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## Hawthorne's Removal from the Salem Custom House and the Thematics of Public Exposure in *The Scarlet Letter*

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As an allegedly timeless literary classic, *The Scarlet Letter* is often considered a universal tale of guilt, sorrow, revelation, and redemption transpiring within the repressive realm of early colonial Boston. But, as Hawthorne indicates in his extended introduction to the narrative, the romance was actually composed in the context of a major personal crisis of Hawthorne's life resulting from his controversial firing from his job as surveyor at the Salem Custom House in June and July 1849, an emotional and financial trauma augmented by the death of his mother at the end of July. By examining the humiliating ordeal that Hawthorne, a famously shy individual, experienced when accused and then exposed for wrongdoing at his government job, we can gain deeper insight into "The Custom-House" introduction and *The Scarlet Letter* proper as alternately discursive and narrative means for representing a thematics of public exposure that Hawthorne suffered at this time. While Hawthorne had previously written in his tales and sketches about the dynamics of sin and redemption in both Puritan and contemporary New England, this personal involvement in a drama of public shaming gave him the creative impetus and firsthand experience to create his first mature full-length work of fiction.

For many contemporary readers, "The Custom-House" conveys the impression of Hawthorne as a mild-mannered humorist whose three-year stint in the Salem Custom House constituted a kind of spiritual imprisonment within the confines of a government sinecure on the decaying wharves of his ancestral hometown; moreover, his ejection from his post as a result of the spoils system was a providential intervention that restored his fiction writing powers, even as the archives of the Custom House itself provided him with a subject for his new romance. But such an impression belies the

dramatic history of Hawthorne's dismissal, which became a focus of national attention as Hawthorne fought to retain his job but suffered an ignominious removal following a climactic act of exposure of apparent wrongdoing (Nevins; Cortisoz ch. 5; Nissenbaum). The ultimate cause of Hawthorne's dismissal was the election of the Whig Mexican War hero, Zachary Taylor, to the presidency in November 1848 and his inauguration in March 1849, leading to the possibility for many Democratic-appointed officials that they might have their jobs terminated as part of the reassignment of government jobs under the spoils system. In a June 5, 1849, letter to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Hawthorne thus expressed anger at the cabal of Salem Whigs whom he called "political bloodhounds" and who were apparently plotting to remove him from office (*Letters* 269); but when Hawthorne actually obtained notice of his removal as surveyor of the Salem Custom House three days later, he was at first stoically ready to leave his position, envisaging a return to the fiction writing that had been curtailed by the uninspired routine and ennui of the sleepy Salem Custom House. However, when Hawthorne soon learned that his dismissal was being justified by charges of malfeasance rather than being a routine rotation of political office, he quickly reversed course and began a campaign to defend his job while enlisting the support of sympathetic Whigs.

As Hawthorne quickly discovered, the main instigator behind his firing was the head of the Salem Whigs, Charles W. Upham, a former Unitarian minister whom Hawthorne had known as a friendly acquaintance over the previous two decades, especially in the minister's capacity as a fellow historian of Salem witchcraft as well as other aspects of the New England colonial past (Cook). As the month of June progressed, Hawthorne was increasingly enraged by the manner in which Upham seemed to be orchestrating a series of invented charges against him after previously assuring him that his job was secure. In the formal charges adduced by the Salem Whigs and published in an unsigned letter to the Whig *Boston Atlas* on June 16 (likely written by Upham), Hawthorne thus stood accused of political activism and corruption, both of which allegedly belied his claim to being a nonpartisan literary man who happened

to be a Democrat. Claiming that Hawthorne had displaced a Whig when he obtained his Custom House position in 1846, the writer insisted that Hawthorne had in fact been active as a Democrat in a variety of areas, including marching in a political torchlight parade, serving on a Democratic town committee and as a delegate at a Democratic state convention in Worcester, writing political articles for Democratic publications, and—perhaps most damning—paying the four Democratic inspectors under his supervision more than the Whig inspectors. Hawthorne replied to these charges on June 18 in a letter to his Whig friend George Hillard, published in the Whig *Boston Daily Advertiser*, denying the trumped-up charges of Democratic political activity while claiming that the issue of a salary differential for the inspectors, the result of extra work being assigned to the four Democratic inspectors, was determined by his immediate superior, the Whig deputy collector, Ephraim Miller, son of the long-time Whig collector, General James Miller, a hero of the War of 1812, now retired and succeeded by his son.

