To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Rosalind Brock Reilly entitled "The Scarlet Letter and the Art of Reading." I have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

Richard M. Kelly, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation
and recommend its acceptance:

Accepted for the Council:

The Graduate School

THE SCARLET LETTER AND THE ART OF READING

A Dissertation

Presented for the

Doctor of Philosophy

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Rosalind Brock Reilly

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ABSTRACT

The recent emphasis in contemporary criticism upon readers and their role reflects a growing interest in the nature of the reading process. While philosophy and psychology offer certain ready-made paradigms for understanding the activity of reading, a largely untapped source of insight into this topic is literature itself, particularly literature which focuses upon the phenomenon of its own existence and its relation to its audience. The present study examines Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter as an allegory of the reading process. The characters of the romance are viewed as personifications of a family of reading modes which operate over the course of the plot to bring about within a single reading mind, i.e., that of the Surveyor-Narrator, a holistic, multi-faceted experience of the scarlet letter--the text.

The presence of the text as an autonomous subjective center within the reader is shown in the existence of Pearl, a character whose birth demonstrates the principle that the text comes to life for the reader when the aesthetic and phenomenological dimensions of literary experience miraculously intersect in the absence of intellectual analysis, even as the sensuous Hester and the eloquent minister unite with one another while Hester's scholarly husband is lost somewhere in the wilderness. Though the romance is deeply concerned with the analytic

impulse toward interpretation, it shows that the efficacy of this impulse depends upon its interaction with more immediate responses to the text. In particular, the novel shows that it is when the reading intellect, caught up in the fatalistic design of the text, ceases to function as a cool, rational agent that it discovers the archetype upon which the text's meaning is based. Finding words in which to convey this archetype is not, however, the province of the hermeneutic mind. This task is taken up by the "Tongue of Flame," Arthur Dimmesdale. Guided and supported by Hester's concrete vision of the personal relevance of the text, the minister succeeds, ultimately, in creating a myth of meaning which makes the private experience of the letter universally available.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	INTRODUCTION	1
II.	THE SURVEYOR	37
III.	THE TOWN	54
IV.	HESTER AND THE GOODWIVES	64
V.	DIMMESDALE AND THE SAGES	82
VI.	PEARL	114
VII.	ROGER CHILLINGWORTH	135
VIII.	PART I-A OF THE SCARLET LETTER	155
IX.	PART I-B OF THE SCARLET LETTER	170
X.	PART II-A OF THE SCARLET LETTER	189
XI.	PART II-B OF THE SCARLET LETTER	207
XII.	CONCLUSION	235
BIBLIOGRAPHY		252
VITA		258

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

When we begin a work of literature, we expect to be affected in some way. At times we seek only casual entertainment; we want a book that makes us "feel good" and that reinforces our view of the world. We tend to think that we go to other kinds of discourse for what used to be considered the other function of literature, i.e., instruction, but we still expect some kind of intellectual, if not moral, enlightenment from "better" literature. In general, we expect fiction to expand the horizons of our experience of the outer world, with its diversity of people, places, and situations, and of the inner world of our own response capacities.

Interest in the nature of reading can be traced back as far as Plato, who warned audiences of the degenerative effects of literature. From classical rhetoricians and medieval allegorists, through renaissance didacticians and eighteenth century aestheticians, the study of what readers do and what they should do continued. Hazard Adams speculates that with Kant "a shift from interest in the reader's subjectivity and his response to art toward concern with the internality of the work itself"[1] may be

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[1] Critical Theory Since Plato, ed. Hazard Adams (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), p. 377.

observed, for Kant urged reader-critics "that we must talk about the work itself, pretending that what we say about it is independent of ourselves."[2] Thus the modern mood of uncertainty over how to approach the reading question, if indeed it should be approached at all, was born. The New Critics advised us not to think too much about questions concerning the reader lest we become lost in the subjectivity of our own responses and lose sight of the "proper" focus of critical endeavor, the supposedly immutable text.[3] Their warnings did not prevent further exploration of the nature of reader response, though they probably helped to discipline the aims and methods of later reading theories. In recent years, a growing interest among literary and related disciplines in the dynamics of meaning has made the role of the reader once again a fully legitimate subject of inquiry. DeMaria states that "one of the most conspicuous aspects of contemporary literary criticism is an emphasis upon readers and the art of reading to the exclusion, and even to the avowed extinction, of authors and literary objects."[4] Frye takes this thought a step further, contending that the current "center of

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[2] Adams, p. 378.

[3] See Wimsatt and Beardsley's influential description of the "affective fallacy," The Verbal Icon (Lexington, Ky.: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1954), p. 21.

[4] Robert DeMaria, Jr., "The Ideal Reader: A Critical Fiction," PMLA 93 (1978), 463.

gravity in literature and critical theory" has shifted "to the reader."[5] Whether his view is correct or not, it seems clear enough from the surge of hermeneutic, phenomenological, and psychological inquiries into the nature of reading and interpretation that a period of vigorous investigation of the role of the reader is now in progress.

A preference for one or the other of two methodologies is common in modern work on audience response. The first type uses some conceptual framework taken from another discipline such as philosophy, psychology, or anthropology, or from other critics. Richard McKeon in "The Philosophic Bases of Art and Criticism" identifies this as the predominant method by which literary theory in general is currently built. The second kind of explanation of the reading process is that derived from the critic's own reading experience. Three examples of each type of study will be briefly examined. The overview presented is by no means exhaustive; it highlights outstanding studies representative of typical approaches which, though they have added considerably to a general understanding of the reader's activity, leave unattempted an alternative methodology to be explored in the present study.

One of the most influential studies in our century of the reader's activity was that of I. A. Richards.

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[5] Northrop Frye, Creation and Recreation (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1980), p. 64.

Richards viewed literature as being valuable because of its beneficial effect on its audience: It enables us to achieve an integration of many "impulses," whereas "under normal circumstances" we are forced to ignore or block out "the full richness and complexity of our environment."[6] Thus literature contributes to personal growth. Since he believed that science had to to invoked in questions concerning the nature of experience,[7] Richards attempted to find in psychology a systematic construct for explaining literature's effect. Nevertheless, his description of the result of reading literature as "the equilibirum of opposed impulses"[8] was criticized as "unsophisticated behaviorist jargon"[9] since his definition of "impulses" and his account of the mechanism by which they are brought into equilibrium are quite vague, as noted by Schiller:

> What, precisely, is an impulse, distorted or otherwise? How can one impulse distort another? Instead of trying to answer these questions, Richards delights in offering us pictures to assist our thought. "Imagine a circle or sphere constantly bombarded by minute particles (stimuli). Within the sphere may be pictured complex mechanisms continually changing for

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[6] I. A. Richards, C. K. Ogden, and James Wood, The Foundations of Aesthetics (New York: Lear Publishers, 1925), p. 91.

[7] I. A. Richards, Principles of Literary Criticism (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1924), p. 2.

[8] Richards, Principles, p. 251.

[9] Hazard Adams, The Interests of Criticism (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969), p. 57.

> reasons having nothing to do with the external stimuli. These mechanisms by opening little gateways select which of the stimuli shall be allowed to come in and take effect. So far as the subsequent convulsions are due to the nature of the impacts and to lingering effects of impacts which have accompanied similar impacts in the past, the convulsions are referential. So far as they are due to the independent motions of the internal mechanisms themselves, reference fails." The impulse theory provides no real explanation of the genesis or nature of attitudes. It simply assures us that Richards believes them to be central to the reading of poetry.[10]

Richards stated that he meant the analogy as a visual aid and not as a fundamental argument, and yet the vague psychological explanations and metaphors he employs as arguments are almost as unsatisfactory as his diagrammatic aids.

In his Practical Criticism Richards attempted to show how the capricious interpretations and elementary errors in comprehension submitted by his students in their responses to poems bearing no title, author, or date illustrated their failure to respond to one or more of the four types of meaning: sense, feeling, tone, and intention.[11] However, William Empson demonstrated that in actual discussion of the experience of reading, Richards tended to reduce this four-fold classification to a

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[10] Jerome P. Schiller, I. A. Richards' Theory of Literature (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1969), p. 57, quoting Richards' Principles, p. 263.

[11] I. A. Richards, Practical Criticism (London: Kegan Paul, 1929), Chapter I.

dichotomy between cognitive (sense) and emotive (feeling, tone, and intention) meanings and to minimize or ignore entirely the importance of cognitive meaning in the reading experience.[12] Richards' investigation of the reader's activity was significant in that it provided a seminal descriptive account of the complexity of meaning and a standard of taste favoring the poetry of irony, a standard developed by the New Critics, but he did not offer an operable system for understanding reading.

A more comprehensive psychological explanation of reading has been proposed by Norman Holland. He describes the reading process an an "act of transformation" whereby the ego recreates the unconscious, primitive fantasies immanent in a text into socially and personally acceptable modes of meaning.[13] He maintains that self expression and personal style figure just as actively in the reading of literature as in the writing of it.[14] Holland's experimental studies of the responses of fairly typical readers show that the reader actually recomposes a poem in his own personal style, translating textual elements into his own terms, searching out those that match his view of the

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[12] William Empson, The Structure of Complex Words (London: Chatts & Windus, 1951), pp. 56-57.

[13] Norman Holland, Poems in Persons (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), p. 167.

[14] Holland, Poems, p. 1.

world and ignoring those that do not. In this manner, the reader assures himself of a positive literary experience. The reader defends himself against the possibility of a negative experience by recreating "for himself from the text rather precisely all or part of the structures by which he wards off anxieties in real life."[15] Once this recreation of the text into a form amenable to the ego is complete, the reader can pour into it the pleasure-producing fantasy he habitually longs for. This sequence, according to Holland, is the prerequisite for experiencing any pleasure in reading.[16] The aesthetic, intellectual, and moral senses which the reader finds in (actually projects into) literature are offerings made to his ego in order to procure the principal object: pleasure.

Holland's is a much more coherent and systematic use of a psychological paradigm to explain the literary experience than is Richards', yet it appears to ignore a dimension of literature which Richards was very much aware of, i.e., literature's power to dispossess the reader of his habitual world view by forcing upon him a more comprehensive and compelling one. The reader who defends himself against the shock of having his ego overthrown cannot be said to have read fully, but rather to have

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[15] Holland, Poems, p. 77.

[16] Holland, Poems, pp. 77-83.

misread for the sole pleasure of personal reinforcement. The creative activity, as Holland describes it, of such reading is an accommodation of the text to the reader rather than the creative accommodation of the reader to the text.

In Structuralist Poetics, Jonathan Culler works towards a poetics, which, as he explains, is "essentially a theory of reading,"[17] using the analytic techniques of linguistics. After reviewing a variety of attempts made by structuralists[18] "to apply linguistic models to the study of literature,"[19] Culler concludes that "linguistics does not . . . provide a method for the interpretation of literary works."[20]

> The reason is simply that both author and reader bring to the text more than a knowledge of language and this additional experience--expectations about the forms of literary organization, implicit models of literary structures, practice in forming and testing hypotheses about literary works--is what guides one in the perception and construction of relevant patterns. To discover the nature and forms of this supplementary knowledge is the task of poetics.[21]

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[17] Structuralist Poetics (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975), p. 128.

[18] Barthes, Levi-Strauss, Jakobson, and Greimas.

[19] Culler, p. ix.

[20] Culler, p. 109.

[21] Culler, p. 95.

Culler contends, however, that linguistics can be used "as a model which suggests how a poetics should be organized,"[22] and he undertakes this task in the remaining chapters of Structuralist Poetics.

In the chapter entitled "Literary Competence," Culler describes poetry as "an utterance that has meaning only with respect to a system of conventions which the reader [as well as, of course, the author] has assimilated."[23] Thus structuralism provides:

> a reversal of critical perspective and a theoretical framework within which the work of other critics can be organized and exploited. Granting precedence to the task of formulating a theory of literary competence and relegating critical interpretation to a secondary role, it leads one to reformulate as conventions of literature and operations of reading what others might think of as facts about various literary texts. Rather than say, for example, that literary texts are fictional, we might cite this as a convention of literary interpretation and say that to read a text as literature is to read it as fiction. Such a reversal may, at first sight, seem trivial, but to restate propositions about poetic or novelistic discourse as procedures of reading is a crucial reorganization.[24]

The way in which Culler's reader "makes sense" of the text involves a process called "naturalization" whereby the reader brings what is strange or incomprehensible into a framework which our culture already possesses, so that

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[22] Culler, p. ix.

[23] Culler, p. 116.

[24] Culler, p. 128.

what was unintelligible is no longer so. Placing a text within a genre and placing literary elements within "a range of cultural stereotypes or accepted knowledge"[25] are forms of naturalization. Through this process the problems which a text poses are solved by the reader's understanding of the conventions of literature. Culler goes on to apply these linguistic notions to the specific tasks of describing a poetics of the lyric and of the novel.

Culler's work is an important one in that it attempts a detailed synthesis of two closely related language disciplines: linguistics and literary study. Seen through the discipline of linguistics, reading takes on the character of "a structuring activity" and a "rule-governed process."[26] The goal of a structuralist poetics is not, according to Culler, hermeneutic. It is rather to describe those rules "implicitly known" by all successful readers.[27] Culler strongly emphasizes that

> Interpretation is not a matter of recovering some meaning which lies behind the work and serves as a centre governing its structure. . . . In other words, the critique of language has the the function of freeing one from any nostalgic longing for an original or transcendent meaning.[28]

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[25] Culler, p. 141.

[26] Culler, p. 241.

[27] Culler, p. 258.

