counterbalances her libertarian extreme. Just as the kiss he asks from her is his last concession to the world of human relations that he rejects in his dying speech, so her bestowal of the kiss is her first act within the human world to which he has drawn her.

Since she becomes fully incarnate only in the final moments of the book, Pearl remains almost as abstract and schematic in her moral meaning as in her premoral multiplicity. We can seldom say with any confidence that she is actually experiencing either the limits or the possibilities of the concrete human life she represents. But Pearl "humanized," however abstractly, comes close to being what her mother sees in her—a symbol of Hester's own moral dialectic. She descends from a realm of total creativity into the middle world that Hester painfully reaches from below, from total self-negation and enslavement. This would seem to be the rationale of her behavior in the forest when Hester herself denies all limits and arrives at a project of absolute liberty. Like the pool on the shore, the forest brook that figures in this scene is a "boundary between two worlds"—between a visionary and a substantial (or human) existence. But it is also the spring of natural human life, where visionary freedom and actual bondage, joy and sorrow, are
interdependent. Initially, Pearl can hear only the sad murmur of the little stream of natural life, and she dances off into ideal freedom and joy. When she returns to the boundary, however, she finds herself decisively relegated to the "shadowy and intangible" role of a watery "image." Having been exiled from the concrete world of human sympathy, she becomes poignantly aware of it. Even more, she becomes aware of the mixed world of man because of Hester's attempt to transcend it. By throwing away the scarlet letter, Hester has leveled the distinction between ideal and human freedom; there is no human world for Pearl to return to. Like a little prophetess, she summons her mother back to the reality of joy-and-sorrow that is guaranteed by sorrow: "Come thou and take it up!" She demands her place in a human group—"hand in hand, we three together." And once Hester has resumed the sign of suffering, Pearl kisses it in token of truth re-established.

Pearl has already expressed the positive side of Hester's truth by tracing a letter of grass upon herself, "freshly green instead of scarlet," in virtual answer to her own question as to what the letter means. As a "human child," she is a growing point of human experience, and she betokens a "oneness of . . . being" in the parents who created her. This is her role, apparently assumed with some self-awareness, when she, Hester, and Dimmesdale form "an electric chain." It is validated when the celestial "A" shines down upon this archetypal trio: Pearl, "herself a symbol," is the human counterpart of the divine signature in the sky. Though the noonday light that suffuses the scene is like that of Judgment Day, it is not a visitation by an angry God; if it gives a new "moral interpretation to the things of this world," it does so by consecrating the emergent meaning of temporal life—in Dimmesdale, "with his hand over his heart"; in Hester, "with the embroidered letter glimmering on her bosom"; but especially in Pearl, "the connecting link be-
tween those two.” And in this role Pearl is an aesthetic, as well as a moral, exemplar. She represents not only a secular morality but also a secularized symbolism. She recalls us once more to the distinctive imaginative medium of her author—the liberated modern consciousness that often dissolves, like Pearl, into a “vast variety of forms,” but of which, again like Pearl, the imaginative structure of *The Scarlet Letter* is a “living hieroglyphic.”