By mid-June, newspapers in Salem and Boston were echoing with discussions of Hawthorne's case while the author himself commissioned Hillard and his Whig brother-in-law Horace Mann to enlist support for him among powerful Whigs at the state and federal level—a list that would eventually include such well-known figures as Charles Sumner, Rufus Choate, Abbott Lawrence, George Ticknor, Edward Everett, and Daniel Webster. In the meantime, Hawthorne's case spread as a topic of discussion outside the state of Massachusetts as fellow Democrats came to his defense. For example, the Democratic *Albany Atlas* noted on June 17, 1849: "Hawthorne removed! Can it be possible? If every other Democratic incumbent of office had been swept by the board, we should still have looked to see an exception made in the case of the gentle Elia [pseudonym of the English essayist Charles Lamb] of our American literature. . . . The man who would knowingly commit such an act would broil a hummingbird, and break a harp to pieces to make the fire" (Cortisoz 87). So, too, William Cullen Bryant editorialized in the Democratic *New York Post* on June 22, 1849: "The removal of Mr. Hawthorne from the Custom House at Salem was a flagrant case

of political proscription. . . . His removal was an act of wanton and unmitigated oppression” (Cortissoz 88).

By the end of June, Hawthorne and his wife, Sophia, thought that the tide had turned in his favor and that he had successfully fought against the charges of malfeasance while defending himself as an honest and efficient government employee despite his party affiliation. Yet Hawthorne was in for a rude awakening when the Salem Whigs under the direction of Upham sought to counter the national campaign in Hawthorne’s favor by insisting that the issue was a local matter and that serious grounds for Hawthorne’s firing remained intact and were even worse than what was previously charged against him. Thus in a detailed letter, or “Memorial,” dated July 6 and addressed to the secretary of the treasury, William Meredith, the Salem Whig committee sought to end the possibility of Hawthorne’s reinstatement by exposing a scheme of “corruption, fraud and iniquity” (Nevins 117) in order to clear the way for the appointment of his Whig replacement. After a detailed recital of the political background to the current situation, the writer, Charles W. Upham, enumerated the new, most serious charges against Hawthorne by pointing out a differentiated pay scale for Democratic and Whig Inspectors averaging about \$130, half of which was demanded as kickbacks to support the party:

Were the procedure sifted to the bottom, it would be found, we doubt not, one of the most flagrant instances of political financiering and official extortion and corruption yet developed. The democratic inspectors were required to pay back, ostensibly and professedly for the support of “the party,” at least one-half of the proceeds of the extra jobs, or, in other words one-half of the excess of their receipts over those of the whig inspectors. That is, what rightfully belong to the whig inspectors, their legitimate share was withheld from them and appropriated, or supposed to be appropriated, to the party purposes of their opponents. (Nevins 117)

The writer added that a further “assessment” was required from Democratic inspectors for the support of the local Democratic newspaper, the *Salem Advertiser*: “The editor, under the sanction

of Mr. Hawthorne, claimed from the democratic inspectors, for the support of his paper, an assessment, so much beyond all reason, that three of their number, conferring together, declined to pay it, and proposed a smaller sum” (Nevins 117). The writer noted that when threatened with dismissal in a note signed by Hawthorne, two of them agreed to the assessment while the third did not and was duly punished by having extra work withheld.