He does state, however, that interpretation "is . . . an attempt to participate in and observe the play of possible meanings to which the text gives access."[29] Though few would dispute that this is the nature of interpretation, it is less clear that interpretation, even when defined thus, sums up reading, as Culler appears to assume. The problem, then, with Structuralist Poetics as a theory of reading is that it is based upon a narrow view of reading as a cognitive exercise only.

Each of the studies just reviewed is an important treatment of certain aspects of the reader response question from an external vantage point. Holland's and Culler's explanations most clearly reflect non-literary roots: psychoanalysis and linguistics, respectively. The present study represents a departure from the approaches of these three investigations in that it will not be an application of systematic constructs developed by some other discipline, but will be derived, insofar as that is possible, directly from literature. Though reflections upon one discipline from the dissociated vantage point of another one serve the important purpose of amplifying and sometimes enlivening a system of understanding which may have become too familiar to us, cross fertilization of

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[28] Culler, p. 247.

[29] Culler, p. 247.

this kind is by no means the only way to develop theory. Frye has long championed the view that theory, if it is to be authentic within its discipline, must grow out of that discipline:

> The axioms and postulates of criticism . . . have to grow out of the art it deals with . . . . Critical principles cannot be taken over ready-made from theology, philosophy, politics, science, or any combination of these.[30]

The present study attempts to derive a theory of reading literature directly from a literary text, while acknowledging the fact that it would be simplistic to suppose that all influence from outside disciplines can, or should, be excluded.

The explanations of reading discussed below are much more intimately bound to an immediate literary experience than those sampled above. They are clearly inspired by direct involvement in literary texts and are not overtly authorized by any conceptual framework borrowed from another discipline nor by experimental study of typical reading habits; they are, instead, introspective examinations by the critics of their own reading patterns.

Though greatly influenced by Richards' notion of the multiplicity of meaning which a single textual element can have for the reader, William Empson developed a method of studying the reading process which differs greatly from

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[30] Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), pp. 6-7.

that of his teacher in that while Richards employed an experimental setting to determine what transpires in typical reading, Empson began with his own highly sophisticated intuitive grasp of the work and proceeded to work backwards to show how the intuition must have been arrived at. His was a meticulously close analysis of individual words, an approach described by Empson as "teasing out the meanings" one by one and following each in turn "as possible alternative reactions to the passage":

> I was frequently puzzled in considering my examples. . . . I felt sure the example was beautiful and that I had broadly speaking reacted to it correctly. But I did not at all know what had happened in this 'reaction'; I did not know why the example was beautiful. And it seemed to me that I was able in some cases partly to explain my feeling to myself by teasing out the meanings of the text. Yet these meanings when teased out (in a major example) were too complicated to be remembered together as if in one glance of the eye; they had to be followed each in turn, as possible alternative reactions to the passage; and indeed there is no doubt that some readers sometimes do only get part of the full intention.[31]

Interestingly, Empson's conclusions about the nature of reading are similar to those of Culler. Culler hails Seven Types of Ambiguity as

> a work from a non-structuralist tradition which shows considerable awareness of the problems of literary competence and illustrates just how

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[31] William Empson, Seven Types of Ambiguity, 2nd ed. (London: Chatts and Windus, 1947), p. x.

> close one comes to a structuralist formulation if one begins to reflect on them.[32]
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> Empson's work on ambiguity has provided admirable support for the claim that poetic effects depend to a considerable extent on the interaction of various half-formed meanings derived from a consideration of figurative language, and that value is to be located in the exploratory process rather than in any semantic conclusion.[33]

Since Empson did not believe it was always possible or desirable to sort out the reader's complicated responses into an orderly array, he has been criticized for leaving "a passage or a poem in pieces without reconstituting its totality"[34] or for making a "muddle" of poetic texts.[35] But his willingness to sacrifice conceptual order for subjective accuracy in his quest for a description of the reader's experience is shared by other analysts of the reader's activity and may be an unavoidable trade-off in a study which attempts to describe the reading experience through an examination of the reader's own mental processes. A more serious weakness in his discussion of reading is the one which it shares with Culler's poetics: it focuses upon the cognitive experience of reading and

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[32] Culler, p. 125.

[33] Culler, p. 182.

[34] Graham Hough, Style and Stylistics (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 91.

[35] Elder Olsen, "William Empson, Contemporary Criticism, and Poetic Diction," in Critics and Criticism, ed. R. S. Crane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), p. 55.

fails to acknowledge the involvement of other of the reader's modes of experience.

Much more than Empson, Stanley Fish insists upon leaving the temporal stream of the reading experience intact while discussing what it consists of, that is, not tracing patterns of imagery, locating levels of complexity, or otherwise imposing a spatial structure upon a temporal experience. His method is to ask of some word or syntactic unit "what does it do?" and to answer with "an analysis of the developing response of the reader in relation to the words as they succeed one another in time."[36] Any further interpretation of the work, i.e., interpretation of its "meaning," is an abstraction that injures the immediacy of the reading experience which is, for Fish, the ultimate meaning of the text. Fish invokes the precedent of the classical rhetoricians, calling attention to those "strategies" which a writer incorporates into the text in order to effect certain responses in the reader. These strategies, to Fish, are the basis of a critical evaluation of the work as "good" literature and should be the primary focus of the critic, rather than the development of a coherent, formal interpretation. Fish unconditionally asserts that the locus of a literary work

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[36] Stanley Fish, "Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics," New Literary History, 2 (1970-71), 126-27 [reprinted as an appendix to Fish's Self-Consuming Artifacts (Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1972)].

is the reader and that the meaning of a text is the reader's temporal experience of it, thus bringing up the issue of the relativity of meaning owing to individual differences among readers. Fish, however, maintains that in his descriptions of reader response he is following the response of "a construct, an ideal or idealized reader . . . the informed reader"[37] whose existence is supported by the modern linguistic notion of a "competence model" shared by all speakers of a language.[38] Since such a model is, however, not yet available to aid in Fish's analysis, he must trust his own reading as a fair reflection of the responses of the informed reader.

Whatever else it may be, Roland Barthes' The Pleasure of the Text[39] is an interesting experiment in the subjective study of reader response. Taking advantage of the

> French . . . vocabulary of eroticism, an amorous discourse which smells neither of the laboratory nor of the sewer, which just--attentively, scrupulously--puts the facts,[40]

Barthes writes a playfully affectionate commentary on the experience of pleasure which reading affords, maintaining throughout the metaphor of lovemaking for what happens

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[37] Fish, p. 145.

[38] Fish, p. 141.

[39] The Pleasure of the Text, trans. Richard Miller (New York, N. Y.: Hill & Wang, 1975).

[40] From Richard Howard's "A Note on the Text," prefaced in The Pleasure of the Text, p. v.

during enjoyable reading and thus giving us, to use Richard Howard's description of Barthes' book, an "erotics of reading."[41] When Susan Sontag called for an "erotics of art,"[42] she stated that the cognitive approach to reading, whereby reading is made synonymous with interpretation, has been followed in our culture to the woeful neglect of the sensuous dimension of our experience of literary texts. In Barthes' work, the role of the senses is warmly reintroduced as an essential part of the reading process to critics long chilled by the "prudery of ideological analysis."[43] System is kept to a minimum in Barthes' book, or so it would appear on the surface. The form of Barthes' remarks is governed by the langorous mood of surrender to sensuous experience which is his subject.

"The pleasure [plaisir] of the text," Barthes--or his ardent persona--muses, "is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas--for my body does not have the same ideas I do."[44] To know the pleasure of reading is to respond sensuously to the luxury of excess in a "text that contents, fills, grants euphoria."[45] The "text of

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[41] Barthes, p. viii.

[42] Against Interpretation (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1961), p. 14.

[43] Barthes, p. vii.

[44] Barthes, p. 17.

[45] Barthes, p. 14.

pleasure" is one "that comes from culture and does not break with it," thus offering "a comfortable practice of reading."[46] Barthes describes the experience of pleasurable reading thus:

> To be with the one I love and to think of something else . . . . Likewise for the text: it produces, in me, the best pleasure if it manages to make itself heard indirectly; if, reading it, I am led to look up often, to listen to something else. I am not necessarily captivated by the text of pleasure; it can be an act that is slight, complex, tenuous, almost scatterbrained: a sudden movement of the head like a bird who understands nothing of what we hear, who hears what we do not understand.[47]

Though the title of his work implies that he will focus upon a single mode of sensuous response, that which is translated as "pleasure," in actuality Barthes gives almost equal attention to describing another kind of experience in reading: "bliss" [jouissance]. This mode of response is to be distinguished from pleasure in that it is the ultimate sensuous rapture which consummates and terminates pleasure. The "Text of bliss" is that which

> imposes a state of loss . . . that discomforts . . . unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, [and] brings to a crisis his relation with language.[48]

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[46] Barthes, p. 14.

[47] Barthes, pp. 24-25.

[48] Barthes, p. 14.

Though akin to pleasure, bliss in reading is really of a different order, Barthes explains. Critics can, and always do, write about pleasure, though not overtly so, but

> Bliss is unspeakable, interdicted. I refer to Lacan ("What one must bear in mind is that bliss is forbidden to the speaker, as such, or else that it cannot be spoken except between the lines").[49]

Similarly, the text of bliss is "the untenable text, the impossible text":[50]

> This text is outside pleasure, outside criticism, unless it is reached through another text of bliss: you cannot speak "on" such a text, you can only speak "in" it, in its fashion, enter into a desperate plagiarism, hysterically affirm the void of bliss (and no longer obsessively repeat the letter of pleasure).[51]

The experience of bliss overthrows tradition, culture, and society where the experience of pleasure deliciously affirms these. In bliss is

> the abrupt loss of sociality, and yet there follows no recurrence to the subject (subjectivity), the person, solitude: everything is lost, integrally. Extremity of the clandestine, darkness of the motion-picture theater.[52]

Barthes gives us, in The Pleasure of the Text, an aesthetic approach to describing the role of pleasure in reading which balances Holland's psychoanalytic

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[49] Barthes, p. 21.

[50] Barthes, p. 22.

[51] Barthes, p. 22.

[52] Barthes, p. 39.

examination of the same phenomenon. Furthermore, in including a description of the nature of "bliss," Barthes acknowledges the reality of literature's power to take us beyond pleasure and beyond ourselves, a power which Holland's analysis fails to account for adequately.

The above three explanations of reading, different though they are in tone and scope, have in common a dependence upon the critic's personal reading experience. As such they are open to the charge of impressionism, relativism, or even solipsism. This is due to the fact that each critic is focusing upon his own experience of literary response and is proposing it, for want of any better, as some sort of standard. Without questioning the value and even the validity of their descriptions, one may suggest that there is yet another way of deriving a model of literary response while remaining within the discipline of literary studies. It is not necessary to examine one's subjective response to a text. In saying that the current "center of gravity in literature," as well as in "critical theory" has shifted to the reader,[53] Frye points to a largely untapped[54] source of theoretical insight into the nature of reading. By looking at the formulation of

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[53] Frye, Creation, p. 64.

[54] Montgomery's chapter on Dante's works in The Reader's Eye (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1979) uses literature in the way alluded to by Frye to derive critical statements about reading.

reading implicitly presented by works "about" reading, one may study the reading experience without having to focus upon one's own elusive and possibly idiosyncratic style of response.

A reader response study of this kind represents a possible means of restoring a balance between the two conflicting trends in reading theory reflected in the studies reviewed above. In the field studies of Richards and Holland, generalizations drawn from observations of many readers tended to remove the investigator from the very foundation of literary activity--the immediacy and power of a unique and personal reading experience. Moreover, the imposition of psychological paradigms in these studies, and of linguistics in Culler's work, while enhancing the coherence and applicability of the explanation, put further distance between the critic and the richly vital experience found through total immersion in a work of literature. The more introspective explanations of critics like Empson and Fish reversed the trade-off between objective order and subjective vitality, for each deliberately avoided organizing, and thus imposing a foreign structure upon, the immediate experience of reading they had felt. The explanation offered by the third approach would be shaped by an order implicit in a major work of literature: the system of characters interacting within the structure of the narrative. Thus it would maintain the literary

tenor of the subjective reading experience without having to sacrifice structural coherence.

The present work is an examination of the theory of reading implicitly presented in Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter. It postulates that the characters in the novel personify an intimately related set of response modes which are engaged within the reader when he enters a literary work. The first six chapters of the present study describe these response modes. A related assumption taken here is that the plot of the romance defines the manner in which the various response modes are orchestrated within the reading experience. Thus the remaining chapters of this study examine the way in which the characters interact with one another over the course of the novel.

Before proceeding to a discussion of the view of reading suggested by The Scarlet Letter, it may be helpful to list a few of the possible functions of reader-response studies which the present investigation will not undertake:

1. This study is not offered as a comprehensive reading of The Scarlet Letter or as the "right" or "best" way of responding to Hawthorne's greatest romance. It demonstrates one line of interpretation, one which should be compatible with many other studies of Hawthorne. It is a line of interpretation which, with due respect for the

autonomy of art, uses fiction to formulate concepts. But since no presumption is made to substitute these concepts for the experience of reading or for the text itself, the prostitution of Hawthorne's novel will, it is hoped, add to a general knowledge of the reading process without restricting our ability to appreciate the novel on its own terms.

2. No attempt will be made to suggest that the view of reading embodied in The Scarlet Letter is the right one, rather to show that it is an adequate one, and that the novel's dramatization of what occurs in successful reading captures at least part of that process. The allegory of reading present in The Scarlet Letter is a model which agrees, at many points, with theories advanced by contemporary and earlier commentators on the reading question. Parallels between it and other reader-response theories could be drawn ad infinitum. This study presents those which the author's background suggests; other readers will be able to supply many more. The compatability of the description of reading implicit in The Scarlet Letter with other theories is taken to argue in favor of its credibility, and to suggest that it is a model worthy of our serious consideration.

3. Similarly, the present study does not presume to describe how critics or readers ought to approach literary texts. The efforts of criticism to define itself have frequently resulted in critical prescriptivism, but such an attitude will be scrupulously avoided here.
4. The present study does not attempt to show in any detail what the actual, average, or "informed" reader of The Scarlet Letter does when he follows the narrative stream. To do so would be to shift the focus off the text and onto one's own subjective response or that of other actual readers. It is with great difficulty, if at all, that readers can consciously reconstruct what transpires behind the scenes in reading. The inestimable value of a text such as Hawthorne's to students of the reading process is that his fiction preserves much of the aspect and structure of an unconscious vision of how reading proceeds. The response modes dramatized in his fiction operate largely beyond the veil of our conscious vision, and so it would be an almost impossible task to compare with any thoroughness what the fictional model of reading says happens with what actually happens when we read the fiction. It is possible to say, however, that the actual reader of The Scarlet Letter, to the extent

that he, like the Surveyor, is subsumed by the text,[55] will pass through the stages of response presented in the novel. The Scarlet Letter itself seems to suggest a term for this: "sympathy." This attitude becomes a standard by which the characters of the romance are judged, and it may be a standard by which the actual reader is judged by the text. If he allows the text to speak to his inmost self and becomes alternately the goodwives or Hester or Chillingworth, etc., the actual reader will, in this sense, cease for that time to be distinct from the characters in the novel. As a result, his capacities for aesthetic, analytic, metaphysical, selfish, and dogmatic responses to art will all be given the opportunity to express themselves in the characters or groups of characters who typify these response modes, and he will, thus, pass through the entire range of reading attitudes which, the novel implies, constitute reading. While the experience gained in this manner would be deeply personal, it would be far from unique; in this point lies the generality of the literary experience. For what one reader who is

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[55] See Holland's discussion of the phenomenon of "'being at one with the work of art,'" The Dynamics of Literary Response (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1968), p. 67.

> "sympathetic" to the design of the text gains or experiences from it will be, in a rough sense, the same as what is experienced by any other "sympathetic" reader. Nevertheless, when "the reader" is referred to in the chapters that follow, the term will refer to the aggregate of characters in the novel which ultimately springs from the reading mind of the Surveyor of the prologue. The degree of the actual reader's participation in the identity of this fictitious reader is something that cannot realistically be determined.

Among critics who have chosen to interpret the scarlet A as a general symbol of literature, the predominant view is that The Scarlet Letter reflects the author's experience of literary creation. In the allegorization of The Scarlet Letter along these lines, Hester and Dimmesdale become personifications of qualities in the artist, and Pearl becomes the personification of the text itself. Such an interpretation seems entirely consistent with the overall design of The Scarlet Letter, and there can be little doubt that Hawthorne at least partially intended this meaning, intentional fallacy notwithstanding. Feidelson's chapter on Hawthorne in his seminal study of the American symbolist period is a notable exception[56] to

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[56] Charles Feidelson, Jr., Symbolism and American Literature (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1953).

the large body of criticism which sees The Scarlet Letter as an allegory of composition. But the difference in focus between Feidelson's work and those studies which view Hawthorne's novel as an allegory of literary creation is not an absolute one because the processes of reading and writing are closely related to one another. Creative writing can be thought of as an interpretation, i.e., as a reading, of mankind and our world, and to reverse the picture, reading involves the creative capacities of the reader. "We cannot," in Cassirer's words, "understand a work of art without, to a certain degree, repeating and reconstructing the creative process by which it has come into being."[57] DeMaria's demonstration that great criticism takes the literary form of the view of literature embodied in it is also relevant here.[58] Such criticism, in Paul de Man's view, becomes a metaphor "for the act of reading"--[59]at least for the act of reading literature as it is perceived by the critic. The Scarlet Letter is a work whose structure is a metaphor for both processes, or, it might be more accurate to say, for the single process common to both writing and reading. As a dramatization of the reading process, it necessarily

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[57] Ernst Cassirer, Essay on Man (Yale University Press, 1944), p. 149.

[58] See DeMaria, p. 469.

[59] Quoted by DeMaria, p. 463.

suggests itself as a kind of criticism in that it is a reading of a letter, a reading which the narrator shares with others toward their enlightenment. Because of the quality and mode of language which the romance employs, it is first and most importantly art and secondarily a special experiment in creative criticism. As such it is a demonstration of what one strain of contemporary criticism addresses itself to: the aesthetics of criticism. According to Frye, "the presence of incommunicable experience in the center of criticism will always keep criticism an art."[60] Some criticism is, of course, closer than others to being what we normally think of as art. As a work which is more art than criticism, The Scarlet Letter may be thought of as representing the mark toward which aesthetic criticism aspires. To a degree that criticism, as normally defined, cannot achieve, the Surveyor's reading of the scarlet letter captures and conveys the incommunicable center of his experience with the letter in the Custom House attic and, to an extent, the incommunicable center of the experience of readers in general. It moves toward articulating what criticism, in Barthes' words, never discusses: the bliss of the text, that "unspeakable, inter-dicted"[61] experience which "brings to a

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[60] Anatomy, pp. 27-28.

[61] Barthes, p. 21.

crisis [the reader's] relation to language."[62] Paradoxically, it transcends language through language.

With uncanny intensity, this romance concentrates upon the effect of a letter on those whose lives it touched. Feidelson points out that "'wearing'" the letter in the romance "is synonymous with discovery and absorption of its meaning."[63] The A, he explains, leads Hester through the Puritan vision of sin to an independent view of the meaning of sexuality and love, even while withering her outer appearance. For all the principal characters, Feidelson demonstrates that the letter has a strangely "psychophysical" effect, "entering into and shaping the perceiving mind and the objective sense."[64] It alters Chillingworth's face and deportment, wastes Dimmesdale's health and mutilates his flesh, and quite literally is the child Pearl, "both physically and mentally."[65]

Feidelson interprets the characters of The Scarlet Letter as individuals whose lives mirror and repeat the basic process of symbolic perception (i.e., reading) originally described in the Custom House Prologue. But in order to take into account the differences among the

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[62] Barthes, p. 14.

[63] Feidelson, p. 13.

[64] Feidelson, p. 11.

[65] Feidelson, p. 11.

characters and their careers in the romance, a different level of interpretation must be proposed to complement Feidelson's view. Rather than looking at the lives of the characters as merely repeating the Surveyor's experience with the "rag of scarlet," the present study views them as distinct and complementary modes of perception whereby the Surveyor-turned-author comes to an understanding, i.e., reads, the letter whose meaning he earlier vowed to explain. Crossing the boundary which separates the preface from the allegorical romance, the Surveyor, a would-be reader, loses his normal identity as Surveyor of the Customs (is figuratively decapitated) and is subsumed by the dramatis personae of his allegory. It is in and through them that he is able to read the enigmatic letter found in the attic. Briefly identified, these characters (to be discussed in detail in subsequent chapters) are:

1. The colony: As the collective body of conventional thought and raw feeling in which all understanding is rooted, the Bostonians form the ground out of which new literary vision must grow and against which it must rebel in order to emerge.
2. Pearl: As "the scarlet letter endowed with life" (p. 76), Hester's daughter embodies the reader's nascent consciousness[66] of the text.

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[66] The phrase "nascent consciousness" is taken from Jung's account of the divine child archetype (See

3. Hester Prynne: As the mother of Pearl, the adulteress represents the the sensuous origin of the reader's infant imagination and embodies the propensity for participation in the concrete surface of the text (imagery, texture, etc.).
4. Arthur Dimmesdale: As Hester's partner in the creation of embryonic awareness of the text, the minister represents the reader's propensity toward supra-natural forms in literary understanding and in life.
5. Roger Chillingworth: As the cuckolded husband of Hester and a scientific philosopher, this vindictive old man personifies the reader's analytic faculty. His power is usurped when the passional imagination overpowers objective thought processes. Nevertheless, he is new baptized to a more instinctual application of intellect which enables him to direct the reader along the route of non-rational analysis toward the revelation of hidden and, finally, ineffable meaning.

Thus the model of reading implicit in The Scarlet Letter is a dramatic one, by virtue of the novel's dramatic structure. Richards was well aware that reading

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Archetypes & the Collective Unconscious, Vol. 9, Part I, of The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968), p. 168.

orchestrates a number of different "impulses," but his model failed to account for the manner of their interaction. The dramatic structure of Hawthorne's romance not only shows reading to be a complex, many-faceted process, it shows how this process proceeds.[67]

The primary metaphor in The Scarlet Letter for the dramatic interaction of reading modes is the union of the sexes, within marriage and without.[68] The marriage of Chillingworth and Hester, a formal arrangement of the old World, is succeeded in the New World by the adulterous union of Hester and Dimmesdale, an act which engenders within the reader an infant consciousness of the text. In the fruitless marriage of Chillingworth and Hester, the novel shows that the mechanical conjunction of intellect and sensuous imagination may move the reader in the

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[67] Vivas speculates that all experience, not just reading, involves "mixed modes": moral, aesthetic, religious, and cognitive, various cultures emphasizing some and subordinating others [Eliseo Vivas, "The Object of the Poem," Creation and Discovery (Chicago: Gateway Editions, 1955), p. 436(n)]. It is interesting to note that The Scarlet Letter shows these same modes and that furthermore it defines the pattern of their interaction. Cf. also Jung's discussion of the four basic "functions": thinking, feeling, sensation, and intuition, Psychological Types, Vol. 6 of The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1967), p. 437.

[68] The union of sexual opposites is a pervasive metaphor for the synthesis of complementary poles of man's being in Romantic and pre-romantic literature and myth. See Martin Bickman, The Unsounded Center (Chapel Hill, N. C.: Univ. of North Carolina, 1975), pp. 58-59.

direction of insight and revelation, even as Chillingworth and Hester move to the promised utopia of America, but that the naively idealized vision of redemption from a meaningless world which the intellect seeks in taking such a step is not to be realized so simply. It is only when the intellect, like Chillingworth, is lost in the wilderness and eclipsed by primitive passion that the text begins to live within the reader. For it is while Chillingworth is held captive by the Indians of the New World that his wife and the young minister are overpowered by their own passionate need for one another. The birth of the text as a autonomous subjective system within the reader is powerfully shown in the existence of Pearl. As the "unpremeditated offshoot of a passionate moment" (p. 76), Pearl demonstrates the principle that the text comes to life for the reader when he surrenders conscious control of the reading process to the dynamic interplay of his instinctive attraction to beauty and longing for bliss. Irresistably drawn to one another, the sensuous and spiritual modes of perception intersect on a plane below and beyond reason to produce within the reader an appreciation of the text as being at once distinct, in its concrete particularity, from the reader and, paradoxically, indistinguishable from him in that it is the medium with which his own subjectivity has merged. Meanwhile the intellect is evicted from its position of dominance within

the reading consciousness and must, in order to procure its original goal, lose itself as an active but unobtrusive participant in the framework of subjectivity which has usurped the reader's consciousness. This is the dramatic view of the role of blissful pleasure in reading toward which The Scarlet Letter moves. Though the novel is deeply concerned with the analytic impulse toward interpretation, it shows that the efficacy of this impulse depends upon its working in concert with irrational modes seated in the sensual and intuitive imagination. Thus the romance shows reading as an erotic revolt against habitual intellectual assumptions and expectations, a revolt which motivates within the reader a profound and painful reorientation at all levels of response.

Several conclusions about the nature of reading are suggested by Hawthorne's allegory. Its denouement implies that reading is not to be thought of as an interior experience only, but as a movement toward outward disclosure of some kind. Next, the entire reading process as it is depicted in this allegory has a distinctly moral character. Though the reader, in some of his guises or modes, lapses into self-indulgence and rebells against the most sacred principles of society, his final outward disclosure returns him to tradition and represents an act of conformity with culture in the deepest sense. Finally, the whole process of dramatic interplay and resolution within the

reader as it is embodied in The Scarlet Letter appears to be guided by an unseen controller. In few works is the sense of fate or doom as a force pressuring the lives of the characters toward some inescapable end so strong as it is in The Scarlet Letter. The aspect of this invisible agent is terrible when it leads the characters through suffering, doubt, and denial, but its hidden purpose is finally understood to be redemptive. Crews and Josipovici[69] interpret this ominous design as compulsive guilt, but Jung's description of the unconscious roots of meaning suggests a way of characterizing the fatalistic presence in The Scarlet Letter which is at least as close to the spirit of the novel as the Freudian term used by Crews and Josipovici:

> A dark impulse is the ultimate arbiter of the pattern [of give and take between conscious and unconscious in 'active imagination'], an unconscious a priori precipitates itself into plastic form . . . . Over the whole procedure there seems to reign a dim foreknowledge not only of the pattern but of its meaning.[70]

The force seizes Chillingworth, agent of analytic technique in the novel, as its instrument. Thus it would

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[69] F. C. Crews, The Sins of the Fathers (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966); Gabriel Josipovici, The World and the Book (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1971).

[70] Carl G. Jung, Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche, Vol. 8 of The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969), p. 204.

appear that the logical mode of interpretation, directed by its preconceived hypothesis of meaning, drives the reading process along in the direction of that idea, but the final revelation transcends the reader's simple cognitive intuition.