After citing these seemingly damning facts, the writer paradoxically went on to state his belief that Hawthorne did not likely know of them but was being used as a tool of other Democratic operators in the Salem Custom House; thus, he was more fool than knave: “His entire ignorance, previous to his appointment, of matters of business, his inexperience of the stratagems of political managers, and the very slight interest which his thoughts could take in such things, have made him less conscious of the part he has performed, than almost any other man would have been” (Nevins 118). Thus, Hawthorne’s friends “ought to be thankful that Mr. Hawthorne is withdrawn and delivered” from the corrupt Custom House so that he could get back to being “one of the most amiable and elegant writers of America” (Nevins 119). As a result of the more devastating charges in the Memorial, Hawthorne was finally dismissed from his post on July 24 and a Whig replacement (Allen Putnam) named, although Hawthorne still hoped to defend his honor in an appearance before the Senate in Washington, a wish that was never fulfilled. Thus, in an August 8 letter to his brother-in-law, Horace Mann, Hawthorne explained the circumstances behind the most damning charges in order to maintain his innocence while still noting his suspicion that “there really was an operation to squeeze an assessment out of the recusant inspectors” (*Letters* 292). And while he recognized that his government position was now irretrievably lost, he expressed the wish to publicly defend his honor: “My purpose is simply to make such a defense to the Senate as will ensure the rejection of my successor, and thus satisfy the public that I was removed on false or insufficient grounds” (*Letters* 292). We will never know how complicit Hawthorne was with the shady

practices of his fellow Democrats in the Salem Custom House, but he clearly wanted to clear his name in this shameful scandal.

Hawthorne's "Custom-House" essay prefacing *The Scarlet Letter* provided him with a means to satirically reexamine his experience as a government-appointed custom house inspector, to provide the reader with a glimpse into the actual operation of the Salem Custom House, and to introduce the means whereby he came to the knowledge of the scarlet letter and began writing its history. But "The Custom-House" clearly seeks to relieve the sense of anger, frustration, mortification, and shame that Hawthorne likely felt as a result of his month-long ordeal in getting fired from the Salem Custom House by the opposing political party of Whigs led by its local leader, Charles W. Upham. Although Hawthorne deliberately strikes a genial tone in "The Custom-House," the pain of public humiliation that he felt during his prolonged dismissal from office was evident at several points in his essay, beginning with his reference to the image of the American eagle over the entrance to the Custom House, which ill-tempered bird is all too "apt to fling off her nestlings with a scratch of her claw, and a dab of her beak, or a rankling wound from her barbed arrows" (5). So, too, Hawthorne later plays upon the emasculatory metaphor of his "decapitation" from office, a term that he did not originate but one that was particularly appropriate for the very public and ruthless nature of his removal by the rival political party, which, unlike the more forgiving Democrats, was inclined "ignominiously to kick the head which they have just struck off" (41).

Contrary to his previous defense of his position as surveyor in the Salem Custom House because he allegedly belonged to a nonpartisan sacred fraternity of writers and artists, Hawthorne now makes fun of himself as a lowly storyteller whose illustrious and public-minded Puritan ancestors would be ashamed to acknowledge him. "No aim, that I have ever cherished, would they recognize as laudable; no success of mine—if my life, beyond its domestic scope, had ever been brightened by success—would they deem otherwise than worthless, if not positively disgraceful. 'What is he?' murmurs one gray shadow of my forefathers to the other. 'A writer

of story-books!'" (10). Such an act of seriocomic mortification and humility shows that he would not spare himself in the larger satirical portrait he paints of the sleepy and inactive Salem Custom House and its antiquated occupants, as embodied most grotesquely in the description of the ancient permanent inspector whose vacuous life revolved around the recollection of past meals—a pungent caricature of one of Hawthorne's Whig enemies (Lease). Moreover, contrary to his concerted attempt to keep his position as surveyor, Hawthorne now conveys the idea that his job exerted a numbing and oppressive hold on him, stifling his imagination and threatening to damage his character and terminate his career as a writer. Possibly alluding to the scandal over illegal payments detailed in the Memorial that got him fired, Hawthorne now implies that being on a government salary might in fact involve one in a Faustian bargain: "Who touches it should look well to himself, or he may find the bargain to go hard against him, involving, if not his soul, yet many of its better attributes" (39).