CHAPTER II

THE SURVEYOR

When, in the prologue of The Scarlet Letter, the Surveyor enters the attic of the Custom House, having nothing better to do on that "idle and rainy day"[71] than to rummage among the dusty stacks of documents heaped in this official rubbish site, he makes a profoundly significant discovery. Happening upon "a small package, carefully done up in a piece of ancient yellow parchment," he is gripped by a strangely compelling fascination even before he opens the envelope and sees what is inside. "There was," he tells us,

> something about it that quickened an instinctive curiosity, and made me undo the faded red tape, that tied up the package, with the sense that a treasure would here be brought to light (p. 26).

Sifting through some papers written by a Mr. Surveyor Pue, Surveyor Hawthorne, let us call the narrator, finds his attention irresistibly drawn to something wrapped up in Mr. Pue's records:

> . . . the object that most drew my attention, in the mysterious package, was a certain affair of fine red cloth, much worn and faded. There were traces about it of gold embroidery, which, however, was greatly frayed and defaced; so that none, or very little, of the glitter was left.

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[71] Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter, ed. Sculley Bradley, R. C. Beatty, et al., 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1978), p. 26. All page references in the text of this paper are to this source.

> It had been wrought, as was easy to perceive, with wonderful skill of needlework; and the stitch (as I am assured by ladies conversant with such mysteries) gives evidence of a now forgotten art, not to be recovered even by the process of picking out the threads. This rag of scarlet cloth,--for time, and wear, and a sacrilegious moth, had reduced it to little other than a rag,--on careful examination, assumed the shape of a letter. It was the capital letter A (p. 27).

The Surveyor has discovered something which is, on face value, no more than a "rag," but the attitude which he brings to this bit of tattered cloth makes it a thing of latent meaning and value. Its presence is

> . . . a riddle which . . . I saw little hope of solving. And yet 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 (p. 28).

His mood is typical of the attitude which makes an object a symbol rather than a sign. The distinction between the two, widely held since the age of romanticism, is formulated by Jung as follows: The symbol is an expression of something that is unknown and that cannot be characterized in any other or better way, while a sign is "an analogue or an abbreviated designation for a known thing.[72] Jung adds that an expression is not inherently a sign or a

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[72] Jung, Psychological Types, p. 474.

symbol; its nature as one or the other is determined by the individual attending to it:

> Whether a thing is a symbol or not depends chiefly on the attitude of the observing consciousness; for instance, on whether it regards a given fact not merely as such but also as an expression for something unknown. Hence it is quite possible for a man to establish a fact which does not appear in the least symbolic to himself, but is profoundly so to another consciousness.
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> . . . . . .
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> The attitude that takes a given phenomenon as symbolic may be called, for short, the symbolic attitude. It is only partially justified by the actual behavior of things; for the rest, it is the outcome of a definite view of the world which assigns meaning to events, whether great or small, and attaches to this meaning a greater value than to bare facts.[73]

The Surveyor's perplexed fascination with the "mystic symbol" (p. 28) which evades the analysis of his mind but speaks to his deeper sensibilities is a poignant demonstration of the symbolic attitude described above, and The Scarlet Letter suggests that this attitude is the foundation of the reading process. Without it, the reader finds the text lifeless and cold. With it, he enters at once into a creative partnership with the writer, "assigning meaning" to bare signs on a page. It is not, of course, by any conscious effort on the reader's part that the text seems to him suffused with meaning and, therefore, in the Surveyor-Reader's words, "most worthy of interpretation" (p. 28). "The living symbol," in Jung's words,

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[73] Jung, Psychological Types, pp. 475-76.

"formulates an essential unconscious factor."[74] It is the expression of something "not yet clearly conscious," but partly "divined."[75] The reader who feels compelled to enter into a more intimate relation to the text that grips and perplexes him does so in order that it may help raise to consciousness his own preconscious intuition of its meaning. Paul Ricoeur terms this process the "hermeneutic circle":

> . . . hermeneutics proceeds from a prior understanding of the very thing that it tries to understand by interpreting it. . . . [We render] explicit the prior understanding that gives life to the interpretation.[76]

It would follow that a reader cannot authentically read a symbol for which he has no previous context of latent understanding. The act of reading, then, becomes the creative process of evoking . . . and objectifying the reader's own core of potential meaning in its uncultivated and amorphous state through the agency of the concrete symbol which is the text. The reader thereupon continues, by additional reflective and, perhaps, written interpretation, the process of clarification which the text gets underway. Searching for some means of clearly formulating the deep meaning which he senses, the Surveyor attempts to

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[74] Jung, Psych. Types, p. 477.

[75] Jung, Psych. Types, p. 475.

[76] Paul Ricoeur, The Symbolism of Evil, trans. Emerson Buchanan (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 352.

analyze the "text" before him. He measures it to be three and a quarter inches in length along each limb and speculates upon its history. The text, however, is closed to these mechanical procedures. But while attempting to "cogitate" upon the mystery, the Reader-Surveyor spontaneously intuits the exact location of the point connecting the letter and his own heart: "I happened to place it on my breast," he says,

> and 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 to the floor (p. 28).

Providentially delivered from a fruitless intellectual approach, the Surveyor ceases to think and is immediately vouchsafed a glimpse of the profoundly intense effect which a mere letter may have upon one who allows it, in its concreteness and immediacy, to "touch" his sensible being.

Then, after he has placed the letter to his breast and felt its seering heat, Surveyor Hawthorne's eyes are opened to something which was wrapped up inside the letter itself, the moving story of a woman's forbidden passion and burning shame:

> In the absorbing contemplation of the scarlet letter, I had hitherto neglected to examine a small roll of dingy paper, around which it had been twisted. This I now opened, and had the satisfaction to find, recorded by the old Surveyor's pen, a reasonably complete explanation of the whole affair. There were several

> foolscap sheets, containing many particulars respecting the life and conversation of one Hester Prynne. . . (p. 28).

The order of events in Surveyor Hawthorne's reading experience suggests that the text's power to affect our senses is the key to our ability to experience it as a human story. The imaginative world locked up within the letter comes to life for the reader when he allows the letter to touch him in a personal and physical way.

Surveyor Hawthorne might have stopped here in his description of his experience of the letter. He has inspected it visually, analyzed it, felt its powerful impact upon his senses, puzzled over its meaning, and learned its story. But he goes on to describe at length another dimension of his attic experience, the role of Surveyor Pue. Though Surveyor Hawthorne burlesques his own impression that the original transcriber of the letter appeared and spoke to him, he introduces in this episode a point which becomes a major theme of the romance, i.e., that literary response involves not only the aesthetic experience of treating the text as an object and responding to it in an intensely private and sensuous way but also the phenomenological experience of listening to another human voice speaking through the text and of answering it. Surveyor Hawthorne says he felt

> as if the ancient Surveyor, in his garb of a hundred years gone by, and wearing his immortal wig--which was buried with him, but did not

> perish in the grave--had met me in the deserted chamber of the Custom House . . . . With his own ghostly hand, the obscurely seen but majestic figure had imparted to me the scarlet symbol, and the little roll of explanatory manuscript (p. 29).

Continuing in his mock-serious vein, Surveyor Hawthorne recalls that he seemed to hear the original transcriber speak:

> With his own ghostly voice, he had exhorted me . . . to bring his mouldy and moth-eaten lucubrations before the public. "Do this," said the ghost of Mr. Surveyor Pue . . . And I said to the ghost. . . "I will!" (p. 29).

Walter J. Ong[77] contends that our view of poems as "objects, structures, skeletons, and stratefied systems"[78] must be supplemented by a consideration of their "interiority," a quality "precisely the opposite of surface," in that it denotes "that special interior focus or pitch of being which we call life . . . and in the case of man his own interior self-consciousness."[79] For Ong, words establish, in Buber's terms, an "I-thou world where, through the mysterious interior resonance which sound best provides, persons commune with persons."[80] Thus "instead of reducing words to objects, urns, or even icons," Ong

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[77] "A Dialectic of Aural and Objective Correlatives," Critical Theory Since Plato, ed. Hazard Adams (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), 1971.

[78] Ong, p. 1159.

[79] Ong, p. 1160.

[80] Ong, p. 1160.

continues, alluding, of course, to famous titles by Eliot, Brooks, and Wimsatt, "we take them simply as what they are even more basically, as utterances."[81] Ong also speaks of the "strangely magnetic action" which characterizes utterance as the "drawing [of] other interiors into the ambit of [the speaker's] being."[82] By virtue of this magnetic power, the speaker "'captivates' others' attention, their very selves."[83] The spirit of Ong's discussion lies close to that of Hawthorne's description of the Surveyor's attic experience in which the text changes from a strangely moving artifact to both a channel of meaningful communication between persons and an occasion for interpretive recreation of the original text.

In The Scarlet Letter the contact between reader and writer is not, as one school of phenomenologists would suggest, the climax of the reading process. On the contrary, the meeting between them initiates a response which has profoundly important social implications. Surveyor Pue's stipulation that his reader make public the story he has found imperfectly or incompletely recorded is, fundamentally, an injunction that the reader interpret the text in language comprehensible to himself and his

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[81] Ong, p. 1160.

[82] Ong, p. 1160.

[83] Ong, p. 1160.

society.[84] The text, it would appear, does not come to us gratis for our casual perusal. In effect, it places a burden of responsibility upon its readers. Having read, we feel obligated to relate the text to the world as we know it. In saying "I will" to this demand, the Surveyor becomes a critic in the full sense of the word, for in deeming Pue's text worthy of further articulation, he makes an implicit judgment upon it. For the Surveyor, and the reader-critic in general, explication and criticism tend to merge, though the criteria upon which our critical judgment of a text is based may remain unknown.

Thus Surveyor Hawthorne takes his place in a developing dialogue concerning a timeless story. By recreating in his own terms the account he has read, he will leave the imprint of his personal mode of vision and that of his culture on the original symbol. The modern version of the old story, by virtue of the fact that it is a re-vision,

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[84] E. D. Hirsch makes a distinction between what he calls "interpretation" and "criticism": "The object of interpretation is textual meaning in and for itself and may be called the meaning of the text. The object of criticism, on the other hand, is that meaning in its bearing on something else (standards of value, present concerns, etc.) and this object may therefore be called the relevance of the text" ["Objective Interpretation," in Critical Theory Since Plato, ed. Hazard Adams (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1971), p. 1178]. But to make the meaning of a text truly intelligible to any particular culture is to speak of it in language which bears upon the conventions and values held by that culture. Unless the language of the text is shown to be relevant to the society which attempts to read it, it will not speak to them and will have little or no meaning.

involves many changes in the original, and yet its structural core remains the same:

> . . . it should be borne carefully in mind, that the main facts of the story The Scarlet Letter are authorized and authenticated by the document of Mr. Surveyor Pue. The original papers, together with the scarlet letter itself,--a most curious relic,--are still in my possession, and shall be freely exhibited to whomsoever, induced by the great interest of the narrative, may desire a sight of them. I must not be understood as affirming, that, in dressing up the tale, and imagining the motives and modes of passion that influenced the characters who figure in it, I have invariably confined myself within the limits of the old Surveyor's half a dozen sheets of fooscap. On the contrary, I have allowed myself, as to such points, nearly or altogether as much license as if the facts had been entirely of my own invention. What I contend for is the authenticity of the outline (p. 29).

The romance moves toward (but never converges upon) total explication of the submerged content of this archetypal image, until the symbol's "numinosity"[85] is almost snuffed out by hyper-clarification. Its mysterious spell is never to be completely broken, however. It is merely lost and buried again, this time in an overgrown cemetery rather than a Custom House attic.

> . . . one tombstone served for both. . . . and on this simple slab of slate--as the curious investigator may still discern, and perplex himself with the purport--there appeared the semblance of an engraved escutcheon. It bore a device, a herald's wording of which might serve for a motto and brief description of our now concluded legend; so sombre is it, and relieved

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[85] Jung's term for the emotional aura or spell evoked by symbols. See Carl G. Jung, ed., Man and His Symbols (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964), p. 93.

> only by one ever-glowing point of light gloomier than the shadow:--
> "ON A FIELD, SABLE, THE LETTER A, GULES" (p. 186).

Here the "curious investigator" (p. 186), like the curious Surveyor, may feel compelled to recreate in new and vibrant terms, the experience which has been demystified through intellectual analysis.

Finding those new terms is the difficult challenge facing both readers and writers as they confront the ancient themes of human experience. It is a task which almost defeats Surveyor Hawthorne. "On Hester Prynne's story," he tells us, "I bestowed much thought" (p. 30), but the embryonic tale which he perceived in the outline bequeathed him by Mr. Pue would not grow so long as Surveyor Hawthorne retained his role as a Custom-House official:

> . . . so little adapted is the atmosphere of a Custom-House to the delicate harvest of fancy and sensibility, that, had I remained there through ten Presidencies yet to come, I doubt whether the tale of The Scarlet Letter would ever have been brought before the public eye. My imagination was a tarnished mirror. It would not reflect, or only with miserable dimness, the figures with which I did my best to people it. The characters of the narrative would not be warmed and rendered malleable, by any heat that I could kindle at my intellectual forge (p. 30).