One of the most suggestive moments in "The Custom-House" preface occurs when Hawthorne discusses the mesmerizing effect that the discovery of the antiquated scarlet letter had on him when he found it among piles of old documents in the second story of the Salem Custom House. As he notes his fascination with the capital letter *A* once worn by Hester Prynne, "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" (31). Hawthorne's reaction here suggests his intuitive awareness of the *A* as a punitive symbol of sin and shame, a recognition culturally embedded in the first page of the New England Primer introducing the first letter of the alphabet while teaching "In Adam's fall, we sinned all." But apart from the larger recognition of the letter as a symbol of original sin, Hawthorne's reaction to the letter also suggests his sense of participation in the punitive purpose of the letter. For while debating the ultimate meaning of the strange letter, Hawthorne instinctively put it against his chest and had a

very marked reaction: “it seemed to me, then, 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. I shuddered, and involuntarily let it fall upon the floor” (32). Like his protagonist Arthur Dimmesdale, Hawthorne has both proleptically and psychosomatically inscribed the burning “brand” of the scarlet letter on his chest.

Hawthorne’s visceral sensation of the alleged heat emitted by the letter anticipates our impending witness in the novel proper to the cloth letter as Hester Prynne’s legally enforced badge of shame for adultery; but the author’s strong personal reaction to the letter is also suggestive in this context of his own personal history of being fired from the Salem Custom House for alleged misdeeds in his capacity as surveyor. Hawthorne seeks to undercut the violence of his reaction to the letter by invoking the reader’s skepticism (“the reader may smile but must not doubt my word”), but his placing the *A* on his own chest, his sense of its painful heat, and his letting it fall to the floor all palpably suggest the recent ordeal of shame and humiliation he himself had undergone when getting fired from his job. For beyond its general application to him as a generic son of Adam and as a more direct descendant of seventeenth-century Puritan patriarchs who persecuted Quakers and witches, the *A* of the letter might also suggest the traumatic letter written by Charles W. Upham in the form of a Memorial to the treasury secretary, William Meredith, in early July containing the explosive charges that led to his final dismissal. And if Hawthorne was obviously not susceptible to the same carnal transgression figured by the red letter, he nevertheless stood accused by Upham and the Salem Whigs of financial crimes in the form of, illegal kickbacks and “assessments” on Democratic inspectors’ salaries. Hence the act of placing the burning *A* on his chest conceivably figures Hawthorne’s repressed feelings of shame at his public exposure, if not a sense of actual guilt over the practices of the Salem Custom House where he sought to honestly perform his duties but was apparently surrounded by partisan wire-pulling and speculation.

When we move from the introductory “Custom-House” sketch to the novel proper, we see that the thematics of public exposure immediately assume a prominent place in the development of the narrative, for Hawthorne almost certainly used his own experience of prolonged exposure to the public eye during the scandal of his removal as a displaced means of inspiration for a tale set two centuries earlier. The story would thus involve a trio of characters who are all involved in alternately displaying (Hester Prynne), concealing (Arthur Dimmesdale), or detecting (Roger Chillingsworth) the sin and crime of adultery that has led to the birth of Hester’s child, Pearl—a collective study of the psychology of shame, hypocrisy, and repression in which Hawthorne specialized as a writer (Rust; Harris; Adamson). Thus, the first three chapters of the novel depict Hester’s emergence from the Boston prison while wearing the embroidered badge of her shame to public exposure on a scaffold in the marketplace designed for the punishment of malefactors. With her babe in arm, Hester undergoes the humiliating ordeal of public shaming before the crowd of her fellow townspeople on an elevated scaffold that “was held, in the old time, to be as effectual an agent in the promotion of good citizenship, as ever was the guillotine among the terrorist in France” (55)—a comparison that evokes the metaphor of decapitation that Hawthorne had used only a few pages earlier in “The Custom-House” for his own public humiliation and emasculation.

Hester’s prolonged public exposure in Chapter 3 leads to her recognition by her newly arrived husband, Roger Chillingsworth, who signals Hester to keep his identity a secret, while the leading colonial authorities—Reverend Wilson and Governor Bellingham—exhort Hester’s pastor, Arthur Dimmesdale, to make her reveal the name of the father of her child, and the pastor undertakes this task while claiming that such a confession would actually be beneficial to her fellow sinner: “Heaven hath granted thee an open ignominy, that thereby thou mayest work out an open triumph over the evil within thee, and the sorrow without. Take heed how thou deniest to him—who, perchance, hath not the courage to grasp it for himself—the bitter, but wholesome, cup that is now presented to thy lips”

(67). The reader will realize, from the eloquence of his remarks on how the hidden sinner would benefit from Hester's naming him, that Dimmesdale is the likely guilty party who lacks the moral strength to make his own confession—an act that historically would lead to removal from office, exile, or even death (Baughman).

Despite their obviously different degrees and kinds of guilt, Hester's public shaming in front of the whole community of Puritan Boston for the potentially capital crime of adultery is comparable to Hawthorne's own extended public shaming in the Whig newspapers of Salem and Boston in June 1849 for malfeasance as surveyor of the Salem Custom House. Just as Hester faces exposure to the whole community of early colonial Boston, the audience for the controversy over Hawthorne's firing had attained a broad scope by the time of his final dismissal and involved many leading New England political figures and opinion makers. And just as Hawthorne remained silent with regard to any potential Democratic collaborators (such as his friend Zachariah Burchmore) in the allegedly corrupt schemes at the Salem Custom House, Hester refused to name her partner in crime. So too, after her initial public shaming, Hester's decision to remain in Salem to raise her young daughter because it was the scene of her criminal trespass may remind us of Hawthorne's own sense of irrational attachment to Salem because of the sins of his persecuting Puritan ancestors, and his desire to atone for them, as expressed near the beginning of his "Custom-House" essay.

In the novel's unfolding history of secret sin and public atonement, the characters of Chillingworth and Dimmesdale become inextricably entwined when the former becomes the doctor (or "leech") to the ailing minister and moves in with him in order ostensibly to better serve his patient. As we soon discover, however, Chillingworth's mask of benevolent care for Dimmesdale and his selection of medicinal remedies all seem aimed at ascertaining the guilt of the minister and then punishing him by keeping him a dependent and self-torturing invalid after Dimmesdale's sin becomes evident to him. Chillingworth's treatment of the minister would seem to combine the roles of both physician and spiritual counselor, a position that enables him to explore like a thief for Dimmesdale's

secret history of sexual sin; on such occasions Chillingworth "strove to go deep into his patient's bosom, delving among his principles, prying into his recollection, and probing everything with a cautious touch, like a treasure-seeker in a dark cavern. Few secrets can escape an investigator, who has opportunity and license to undertake such a quest, and skill to follow it up" (124).

As the narrator notes, the more Chillingworth investigates Dimmesdale's life for hints of his guilt, the more he transforms himself into a diabolical figure revealing to the public "something ugly and evil in his face, which they had not previously noticed" (88). By indulging his own secret desire for vengeance against the man who had violated his masculine honor—even though Chillingworth earlier recognized he was unsuited to be a husband for Hester—Chillingworth thus greedily pursued his goal of Dimmesdale's guilt, which puts his own spiritual fate at risk: "He now dug into the poor clergyman's heart, like a miner searching for gold; or, rather, like a sexton delving into a grave, possibly in quest of a jewel that had been buried on the dead man's bosom, but likely to find nothing save mortality and corruption. Alas for his own soul, if these were what he sought!" (129). Instead of forgiving injuries and allowing God to avenge wrongdoing as Christian doctrine taught, Chillingworth assumes a divine prerogative to violate the sanctity of Dimmesdale's person and soul in what amounts to an example of the "unpardonable sin" dramatized elsewhere in Hawthorne's fiction. This sin is symbolically consummated when Chillingworth attains visual confirmation of Dimmesdale's guilt when the minister is sleeping in his chair and the former "thrust aside the vestment" to examine the bare chest, apparently finding a visible indication of Dimmesdale's guilt in what is hinted to be a self-inflicted stigma of the scarlet letter. Chillingworth's "ghastly rapture" (138) here conveys a hint of displaced sexual violation of his housemate, just as the leech's facial expression during the "moment of his ecstasy" shows "how Satan comports himself, when a precious human soul is lost to heaven, and won into his kingdom" (138).