Though Surveyor Hawthorne has come under the power of the archetype, he cannot "dream the myth onward"[86] until he

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[86] Carl G. Jung, Psyche and Symbol (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1958), p. 120.

has found his own individual orientation to the shared core of meaning by being ousted, paradoxically, from the social and conventional milieu which introduced the symbol to him in the first place. While he lived and worked in the employ of the government, he was tyrannized by a conventional way of viewing the world which, having been imposed upon him from without, had sinisterly invaded his mind to such an extent that his individual vision was hopelessly inhibited. In becoming a servant of the government, he had "bartered" his imagination "for a pittance of the public gold" (p. 30). Thus he wondered "how much longer [he] could stay in the Custom-House, and yet go forth a man" (p. 34), for having leaned so long upon "the mighty arm of the Republic," he found that "his own proper strength" (p. 33) had deserted him. He is fortuitously expelled from his position as Custom-House Surveyor by a political "coup." As he himself describes it: "My own head was the first that fell!" (p. 35). The metaphor of decapitation remains prominent through the remainder of the prologue:

> The moment when a man's head drops off is seldom or never, I am inclined to think, precisely the most agreeable of his life (p. 35).
>
> Meanwhile, the press had taken up my affair, and kept me, for a week or two, careering through the public prints, in my decapitated state, like Irving's Headless Horseman; ghastly and grim, and longing to be buried (p. 36).

The title which he fancies most appropriate for the Prologue is "'Posthumous Papers of a Decapitated Surveyor'" (p. 36).

The suppression of individual vision by an old and decrepit collective power on the social level is mirrored by a similar tyrannical relationship on the psychological level. The Surveyor has been living too much "in the head," in that his deeper vision has been subjected to overregulation by the executive power of habitual thought processes. It is only after he severs himself from the tyranny of centralized control in his mind and in his cultural milieu that he can respond to the promptings of his heart and find in them an underground current of inspiration. Immediately following his fortunate decapitation, new powers of creativity are freed, and Surveyor Pue's story of Hester Prynne comes to life. The woman herself, as if the Muse of this new-found vision, steps forth from "a wooden edifice, the door of which was heavily timbered with oak and studded with iron spikes" (p. 39) at the same time that the Surveyor, long imprisoned in the prosaic world of the Custom House, is liberated from the dungeon of conventional understanding and routine thought processes. That door, an "inauspicious portal" from which "our narrative . . . is now about to issue" (p. 40), is the first chapter--"'The Prison-Door'"--of the Surveyor's new vision of the letter. The narrative issues forth in

the form of "that Scarlet Letter, so fantastically embroidered and illuminated upon [Hester's] bosom" (p. 44). Printed in the text in italics, it matches the title of the novel, and following this lead, we may interpret Hester's embroidery as a representative of the larger narrative which is issuing even now from the prison of oak and iron that trapped the Surveyor during his fruitless period. Thus The Scarlet Letter carries within its structure a microcosm of itself.

As he crosses the threshold of "'The Prison-Door,'" the former Surveyor's language changes, reflecting a change in his mode of understanding the letter. Taking his leave of the expository, historical style, he passes over into the province of romance. We hear no more of the sedentary old men with whom the Surveyor passed many languid hours. We are shown in their stead vigorous colonists, passionate lovers, passionate enemies, and a wild little girl growing to womanhood in the center of all. The faded "rag of scarlet" bound in dingy parchment gives way to a glittering jewel newly stiched upon the bosom of a proud adulteress' gown. The Surveyor-Reader has indeed become "a citizen of somewhere else" (p. 37), a realm where life and color and passion are strong, a state of mind where the text is not a faded artifact, but a living symbol whose impact upon the senses and the emotions is immediate and intense.

Though a number of explanations[87] have been proposed for Hawthorne's inclusion of the Custom-House Prologue in The Scarlet Letter, it has a very particular relevance in the context of the present study. The romance portion of The Scarlet Letter is a beautifully allegorized version of the Surveyor's Custom House experience of the letter, from the powerful spell which aesthetic absorption induces through intellectual analysis to liberation from confining conventions of thought and discourse and, finally, to communication with society at large. The allegory, the Surveyor's critical/literary recreation of the letter he read in the attic, "explains" the meaning of the original document by acting out the process of reading it. It is in following that process that we, readers of the A at the second remove, can know the letter.

Feidelson suggests that allegory was Hawthorne's way of coping with his fear of the chaotic richesse of the symbol:

> Allegory was the brake that Hawthorne applied to his sensibility. For allegory was analytic: allegory was safe because it preserved the conventional distinction between thought and things and because it depended on a conventional order whose point of arrangement was easily defined. The symbolist and the allegorical patterns in

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[87] See, for example, Robert L. Berner, "A Key to 'The Custom-House,'" American Transcendental Quarterly, 41 (1979), 33-43; Carlanda Green, "The Custom House: Hawthorne's Dark Wood of Error," New England Quarterly, 53, 184-95; and Dan McCall, "The Design of Hawthorne's Custom House," Nineteenth Century Fiction, 21, 349-58.

> Hawthorne's books reach quite different conclusions; or, rather, the symbolism leads to an inconclusive luxuriance of meaning, while allegory imposes the pat moral and the simplified character.[88]

It may be, however, that in The Scarlet Letter allegory is not, as Feidelson suggests, so much a retreat from "the inconclusive luxuriance of meaning" as it is an attempt to deal with it in a comprehensible form. Like interpretation, allegory is a means of reducing the complexity of a symbolist vision that we may highlight and thereby understand part of its significance. But allegory is a special mode of critical interpretation, for it explains by embodying and acting out its message. Like analysis, it emphasizes essential elements, but it goes a step further and puts the elements of meaning back together in a story whose structure helps us to experience the structure of that more complex something which we wish to understand.[89] In his capacity as allegorist, Surveyor Hawthorne completes his role as reader. His symbolist vision of the letter is intensely aesthetic--but not merely so. Analyzing his characters and metaphors as he goes, he relates what is ineluctably symbolic in his tale to the conceptual universe of his society. He makes the

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[88] Feidelson, pp. 14-15.

[89] Compare DeMaria's thesis: "great criticism takes the very form of the vision of literature it contains," p. 463.

scarlet letter burn with beautiful vividness before the reader's eye, but he also makes the letter speak. Thus he reads the text in its dual nature as art object and as meaningful discourse.

Though Surveyor Hawthorne, Hawthorne's persona, seems to recede into the background after the romance begins, he re-emerges at the end, citing as his authority for the tale the "manuscript of old date" (p. 183). His use of the first-person plural in the final pages reflects, perhaps, the fact that he has now fully assimilated into himself the company of characters who eclipsed his personality for twenty-three chapters in order to act out the process which has brought him to a superior perspective upon the letter. With this view of Hawthorne's narrator in mind, we may examine the romance as a drama played out by different facets of the Surveyor-Reader's mind.

CHAPTER III

THE TOWN

The Surveyor "relates" Pue's story to the world in both senses of the word. He tells that story to America, but, instinctively recognizing that we would not hear the story unless it were related to us in terms with which we could identify, he "relates" it to us in the contemporary sense of the word, i.e., he shows its relation to us and makes his tale a romance about us and our origin, that is, about the beginning of our American society. But the story of America's origin cannot be told by recounting the details of our continent's discovery and colonization or even of our nation's political conception. The history of America, as The Scarlet Letter shows, is the story of a letter and a child, for the birth of a nation fundamentally involves language on the one hand and developing consciousness on the other.

The New World setting of the romance is a clearing in the wilderness where men and women seek to establish a new order of vision and behavior. Living on the outskirts of "the primeval forest" (p. 132) ruled by "that wild, heathen Nature . . . never subjugated by human law, nor illumined by higher truth" (pp. 146-47), the people of Boston have erected in the center of their market place a

scaffold where "that wild, heathen Nature" of their own hearts[90] is made to conform with principles of social order. ~~Thus one of the great conflicts upon which the romance is based may be seen in its setting where the Bostonians are engaged in the struggle to reconcile the forest and the market place, nature and society, instinct and law.~~

When the romance is viewed as an allegory of the process of reading, the setting of forest and town gathers particular significance. The forest, where instinct and passion find creative expression, and the town, where the scaffold returns individuals to the order of society, localize a pair of impulses which direct the reading experience: one leads toward the pleasurable activity of expressing private fantasy and emotion through the medium of the text (cf. Barthes' "the pleasures of the text") and the other tends toward the self-transcendent function of understanding something implicit in the text about the general "laws" of literature and of human experience (cf. Barthes' "the bliss of the text"). The reader's task involves the resolution of these opposite but

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[90] In speaking of the forest, Fossum remarks, "Psychologically, it represents what it always has in Hawthorne: the human heart, a place in which the primitive instincts of an earlier stage of human evolution still riot, in which passion rules over reason, and in which objective distinctions of time are blurred," Hawthorne's Inviolable Circle (Deland, Fla.: Everett/Edwards, 1972), p. 118.

complementary impulses. Only by bringing to the text his own unconscious fantasies and instinctual emotions can the reader identify with the characters of the romance and thus experience the powerful affective responses which the text potentially evokes. But problems--like the witches in the woods and the demonic flaw in Pearl's character--are a part of the primitive and personal mode of response. Those who wander in the forest land in hopes of finding, in its fertile luxuriance, a renewal of their buried instinctual life run the risk that what is gained may exhibit certain abberations. The "moral wilderness" (p. 132) of the reader's heart may lead him toward personal fantasies which cannot be reconciled with the more conventional readings of the text. When this happens, the law of the text has been broken, just as surely as the law of society was broken when Hester and Arthur freely pursued their instinctual desires in the privacy of the forest. The linguistic traditions and conventions upon which, by social agreement, dependable communication among individuals is based have been defied.

Just as it is natural for the reader to escape into the forest during his reading experience, it is natural for him to attempt to return to the town where he may "make sense" of the powerful feelings and vivid sensations which the text evokes in him. The town can tame the wild peculiarity of the reader's forest experience of the text,

for it is here--in particular, upon the scaffold in the market place--that the letter and the child may be known. Only through obedience to the structure of order and tradition which the pillory platform represents may literary understanding be achieved. Thus the struggle between forest and town becomes a struggle between responses which are strictly personal and uncommunicable on the one hand and responses which are universal and intelligible to society on the other.

But what happens if the principles of literary judgment which the reader initially applies to the text are as incapable of handling its subtleties as the Puritan magistrates are of dealing with Hester Prynne?

> They were, doubtless, good men, just, and sage. But, out of the whole human family, it would not have been easy to select the same number of wise and virtuous persons, who should be less capable of sitting in judgment on an erring woman's heart, and disentangling its mesh of good and evil, than the sages of rigid aspect towards whom Hester Prynne now turned her face (p. 51).

When the reader, even though he has a great fund of experience with language, has no interior rule for understanding the text's effect upon his heart (and this is, to a greater or lesser extent, always the case), either a great gap will forever exist between his aesthetic and critical impressions of the text, like the gap between Hester and her judges, or a deeper level of analysis will be begun, one which seeks to make sense of the text not by applying inappropriate abstractions to it as the

magistrates do but by stimulating changes within the linguistic apparatus which the reader uses to understand what he reads. This, in effect, is what Roger Chillingworth does by analyzing and vexing the eloquent Arthur Dimmesdale, a veritable "Tongue of Flame" (p. 104) for his community.

The three scenes placed in the novel's structurally critical positions of beginning, middle, and end show that the inescapable context of reading is a social one. As the platform centrally located in the market place of the town three times hosts the revelation of the letter, the reader's experience of the text and the conceptual universe he shares with others confront one another. Initially, when the reader's experience of the text is dominated by sensation and the incommunicable experience of pleasure, Hester stands alone upon the scaffold. Those who observe her are unaware at this point that the head of their own social system is Hester's partner in adultery; thus they lack the key which relates the lavish details of her text and the instinctual responses she represents to the world they inhabit as civilized beings. Desirous, nevertheless, of making the law-breaker fit in, the Bostonians give her a ready-made label which merely suggests, in a highly abbreviated and simplistic way, her relation to their moral universe. At this point, the colonists' understanding of the letter is incomplete, but it

undergoes a gradual and uneven evolution as the narrative proceeds. In the medial scaffold episode, the problems generated when the social context of meaning is left out of the reading process come to a crisis. The reader's imagination runs rampant, interpreting the text as "no more than a fitting page for his soul's history and fate" (p. 113), and critical discourse is an unintelligible outcry. Finally, however, private response and socially meaningful discourse meet as Hester and Dimmesdale ascend the scaffold together. Now what is personal, passionate, and strange in the reader's experience of the letter, qualities associated with Hester, are related, by Dimmesdale, to the conceptual universe which the reader shares with his society. At this public staging of the letter, the community offers no more simple interpretations or easy moral judgments. Rather, witnessing the death of their beloved minister, the crowd

> broke out in a strange, deep voice of awe and wonder, which could not as yet find utterance, save in this murmer that rolled so heavily after the departed spirit (p. 181).

They have achieved a reading of the letter which, ironically, cannot be put into words.

Later, however, "when time sufficed for the people to arrange their thoughts" (p. 182) concerning the minister's strange revelation, several interpretations are proposed. It is not surprising that the conscious articulation of so deeply moving an experience is not the same from one

witness to the next, nor will the reader's perception of his experience with the text remain constant as perspective on it shifts from one vantage point to another. Then, years later,

> . . . the scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world's scorn and bitterness, and became a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too (p. 185),

and finally over the graves of Hester and Arthur appears a schematization of the A which makes this letter the coat of arms for the descendents of these ill-fated lovers of early America. Presumably, then, the A is being interpreted as the heritage handed down to the New World heirs of this American Adam and Eve.[91] The letter now appears on a "simple slab of slate" (p. 186) rather than on and in the persons of a woman, a man, and a child, and it is written in language which fully conforms with traditional formulae: "ON A FIELD, SABLE, THE LETTER A, GULES" (p. 186). Immediate life and color have been drained from the letter in the process of its being assimilated by society, but, in being made into a coat of arms, the A has been given the status of socially acceptable and accepted discourse. The letter, i.e., the text, has at last

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[91] For discussions of the biblical overtones of the tale of Arthur and Hester, see R. W. B. Lewis, The American Adam (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955) and Roy R. Male, Hawthorne's Tragic Vision (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1957).

entered conventional language and is, thus, part of our American heritage.