The narrator's extended description of Dimmesdale's victimization by Chillingworth, as the leech probes for the

minister's guilt and finally discovers it in a perverse and self-debasing ecstasy, is again suggestive of Hawthorne's ordeal of exposure during the crisis of his removal from his job at the Salem Custom House. More specifically, the scenes between Dimmesdale and Chillingworth evoke the relationship between the author and the head of the Salem Whigs, Charles W. Upham, who was largely responsible for methodically gathering and repeatedly articulating the charges against Hawthorne justifying his removal, all while claiming to be Hawthorne's advocate for another job in government service and pretending to act in his interests. Thus, Chillingworth's early probings into Dimmesdale's life for traces of his guilt are comparable to Upham's initial set of accusations against Hawthorne as an engaged partisan who exploited his government office for party purposes. As we have seen, Hawthorne was able to refute many of the charges that Upham publicly presented in mid-June 1849 and thought that this might be enough to turn the tide against his removal. But Upham's aggressive investigation of some of the malcontent inspectors within the Salem Custom House turned up the stories of salary kickbacks and "assessments" on Democratic employees, as recorded in the definitive Memorial submitted to the Secretary of the Treasury. And just as Chillingworth had his triumphant moment of confirmation of Dimmesdale's guilt, Upham attained his own triumphant exposure of Hawthorne's secret sins of kickbacks and "assessments" in the Memorial letter that confirmed the Whig case against him. This is not to imply that Hawthorne felt the same tortured and deep-seated guilt as Dimmesdale, for Hawthorne clearly thought of himself as largely innocent, or perhaps naively acquiescent in serving the interests of his political party (Nissenbaum). Yet by figuratively depicting Chillingworth as a greedy treasure seeker and thief, Hawthorne is conceivably reapplying Upham's charges of financial misdeeds to his demonic literary counterpart in the novel.

In addition, the implied evil and diabolism that emerges in Chillingworth's characterization during his sustained investigation and ensuing violation of Dimmesdale's soul is also comparable to repeated characterizations of Charles W. Upham by Hawthorne, his

wife Sophia, and others as an unholy, manipulative, hypocritical, and evil-minded man whose identity as a former minister and sometime literary friend of Hawthorne's was now grotesquely ironic. Thus, after citing an example of Upham's apparent dishonesty, Sophia Hawthorne wrote her father on June 10 that the former minister "had perjured his soul" and "had proved himself a liar and a most consummate hypocrite; for he has always professed himself the warmest friend" (Lathrop 96). And after Hawthorne had finally lost his position in the Custom House, Sophia wrote her mother: "But there is no language to describe him. He is, my husband says, the most satisfactory villain that ever was, for at every point he is consummate. The Government had decided to reinstate Mr. Hawthorne before Mr. U's arrival at Washington, and his representations changed the purpose" (Lathrop 100-01). Hawthorne would in fact further elaborate on Upham's apparent transformation into a demonic inquisitor and hypocrite by extensively caricaturing him in the person of the villainous Judge Pyncheon in his next novel, *The House of the Seven Gables* (Cook).

In conversation with Chillingworth, Dimmesdale rationalizes his need to hide his secret guilt until the Last Judgment, claiming that there can be "no power, short of Divine mercy, to disclose, whether by uttered words, or by type or emblem, the secrets that may be buried with a human heart. The heart, making itself guilty of such secrets, must perforce hold them, until the day when all hidden things shall be revealed" (131). Dimmesdale thus sees any revelation of guilt as an impediment to effectuating any further good in the world, and he in fact gains in eloquence as a minister by means of his tortured conscience, which gives him insight into the hearts of his parishioners. Dimmesdale makes an initial trial effort at public confession one spring night seven years after Hester's initial exposure on the town scaffold by himself mounting the scaffold in therapeutic imitation of her public shaming, where he is eventually joined by Hester and Pearl following Hester's late-night visit to the house of the deceased Governor Winthrop. Yet the scene is interrupted by Chillingworth's unwelcome appearance, an event soon leading to Hester's finally revealing to Dimmesdale the physician's identity as

her revenge-seeking husband during a subsequent tryst in the forest. It is during this extended meeting—the first sign of intimacy we witness between the former lovers—that Hester shares a daring plan to flee Boston with the minister and their child. Dimmesdale's agreement to the plan shows him succumbing to a deadly temptation that brings him to the brink of damnation, and which is only averted by a mysterious final act of divine grace surrounding his Election Day sermon (Abel).

Dimmesdale's cathartic and redemptive confession comes immediately after the Election Day sermon in which he provides his fellow citizens a final demonstration of his moral and rhetorical powers as a minister in a glorious vision of their political future; yet the sermon is the prelude to his confession, for he now publicly joins Hester and Pearl on the scaffold while alluding to the scene of Hester's initial public shaming, during which he neglected to expose his own complicit sin. Speaking of himself in the third person, he notes that while Hester wore the visible token of her sin, her guilty associate's "brand of sin and infamy" (255) was hidden for seven years. In order to confirm his guilt, Dimmesdale now claims that he has visible proof of his judgment by God on his physical person: "With a convulsive motion, he tore away the ministerial band from before his breast. It was revealed! But it were irreverent to describe that revelation. For an instant the gaze of the horror-stricken multitude was concentrated on the ghastly miracle; while the minister stood with a flush of triumph on his face, as one who, in the crisis of acutest pain, had won a victory. Then, down he sank upon the scaffold!" (255).

The immodest audacity of Dimmesdale's sensational action, showing his stigma as a sign of guilty solidarity with Hester's letter, is a form of self-punishment in keeping with the monkish physical punishments such as flagellation he had earlier practiced on himself. Yet the whole scene is rendered problematic when the narrator claims that it would be "irreverent" to describe what the crowd actually saw on Dimmesdale's chest, a sight taking the oxymoronic form of a "ghastly miracle" to the crowd. Is the narrator claiming that Dimmesdale's revelation requires the reader to look

the other way out of pity for the minister? Would a description of Dimmesdale's hidden stigma be a sinful violation of the privacy of his inmost soul? Or is the narrator hinting that the stigma is tainted with Catholic-style superstitions? Whatever the case, the narrator is ironically denying the reader actual ocular proof of Dimmesdale's corporeal scarlet letter, in contrast to Hester's seven years of visibly displaying, and even elaborately embellishing, her letter. Moreover, the scene is rendering the actual existence of Dimmesdale's guilty stigma terminally ambiguous.

This ambiguity is only enhanced at the beginning of the next chapter—the last chapter of the novel—when different groups of spectators have different reports of what actually happened on the scaffold, one (the "majority") testifying to seeing the scarlet letter on Dimmesdale's breast while adducing different theories about its provenance, with another group of "highly respectable witnesses" (259) denying any mark on his breast, and claiming that his words and actions were intended to convey a Calvinistic parable of the utter sinfulness of even the most meritorious person, with Hester used as a mere prop. Such a radical disparity of reports may remind us of the psychological experiments in which different spectators interpret a crime scene in completely different ways depending on the limits of their visual focus, susceptibility to inattention blindness, or personal bias. Thus, the narrator implies that his more positive interpretation of Dimmesdale's alleged confession could be traced to "that stubborn fidelity with which a man's friends—and especially a clergyman's—will sometimes uphold his character; when proofs clear as the mid-day sunshine on the scarlet letter, establish him a false and sin-stained creature of the dust" (260).