What causes the evolution of the A's meaning? Why does the initial reading of the town, so crude and unfeeling, develop into the profound and ambiguous response of the final pages? Why does the romance begin with Hester's aesthetic portrayal of the letter's meaning, move to the minister's eloquent confession, and then return finally to Hester's point of view and her mesmerizing embroidery? Why is reading dynamic? The answers surely have to do with the dynamic nature of the novel itself, i.e., to the interaction of opposing motives acted out by the characters over the course of the plot. Since the principal characters--Hester, Dimmesdale, Chillingworth, and Pearl--are members of the Boston colony, they are merely more prominent aspects of the ordinary reading consciousness embodied by the town at large. But in these characters we are allowed to see the hidden source of the reader's awareness at the unconscious level of instinct and intuition. At the beginning, when the reader is not ready to understand his potential responses to the text, these responses are educated by the text covertly, even as the private passions of Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth, driven underground, secretly and from within work changes upon one another and the town. As seen in the private interaction of the principal

characters, the reader's latent insights into the letter develop in such a way as to alter the public--or outwardly spoken--reading.

If the primary guardians of latent meaning, Hester and Arthur, were truly distinct from the body of men and women who constitute common awareness, the forces which work upon the tormented lovers would never emerge into the arena of ordinary consciousness. But Hester and Arthur have social functions to perform in their community, functions which keep their line of communication with the public world open. Dimmesdale clearly influences the people through his sermons. Hester's impact comes through the darker and more subtle channel of her needlework. But a more indigenous mode of connection between the lovers and their community may be observed in the fact that unmistakable likenesses of both Hester and Arthur appear in two segments of the town which, from the beginning of the romance, assume distinct spheres of dominance in community life: they are the goodwives and the sages. The gap separating the common women from the learned men of power sitting, in the opening scene, high above them is psychological and emotional as well as social. In the rigid authoritarians, intellectual principle has banished the emotions of the heart. The unenlightened goodwives, on the other hand, are the pawns of raw, selfish feeling.

The two complement one another but appear to respond to the letter in fundamentally different ways.

Hester is a genuine sister of the women of Boston, even as the young minister is the brother of his fellows in power and prestige. Though exceptional in some ways, this woman and this man appear, in one sense, to function in the novel as the representatives of their sexes in the community. This schematization is important because, in uniting to produce Pearl, Hester and Arthur, acting for their community as it were, heal a split between two modes of awareness typified by the goodwives and sages of Boston: the irrational and rational, the instinctual and the learned, the aesthetic and the critical. In and through the lovers' union, a synthesis of these two modes of response is initiated so that, in the final revelation of the letter, the responses typical of each sex mingle even as the men and women beholding the revelation below the scaffold merge to form an undifferentiated mass of witnesses who respond in unison to the letter.

CHAPTER IV

HESTER AND THE GOODWIVES

As the first scene in the novel unfolds, the inhabitants of Boston occupying the green adjacent to the prison have, with us the readers, "intently fastened" their eyes "on the iron-clamped oaken door" (p. 40). As we wait for the narrative to issue thither, the town awaits the exodus of the letter-bearer and her child, the "letter endowed with life" (p. 78). From the moment of their appearance, the letter as a document and as a reading of that document, i.e., the living potential of new consciousness, have entered the reader's imaginative world.

The women are the most conspicuous segment of this crowd of witnesses due to the fact that they are so outspoken in their hard-heartedness toward the sinner who is about to endure her penalty. The narrator's description of their "not unsubstantial persons" stresses the fact that

> there was a coarser fiber in those wives and maidens of old English birth and breeding than in their fair descendents.
> . . . . . .
> . . . the beef and ale of their native land, with a moral diet not a whit more refined, entered largely into their composition. The bright morning sun, therefore, shone on broad shoulders and well-developed busts, and on round and ruddy cheeks, that had ripened in the far-off island, and had hardly yet grown paler or thinner in the atmosphere of New England (p. 42).

The "force and solidity" (p. 41) which characterizes the anatomy of these women is reflected in their use of language as well:

> There was, moreover, a boldness and rotundity of speech among these matrons, . . . that would startle us at present day, whether in respect to its purport or its volume of tone (p. 41).

In their antique robustness, these women function as the backbone of their primitive society. Transplanted Old English dames, they are culturally unrefined but physically vigorous. Conscious realization of the letter's meaning will not come to the reader by the direct agency of his collective instincts so graphically personified in the "knot" (p. 42) of crude and impulsive matrons of the earth; nevertheless, the thoughtless remarks of these goodwives regarding Hester and the letter are the first "readings" expressed in the romance and, as such, represent the foundation of the reader's developing understanding. As the colonial setting of the romance, a tentative clearing in the dark and tangled wilderness, suggests itself as the setting of the reading experience, we see that the roots of literary understanding reach deeply into the past and into instinctive emotional reactions.

This group of "hard-featured" (p. 41) women, who are described as "self-constituted judges" (p. 42) of Hester Prynne, appear to take particular gusto in devising torments for their errant sister. In their crude and graphic

words, the "brazen hussy" (p. 44) and "naughty baggage," Mistress Prynne, deserved, at the very least, "the brand of a hot iron" upon her forehead or, according to the "ugliest" and "most pitiless of the five" (p. 42), death itself. Slow to assimilate the leniency of their leaders, these massive women do not accept the sentence imposed upon Hester because they are not steeped in the lore of symbols which teaches their leaders that a mere letter can have a profound effect upon human life. Still living under the old dispensation of an eye for an eye, they do not feel any real equivalence between a symbol and a tangible act, and thus they find the New World magistrates "merciful overmuch" (p. 42) in their manner of punishing Hester. Clamoring among themselves for the fulfillment of the letter of the law, they fail--all but one--to perceive that the spirit of the law has been fulfilled in the abstract sentence imposed upon the adulteress. That one precocious goodwife who stands apart from her hard-hearted peers, appropriately the youngest of them, contends that Hester cannot escape her punishment by simply covering up the letter, as the other goodwives feared she would do, for "'the pang of it will always be in her heart'" (p. 42). Later, when the goodwives are incensed by the fancifulness of Hester's embroidery, the same young wife avers, "'Not a stitch in that embroidered letter, but she has felt it in her heart'" (p. 44). Subtleties such as these pass over

the heads of the other earthy matrons, for whom there is no reality beyond what is available to the senses. Talk of the heart and of a cloth letter's power to inflict inner remorse and pain must surely sound like foolishness to them. In their view, Hester's punishment means nothing unless it leaves a visible mark upon her flesh.

In these coarse women, the reader's instinctive propensity towards literal understanding is vocalized. Headstrong and earthbound, their primitive demand for literalness in meaning is, in one sense, a strong impediment in the reading process, for it precludes consideration of the symbol's connotative reference to the world of imagination and abstraction. A related preoccupation with the appearance of things further obstructs their insight into the text's essential meaning. Whipped to a frenzy by their jealous attention to the details of Hester's "rich gown," "dainty shoulders" (p. 44), and skillful needlework, the goodwives busy themselves in trying to defend their egos from the unflattering light in which their own unloveliness is cast by Hester's beauty:

> "It were well," muttered the most iron-visaged of the old dames, "if we stripped Madam Hester's rich gown off her dainty shoulders; and as for the red letter, which she hath stitched so curiously, I'll bestow a rag of mine own rheumatic flannel, to make a fitter one!" (p. 44).

The marketplace of the reader's mind virtually buzzes with the chatter of a tormented and narrow-minded ego,

which fretfully endeavors to ascertain at every turn how the text reflects upon the reader's self-image.[92] The defensive interpretations and derogatory criticism which they fling at the letter-bearer shield them from the view which, the narrator points out, a "sensitive observer" would have taken, i.e., that "there was something exquisitely painful" (p. 44) in that beautiful mien which infuriated the coarser spectators. Wisely, an unnamed man and woman in the crowd attempt to quiet the self-preoccupied criticism of these vindictive women and return their attention to the living drama being staged before them:

> "Hush, now, gossips; for the lock is turning in the prison-door, and here comes Mistress Prynne herself" (p. 42).
>
> "O, peace, neighbors, peace! . . . Do not let her hear you!" (p. 44).

Were they to open their eyes and hearts to Hester, their perception of human experience could be deepened and enriched.

Hester is severely affected by the market-place mentality of self-consciousness that has turned the goodwives' hearts to stone. Standing "under the heavy weight of a thousand unrelenting eyes, all fastened upon her" as the "most conspicuous object" (p. 46) in the

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[92] See Norman Holland's Five Readers Reading (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1975) for some detailed observations of this phenomenon in actual reading situations.

scene, she feels intensely self-conscious and shows little compassion for her infant's distress. But Hester has other resources within which enable her to evade the blinding spotlight which the marketplace has thrust her into. Through "an instinctive device of her spirit, to relieve itself, by the exhibition of . . . phantasmagoric forms" (p. 47), Hester witnesses an interior drama of her past which lends a larger context to her immediate situation. Following this tour of "memory's picture gallery" (p. 47), she is able to view the letter more clearly than ever before.

> . . . the scaffold of the pillory was a point of view that revealed to Hester Prynne the entire track along which she had been treading, since her happy infancy. Standing on that miserable eminence, she saw again her native village, in Old England, and her paternal home; a decayed house of gray stone, with a poverty-stricken aspect, but retaining a half-obliterated shield of arms over the portal, in token of antique gentility (p. 47).

As her mind's eye surveys other features of the life she left behind, imagery of old age and deterioration dominates. The mirror in which Hester's glowing beauty, a singular quality in this gray and wrinkled world, sought to reflect itself is "dusky." Her husband is old, pale, thin, and slightly deformed. Their marriage, supposedly the beginning of a new life, fed itself "on time-worn materials, like a tuft of green moss on a crumbling wall" (p. 47). After a review of such a barren and colorless period, the rude marketplace of the young colony, the baby

in her arms, and "the letter A, in scarlet, fantastically embroidered with gold thread, upon her bosom" (p. 47) seem to have an infinitely stronger claim to reality. As she abandoned her marriage vow to the wrinkled scholar in preference for a passionate liaison with the young divine, she now banishes all her ties with that gray and decaying world of civilized society for the barbaric vigor of the settlement. Convulsively, she seizes the present as the context of her new reality:

> She clutched the child so fiercely to her breast, that it sent forth a cry; she turned her eyes downward at the scarlet letter, and even touched it with her finger, to assure herself that the infant and the shame were real. Yes!--these were her realities,--all else had vanished! (p. 47).

Hester has attained a vision of her illusory past which she cannot long cling to as a refuge, for the thin and faded aspect of this way of life will not bear up under comparison with what must seem to her now to be the all too substantial impact of her present situation. This remarkable scene, therefore, introduces the arch-letter as the glowing focal point of a new and vital perception of life, of a freshly personal, sensuous, and lawless reading of the world.

Interestingly, it is by touching and looking at the letter that Hester assures herself of the authenticity of her New World situation. Guided here and throughout the romance by a deep and abiding respect for materiality,

Hester stands forth at this crucial moment as a rich type of that mode of understanding which receives intuition from the concrete foundation of an immediate and personal experience of the text. Assimilating to herself the virtues of the transcendentalist,[93] the self-reliant individual,[94] and the antinomian,[95] she seems to demonstrate that "every individual can penetrate the veil to discover divine truth for himself without the aid of traditional authority or even of logic."[96] As if testing the Lockean premise that "all knowledge is perceptual in origin,"[97] she consults her senses for her proper orientation in reality. The great value of the reader's primitive propensity for the materially real is powerfully suggested in the characterization of Hester Prynne. A goodwife who shares with her sisters their earthbound orientation toward the reality that is revealed through the senses,

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[93] Michael J. Hoffman, The Subversive Vision (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1972), pp. 80-81.

[94] Bernard Rosenthal, The City of Nature (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 1980), p. 207.

[95] Michael J. Colacurcio, "Footsteps of Ann Hutchinson: The Context of The Scarlet Letter," English Literary History, 39 (1972), 459-94.

[96] David Bowers, "Democratic Vistas," in American Transcendentalism, ed. Brian M. Barbour (Notre Dame, Indiana: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1973), p. 11.

[97] Bowers, p. 13.

she stands upon the scaffold as some great matriarch of the flesh in all its beauty and fertility.

It was her sensitivity to the quality of material nature that weakened Hester's marriage to the "misshapen scholar," for "as Hester Prynne's womanly fancy failed not to recall," her husband "was slightly deformed, with the left shoulder a trifle higher than the right" (p. 47). Chillingworth himself states that he was deluded to hope "that intellectual gifts might veil physical deformity in a young girl's fantasy" (p. 57), as if realizing that it is only natural for the feminine imagination, or "womanly fancy," to have heightened receptivity to the sensory channels of awareness.

Thus reliance upon the sensuous mode of experience is presented in the novel as a feminine principle, and the woman's unique capacity for childbearing becomes a metaphor for a particular style of expression and intuition. Hester experiences her world by entering into concrete relationships with it, and she has expressed the sentiments of her heart in a concrete way. Her interpretation of the literary experience she has felt is bodied forth in the beautiful but cryptic language of a gorgeous letter and a baby girl. These two symbols simultaneously represent the text and the feminine faculty's reading of it. Hester's style of interpretation is shown to be concrete and densely metaphoric. Rather than explaining or

elaborating upon the text and her experience of it, she creates a vivid image of it. She has no verbal comment to make concerning the act of which she stands accused other than her primary metaphors of interpretation: the letter and the child, both tangible rather than conceptual creations. Ordinary awareness, as depicted in the prying multitude, cannot persuade her to elaborate in any other terms. Symbolic acts perceived at this level do not speak the clear language of reason; rather they embody obliquely the "facts" of an experience which the town wishes to know of in order that they may judge it more fully. Thus the reader is forced to embark upon a second phase of interpretation precisely because of the densely metaphoric character of the concretist reading.