If we compare the scene of the "revelation" of Dimmesdale's scarlet letter to Hawthorne's own disgraced dismissal from the Salem Custom House, we may find some suggestive parallels. For the Memorial written by Charles W. Upham and presented to the Secretary of the Treasury in early July 1849 was adduced as a final proof of Hawthorne's engagement in unethical practices that required his immediate removal; yet despite providing seemingly incontrovertible proof of Hawthorne's guilt, the Memorial still



stated that as a writer of fiction and a political novice, Hawthorne was likely unaware of the full meaning of the corrupt practices in which he allegedly participated. Like Dimmesdale, Hawthorne was thus paradoxically both guilty and innocent, depending on one's perspective. Moreover, the actual "scarlet letter" proving Hawthorne's guilt, the letter of Charles W. Upham (among other things) exposing Hawthorne's "assessments" on his Custom House employees, was never published but only known to the government, the Salem Whigs, and those like Hawthorne with access to the document through Whig friends. And like Dimmesdale's public supporters, Hawthorne's many high-placed Democratic and Whig friends upheld his character when he was under attack for corrupt practices in the Salem Custom House.

On the other hand, the upstanding Whig "friends" in Salem who were willing to support a sinful former minister, Charles W. Upham, as leader of the slanderous witch hunt against Hawthorne could also be cited as confirmation of the narrator's assertion here. Unlike Dimmesdale, whose death coincides with the exposure and confession of his sin, Hawthorne obviously survived his public disgrace and removal from a government sinecure; indeed, it breathed new life into his literary career, as the writing of *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of the Seven Gables* attests. But, like Dimmesdale and Hester, who had planned to flee Puritan Boston with their child, Pearl, for a freer life elsewhere, Hawthorne and his wife and children soon decamped from the hated town of Salem in May 1850, immediately following publication of *The Scarlet Letter*, never to live there again.

The circumstances of Hawthorne's removal from the Salem Custom House were thus clearly instrumental, both literally and figuratively, in the novel that made him famous and helped launch the major phase of his writing career. From his mortifying public exposure in the national press for his alleged political sins, and the ambiguous guilt that ultimately cost him his job, he acquired the knowledge of public shaming and exposure by his native community that gave him many of the insights he needed to write *The Scarlet Letter*. Hawthorne's designated moral for the novel—a

plea to unabashedly acknowledge one's moral failings—could thus apply as much to the author as to his sin-stained characters, and as much to mid-nineteenth-century America as to seventeenth-century Boston: "Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred" (260).

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## Dark Romanticism, American Asceticism: The Transatlantic Contexts of *The Scarlet Letter*

Brad Bannon

"That some remnant of Puritan asceticism should be found in the writings of a novelist from Concord, in Massachusetts, would seem natural to an English reader," Anthony Trollope observes in the September 1879 issue of *The North American Review*, "though I doubt there be much of the flavor of the Mayflower left at present to pervade the literary parterres of Boston" (206). Trollope's statement here, though it would have been a fine opening line for his essay on "The Genius of Nathaniel Hawthorne," actually concludes four paragraphs of a more general introduction before Trollope turns to a closer treatment of Hawthorne's fiction. "It is not sufficient for us to have a good thing and to enjoy it without knowing something of its nature, and inquiring how it has been produced," he writes at the outset, "how far it is perfect, how far deficient, how it might have been improved, how it might have been marred" (203). The nature of Hawthorne, however, strikes Trollope as quite peculiar: "There never surely was a powerful, active, continually effective mind less round, more lop-sided than that of NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE . . . we could not have obtained that weird, mysterious, thrilling charm with which he has awed and delighted us had he not allowed his mind to revel in one direction, so as to lose its fair proportions" (204).

Nevertheless, according to Trollope, that thrilling weirdness and mysteriousness does not emanate from the author's self-acknowledged past. If it had, "readers both in England and the States would have accepted it without surprise. It is, however, altogether different, though ascetic enough" (206). But why should Trollope make so much of insisting that the strange quality of Hawthorne's fiction has nothing to do with Puritanism? Just months after the first publication of *The Scarlet Letter*, Herman Melville had wondered aloud in an anonymous review of *Mosses from an Old Manse*