The archetypal character of Hester's role in the novel is underscored by the narrator's comparison of her and the Virgin Mary. As she stands on her pedestal holding the infant in her arms, she is reminiscent of "the image of Divine Maternity . . . but only by contrast" (p. 45). With that simile, Hester Prynne is given the role of a Magna Mater[98] who inverts the image of purity which characterizes the Mother of Christ. Here the

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[98] For a extensive discussion of this archetype as an explanation of the ambivalent character of Hester's role, see Robert E. Todd, "The Magna Mater Archetype in The Scarlet Letter," The New England Quarterly, 45 (1972), 421-29.

romance plays upon the "negative" qualities inherent in the archetype. Not at all a virgin, this New World mother is distinguished for the carnal nature of the act which made her a mother. Her dark beauty is richly sensuous and presumably, therefore, deadly damning[99] in contrast to the ethereal beauty, unpolluted by carnal knowledge, attributed to the Virgin. Altogether earthly in her make-up, the mother of Pearl is described as the "medium" or "substance" through which the child received its spirit: Seeing her own defiance and desperation in the character of the child, Hester is reminded of

> what she herself had been, during that momentous period while Pearl was imbibing her soul from the spiritual world, and her bodily frame from its material of earth. The mother's impassioned state had been the medium through which were transmitted to the unborn infant the rays of its moral life; and, however white and clear originally, they had taken the deep strains of crimson and gold, the fiery lustre, the black shadow, and the untempered light, of the intervening substance[100] (pp. 68-69).

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[99] The view that knowledge based upon sensory awareness is false is as old as Plato. His condemnation of literature on account of its dependence upon sensory images and, therefore, upon vain appearances (Republic, trans. B. Jowett [Garden City: Doubleday, 1960], p. 295) is an ancient analogue for the suspicion with which the reader in his more intellectual role regards the metaphoric use of language.

[100] Again, Plato's remarks about literary response are relevant: Poetry, being an imitation of nature, Socrates explains, is not "intended . . . to please or to affect the rational principle of the soul; but . . . the passionate and fitful temper" (Republic, trans. B. Jowett, p. 299).

Though the most obvious allusion in the above passage is to the doctrine of original sin, it also has something to say concerning the development of literary awareness in its description of the development of the child who is the "scarlet letter endowed with life" (p. 76). The imagery of the passage clearly connects the gestation of the child with Hester's creation of the letter, for the coloring of the "intervening substance" which gave mortal being to Pearl is the same as that of Hester's rich embroidery. Because she is an individual whose primary mode of awareness is, like her style of participation with reality, sensuous and individualistic, Hester's interpretation of the letter takes on the coloring of her richly concrete and peculiar point of view. Even as the infant potential of understanding enters the world of the reading mind--i.e., as Pearl enters the community of Boston--it has already been molded and permanently marked by the tone and temper of sense experience which has given it birth. Hester's intimate physical involvement in the gestation and delivery of Pearl suggests that the opportunity for higher understanding is delivered to the reader through the dark channels of sensory participation with the world,[101] but, like the people of Boston, the reader's

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[101] This view echoes Aristotle and St. Augustine. In his discussion of the faculty psychology of these two philosophers, Montgomery explains that Aristotle "proposes an orderly movement of the mind from perceived image to

ordinary consciousness may discredit the physical source of his interpretive potential. Though her home is the reader's own imprisoning heart, and though she performs there the secret work of creating the ground of meaning, common awareness greets the chthonic mother of awareness with harsh, repressive measures.

The authenticity of Hester's sensuous interaction with the world helps to account for the provocative beauty of the woman and of her two creations. Even as she emerges from the prison, her appearance and behavior clearly distinguish her from her coarse sisterhood. While they are hard-visaged, ugly, and crude, Hester is strikingly beautiful, "with a figure of perfect elegance, on a large scale" (p. 43). While they are "manlike" (p. 41), she is

> lady-like . . . after the manner of feminine gentility of those days; characterized by a certain state and dignity . . . And never had Hester Prynne appeared more lady-like, in the antique interpretation of the term, than as she issued from the prison (p. 43).

It also appears that she had never appeared more beautiful than on this unlikely day:

> Those who had before known her, and had expected to behold her dimmed and obscured by a disastrous cloud, were astonished, and even startled, to perceive how her beauty shone out, and made a

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rationally contemplated idea," and Augustine views sense perception as "a case of the soul making use of the organs of the body." Thus sensory awareness may precede higher understanding (pp. 23, 30-31).

> halo of the misfortune and ignominy in which she was enveloped (pp. 43-44).

The heightening of her beauty, or perhaps the illumination of beauty heretofore only incompletely expressed, is effected by the letter which she wears. It

> . . . transfigured the wearer,--so that both men and women, who had been familiarly acquainted with Hester Prynne, were now impressed as if they beheld her for the first time (p. 44).

It is the nature of her embroidery of the letter which brings out Hester's new essence. In refusing to comply with the magistrates' sober intentions regarding the letter, i.e., in refusing to subordinate her feminine mode of response to that of men, Hester opened the way for her own expression of its signification, and, in so doing, opened the way for her expression of herself, which, freely released, showed itself beautiful in the way that nature, when undistorted by repression is, to the romantic mind, always beautiful because true to itself. When the reader's secret center of sensuous apperception is called to the surface to give its account of the text, no words of explanation are uttered. When asked to identify her paramour, Hester surrenders to the masters of reason no name which might seem to resolve the mystery. Nothing at all "useful" is offered during this staging of the letter--just <u>beauty</u>, as if that is all the sensuous mode has to say about the secret of the text.

In spite of the power of sensuous language to enable the reader to recreate the "perceptual world" of the text, that the "life of the senses" may be "reborn,"[102] such language fails to penetrate the subjective world of ideas implicit in the text. As Poulet explains,

> This form of criticism is . . . able to provide an admirable equivalent of the vital substratum which underlies all thought, and yet it seems incapable of attaining and expressing thought itself. . . . Identification relative to objects is accomplished almost too well; relative to subjectivity it is barely sketched.[103]

The feminine interpretive principle, responding to the colorful and noisy surface of our phenomenal world and of the text, fails to perceive the universality of the literary experience. The letter for them is not a door enabling communion between one human consciousness and another. Just as the goodwives fail to respond sympathetically to the inner agony of Hester, fussing instead about her clothes and what seems to them a pretentious embroidery, so Hester too fails to sympathize with the subjective reality of her miserable infant.

There is an almost savage quality in her unsympathetic treatment of the child as she stands upon the scaffold which recalls the coarseness of the goodwives. Three

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[102] Georges Poulet, "Phenomenology of Reading," in Critical Theory Since Plato, ed. Hazard Adams (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), p. 1217.

[103] Poulet, p. 1218.

times she unthinkingly squeezes the infant to her bosom. The first time it is "not so much by an impulse of motherly affection," but as an instinctive reflex endeavoring to "conceal a certain token" (p. 43). In the second instance, after returning from her reverie on the lifeless past, "she clutched the child so fiercely to her breast, that it sent forth a cry" (p. 47), whereby she knew that it was real. Again she makes the infant cry out when she recognizes her husband in the crowd. And finally during the long, thundering sermon of Rev. Wilson, she hushes the baby's wailing "mechanically, but seemed scarcely to sympathize with its trouble" (p. 54). No wonder the child held "up its little arms, with a half-pleased, half-plaintive murmur" (p. 53) to Arthur Dimmesdale upon hearing his gentle and sympathetic voice.

Thus, in spite of the fact that the relationship between Hester and these women is that of hostile adversaries, she and they have much in common. She is clearly of their blood in her physical vigor and apparently undeveloped sensibility. A special affinity is established between the heroine of the romance and this group of readers, a connection which helps to explain how merciless the colonists, led presumably by the feminine faction, can be in making Hester the scapegoat of their own guilt.

Jung explains that <u>concretism</u>, a mode "of thinking

and feeling which is the antithesis of abstraction,"[104] produces concepts so "embedded in the material transmitted by sense-perception," that they cannot be entertained as distinct entities, i.e., as ideas.[105]

> The disadvantage of concretism is the subjection of the [psychological] functions [i.e., thinking, feeling, intuition] to sensation. . . . This results in a bondage of the psychological functions to the senses, favouring the influence of sensuous facts at the expense of the psychic independence of the individual. So far as the recognition of facts is concerned this orientation is naturally of value, but not as regards the interpretation of facts and their relation to the individual.[106]

In order to raise literary response to the level of interpretation, the reader must transcend the merely personal dimension of response. Thus the freedom to construe the text according to the guiding principle of personal and immediate experience exacts a heavy cost upon both the ignominious mother and her hostile sisters. No different from the goodwives in her lack of human sympathy, Hester can no more comprehend the transpersonal reference of the letter than they. A prisoner of the flesh, as much as she is a prisoner of the ancient oak building, Hester is unable to transcend the physical boundaries of self-awareness and is thus debarred from a more universal view of her

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[104] Jung, Psychological Types, p. 698.

[105] Jung, Psychological Types, p. 696.

[106] Jung, Psychological Types, p. 699.

situation and from a more abstract understanding of the letter as a moral statement.

The tendency of many critics to focus upon the private character of Hester Prynne which emerges later in the novel--her warm and supportive love for Arthur and her sincere efforts to love and understand her strange little girl--results in a failure to see her clearly in this opening scene. In her tenacious adherence to an egocentered point of view, and in her obliviousness to the voice of the living letter, she stands out as the personification on a grand scale of the goodwives gathered around her beneath the scaffold at the moment when they, the propensity of the reading consciousness toward literal interpretation, overlook the universality of the text.

CHAPTER V

DIMMESDALE AND THE SAGES

Complementing the crude "feminine" segment of the reading colony, i.e., the groundlings below the stage, are the magistrates and ministers seated or standing upon the balcony of the meeting house. The first voice to be heard from this upper gallery is that of "the reverend and famous John Wilson, the eldest clergyman of Boston, [and] a great scholar, like most of his contemporaries in the profession" (p. 51). A man whose gray eyes were more "accustomed to the shaded light of his study" than the bold sunshine of the marketplace, he seemed a character who belonged in one of "the darkly engraved portraits which we see prefixed to old volumes of sermons" (p. 51) rather than in this arena where the issue is living human passion and its immediate consequences. Rev. Wilson and his young colleague seated beside him are the repositories of ultimate theoretical knowledge brought from the Old World, and, as exemplars of civilized thought and mores in the colony, they stand in sharp contrast to the almost barbaric women gathered below. Towering above those earthy matrons, these scholarly professionals attract the respect and even reverence of the masses. Having earned the right to exert an authoritative view over the tangled web of reality seen below, they operate in concert with

one seated "with four sergeants about his chair, bearing halberds, as a guard of honor" (p. 51)--the governing head of the colony, Governor Bellingham. Grouped together, these men embody the perspective which civilization brings to bear upon the text: hard-won conventions of thought and behavior which lend structure to the reader's more personal vision of the text.

In these men may be seen the reader's internal mechanism for applying conventions of understanding and response to the text. Partly out of habit, partly out of deliberation, the sages within the reader attempt to confer order upon an experience previously given over to runaway feeling. Builders of the scaffold upon which order within the community depends, they represent the structuring principle within literary understanding or, in Culler's words, "the underlying system of distinctions and conventions which makes . . . meaning possible."[107] It is only within the context of a "set of institutional conventions," Culler explains, that individual acts or objects at any level of culture acquire meaning:

> Confronted with a marriage ceremony or a game of football, for example, an observer from a culture where these did not exist could present an objective description of the actions which took place, but he would be unable to grasp their meaning and so would not be treating them as social or cultural phenomena. . . . Wherever there are two posts one can kick a ball between

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[107] Culler, p. 4.

> them but one can score a goal only within a certain institutionalized framework.[108]

In the traditions of language and literature, isolated expressions are meaningful only within the broad context of the total system within which they are uttered and heard or written and read. The collective framework within which particular experiences become symbolic is made up, Culler continues, of

> a . . . system of constitutive rules: rules that do not regulate behavior so much as create the possibility of particular forms of behavior. The rules of English enable sequences of sound to have meaning; they make it possible to utter grammatical or ungrammatical sentences.[109]

In The Scarlet Letter, the ponderous institution of social and religious rules headed up by the sages upon the balcony of the meetinghouse is analogous to the complex system of "semiotic conventions which enable [the reader] to read series of sentences or poems or novels endowed with shape and meaning."[110] This institution performs an invaluable social function in that, working within its goals and guidelines, the sages have founded a viable community in a wilderness setting, a body of individuals who may commune and communicate with one another because they hold in common a number of traditions, values, and goals.

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[108] Culler, pp. 4-5.

[109] Culler, p. 5.

[110] Culler, p. viii.

Like Culler's "system of constitutive rules," the ruling body of the Massachusetts Bay Colony cannot "regulate behavior"--the presence of the adulteress upon the scaffold denies their ability to prescribe the individual's experience of the text. Hester's richly personal and sensuous mode of aesthetic response exists alongside the socializing influence of the sages regardless of their power and authority. The sages do, however, provide a context within which Hester's experience acquires universal meaning. By labelling her act as an adulterous one, they call it forth from the untamed wilderness into the settled community that it may be "the object of . . . universal observation" (p. 48). By confining her within the "heavily timbered" and "antique" (p. 39) prison and then situating her atop the platform of the pillory where she may be addressed by those seated upon the meetinghouse balcony, they attempt to subdue her spirit of insubordination by returning her to the structuring centers of the community.

The representatives of religion and law seated upon the balcony have an abstract understanding of the letter which counterbalances the personal and all too often self-assertive intuition of citizens like the goodwives. The sentiments of these women offer a vivid glimpse of the riotous violence of which mob rule is capable if not controlled by some impersonal authority. "If," as one goodwife ominously asserts,

> the hussey stood up for judgment before us five, that are now here in a knot together, would she come off with a sentence as the worshipful magistrates have awarded? Marry, I trow not! (p. 42).

Personal reaction based on primitive instincts, if given free reign, can quickly become as ugly and cruel as these vixenly matrons. Hester's act of passion, when judged by the standards of her community, is no less an act of violence against one of the sacred pillars of society than what her peers comtemplate. This dangerous tendency toward gratification of uncontrolled personal instinct operates on the verge of what Krieger calls "the Manichaean face of reality"--the "contradictory mass of raging and resistant particulars that make up the raw edges of our moral experience."[111] In opposition to this chaos are "Universal principles of an objective morality," which form the

> veil that organized society or organized rebellion against society--that man in his social dimension--must hold before his vision if he is to permit himself to function, to believe in the legitimacy of his functioning. He must stalwartly stare at the veil and keep from looking beyond it--as if it constituted reality, all of reality. The veil may be rent in a thousand places by the violent clawings of the rumbling reality beneath; but moral man must fix on the nonholes, not daring to see through the static comfort of his illusory universals that permit action and the confident judgment that makes

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[111] Murray Krieger, "The Existential Basis of Contextual Criticism," in Critical Theory Since Plato, ed. Hazard Adams (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1971), p. 1229.

> decision possible. The veil of a generic, a stock language, seen by Coleridge as a veil of an imaginatively blinded vision, becomes also the veil that saves us from confronting the unique and unresolvable crises among unique persons, saves us from the paralyzing, too aware contemplation that blocks action, muddies the cleanness of decision, blurs the trim lines on the chart of universal judgment. As the veil of language prevents our symbolizing our unique experience, as the veil of vision prevents our having any unique experience, so the veil of morally binding universals prevents our daring not to judge, prevents our acknowledgment that uniqueness, with its apparent contradictions that preclude judgment, involves only the principle of automatic secession, of utter autonomy.[112]

Without the structuring power of the conventional in language and literature, the reader, like Hester, is "lost" in a darkened world of private fantasy. For this reason, the sages address themselves to the task of saving the woman's soul by leading her to confess the name of her child's father.

In discussing, within the context of literature, the same opposition between the individual and the conventional which Culler approaches from the point of view of linquistics, Frye offers the archetypal quest for the father as an analogy for the search for the truly conventional in a single work of literature or in literature as a whole. "The true father . . . of the poem," he says, "is the form of the poem itself" and "is much more

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[112] Krieger, "Existential Basis," p. 1229.

difficult to identify than the mother."[113] The father is the universal "shaping spirit"[114] within the literary which makes it communicable by making it conform with convention. Were the sages able to exact from Hester her unverbalized knowledge concerning the identity of the father of "the scarlet letter endowed with life" (p. 78), the townspeople would indeed see the point where her personal experience merged with the conventional, for Hester's paramour is one of the most highly revered guardians of tradition and culture within the community. Success in that endeavor is not, however, granted to the governing body of conventional rules and expectations seated within the reader's mind. The answer to the question posed as to who has fathered the text and the reader's experience of it is to come through the efforts of a character in whom Old World knowledge and conventional codes of meaning have an intensely personal relevance. A sage himself, he seconds the injunction of the ministers and magistrates when he demands "'Speak, woman! . . . Speak; and give your child a father!'" (p. 54). But because he is motivated by personal involvement with the woman who wears the letter, Hester's cuckolded husband is able to take the quest for

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[113] Frye, Anatomy, p. 98.

[114] Frye, Anatomy, p. 98.

Pearl's father out of the marketplace of universals to the private world of personal emotion and intuition.

In the meantime, the sages upon the meetinghouse balcony succeed in establishing a place for Hester's experience within the broad cultural context of universal morality. By assigning to her a conventional symbol, the letter of adultery, they make her "the figure, the body, the reality of sin" (p. 61). The letter becomes an abbreviated verbal statement of the long and thunderous "discourse on sin, in all its branches" (p. 54) which Mr. Wilson delivers to the multitude on the occasion of Hester's public shaming. The learned ministers and magistrates make the letter represent all subversive behavior, not merely Hester's particular act. If the reading which the sages arrive at were the only or the final understanding of the letter achieved in The Scarlet Letter, we would be justified in saying that they err too far on the side of generality in their interpretation. But because the ministers and magistrates represent only one of several modes of response dramatized in the romance, their attitude is balanced by the others and would appear to be merely a rather extreme case of what the novel suggests is a necessary part of the total reading process.

Looked at in isolation from the other reading modes, the balcony readers are, in the language of Krieger, "overmediators":

> . . . the overmediator is finally willing to freeze his object by spatializing its form, universalizing it by absorbing it into common formulas--models--broader than the work (or, in cases, broader than literature itself). This sense of the model is what is placed between the work and our private response to it, shaping both work and response to our awareness of that model.[115]

But what Krieger terms "overmediation" is perhaps a fault only if it dominates the reader's experience of the text. It seems likely from the allegory of reading implicit in The Scarlet Letter that reading, at its best, alternates between a number of response modes including overmediation.

The transformation of the reader's perception of the text which Krieger describes is graphically illustrated in the change that occurs in the letter's aspect during and following Rev. Wilson's sermon:

> So forcibly did he dwell upon this symbol, for the hour or more during which his periods were rolling over the people's heads, that it assumed new terrors in their imagination, and seemed to derive its scarlet hue from the flames of the infernal pit (p. 54).

Following the sermon, when Hester is led back to prison, "It was whispered, by those who peered after her, that the scarlet letter threw a lurid gleam along the dark passage-way of the interior" (p. 54). Wilson's interpretation of her letter as the symbol of sin has caused it to take on these hellish properties in the eyes of the

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[115] Krieger, "Existential Basis," pp. 1235-36.

community. Thus the initial reading of the letter, an intensely blissful escape from market-place mentality, gives way to conventional interpretation. Now the aesthetic qualities of the reader's primary view of the letter, a view which Hester embodies, is eclipsed, but not destroyed, by the mediating vision of Christian morality and myth imposed from without. As she reemerges from the prison to begin her "daily custom" (p. 60) under the sentence of the letter, Hester's beauty, pride, and free spirit are seen no more, having been driven into hiding beneath the formal cap, coarse gray gown, and submissive mien which she thenceforth wears before the world. The townspeople take no interest in her:

> Every gesture, every word, and even the silence of those with whom she came in contact, implied, and often expressed, that she was banished, and as much alone as if she inhabited another sphere, or communicated with the common nature by other senses and organs than the rest of humankind (p. 64).

The former "wild and picturesque peculiarity" (p. 44) of Hester's personality and appearance have merely been driven into other channels of expression. Her needlework, especially the clothing she sews for Pearl, embodies the aesthetic luxuriance which Hester no longer expresses in her own person. But, most importantly, this quality and the passionate individualism which characterized the former Hester appear in the personality of Pearl. It seems as though the sages, in applying to Hester's

particular experience the universalizing interpretation of Christian doctrine, have initiated the rechannelling of the aesthetic response into a subjective center in which the reconciliation of the personal with the conventional is potentially possible, for Pearl is the biological reconciliation of her parents. Were she to know her father as she does her mother, and were her character to reflect his reverence for tradition and his sympathy for mankind even as it early on reflects her mother's defiant and haughty spirit, Pearl would become the reconciliation of her parents' subjective response modes.

The young minister bears a relationship to his male cohorts similar to that which Hester bears to the goodwives. As one "who had come from one of the great English universities, bringing all the learning of the age into our wild forest-land" (p. 52), Arthur Dimmesdale is a promising custodian of the older civilization's great heritage of scholarly lore. Though he is much younger than his peers upon the balcony, his character has the conservative cast which renders him well suited to occupy a position beside them. His is

> an order of mind that impelled itself powerfully along the track of a creed, and wore its passage continually deeper with the lapse of time. In no state of society would he have been what is called a man of liberal views; it would always be essential to his peace to feel the pressure of a faith about him, supporting, while it confined him within its iron framework (p. 91).

Like the elder clergyman Rev. Wilson, a man who suppresses his "kind and genial spirit" (p. 51) that his character may more closely conform to the clerical image of awesome sobriety, Dimmesdale is engaged in the difficult task of repressing natural human feeling that the outward appearance of sanctity, if not the inner reality, may be his. A man thoroughly devoted to ideal forms of thought and conduct, he strictly regulates his natural impulses to insure their convergence with a most unnatural set of externally imposed rules. In the seven years following his single grievous violation of "one of the most sacred" of society's "generally received laws" (p. 143),

> he had watched, with morbid zeal and minuteness, not his acts,-- for those it was easy to arrange,--but each breath of emotion, and his every thought (p. 143).

By implementing his "vast power of self-restraint" (p. 52), Dimmesdale earns the right to sit upon the platform with the governor of the colony, for regulations and principles of thought govern the young minister's being even more rigidly than the laws of Massachusetts Bay govern the people.

Dimmesdale's devotion to his profession has not, however, destroyed his ability to enter into passionate, unmediated experience. His pre-narrative transgression of social and moral law is evidence enough that once, anyway, he had the ability to feel and to enjoy and to respond as a free agent unregulated by rational codes of order. The

resurgence of his reckless pursuit of unrestrained joy many years later in his fateful forest interview with Hester indicates that he never lost that ability. Thus, his is a special case within the general class of sages to which he belongs. Though he occupies a seat upon the elevated platform of the meetinghouse from which the impersonal machinery of social order attempts to quell rebellion by defining it in accordance with a general lexicon of moral behavior, he is not wholly devoted to its cause. Education and temperament have qualified him to wield universals, to pass judgment, and to regulate human vision and behavior as do they, but not so totally without reference to the special pleading of the heart as is their tendency.

He maintains his right to participate in the social endeavor to tame lawless experience, but he participates with a difference. Whereas the other wise and powerful ones intend to destroy the immediacy of Hester's passion and the autonomy of her personal experience by identifying them with some universal moral principle, Dimmesdale makes allowances for Hester's special feelings. When his turn to speak to the adulteress arises, he avoids the error of forcing experience to defer to authority and gives Hester an opportunity to conform to the demands of conventional wisdom without forcing her compliance. Addressing her from the balcony of the meetinghouse, he declares:

> "If thou feelest it to be for thy soul's peace, and that thy earthly punishment will thereby be made more effectual to salvation, I charge thee to speak out the name of thy fellow-sinner and fellow-sufferer! Be not silent from any mistaken pity and tenderness for him; for, believe me, Hester, though he were to step down from a high place, and stand there beside thee, on thy pedestal of shame, yet better were it so, than to hide a guilty heart through life. What can thy silence do for him, except it tempt him---yea, compel him, as it were--to add hypocrisy to sin? 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!" (p. 53).

To be sure, Dimmesdale's respect for Hester's right to privacy is based, in great measure, on his own dread of exposure, but genuine sympathy for the woman with whom he has shared existence in so intimate a way undoubtedly enters into his generous treatment of her also. Regardless, however, of his personal motive for handling her so delicately, Dimmesdale manages to avoid the fault of overmediation by consulting his personal experience before applying <u>a priori</u> principles of interpretation and judgment. Dimmesdale's struggle to balance his two roles as secret lover of Hester Prynne and dauphin of the colonial establishment illustrates the conflict inherent in the reader's committment to a personally gratifying response on the one hand and to conventional approaches on the other. To touch the germinating ground of experience in a brief but passionate encounter with the matriarch of

flesh, without becoming so enmeshed in the world of sense as to lose one's right to contemplate experience and to exercise rational judgment of it; to devote oneself to the high calling of truth without denying the insistent reality of irrational powers which support life and animate ideas: such is the tortuous task faced by Dimmesdale and by that "masculine" faculty within the reader which, like the minister, aspires to know truth. Only by maintaining his distance from Hester can Dimmesdale play the part of her judge and advocate before the people. He remains aloof from Hester and the sensuous mode she represents that he may pursue his professional quest for transcendent ideals, for were he "to step down from [his] high place, and stand there beside [Hester]" (p. 53), his privileged position as spiritual teacher and guide would be immediately revoked. By applying the viewpoint of a professional to the experience he and Hester have shared, Dimmesdale achieves the overview of general vision upon which meaningful interpretation depends. Thus, in the attempt to render experience comprehensible, the immediate and sensible texture of the living text are necessarily abandoned--like Hester and Pearl upon the scaffold. In Hawthorne's young divine can be seen that part of the reader which, though intimately bound to the sensuous mode of experience, stands apart from it in accordance with its concern for authoritative principles of interpretation and judgment.

The minister's dissociation from "the scarlet letter endowed with life" (p. 76) and from the capacity, embodied in Hester, to yield to the text's appeal to the senses and to the literal imagination is analogous to that separation of the critical faculty from the concrete presence of the text which Poulet refers to as the criticism of detachment.[116] This critical stance, Poulet maintains, achieves "maximum lucidity" by confirming "a separation instead of a union"[117] between reader and text. The "critical language" of such a reader, according to Poulet, "would attempt deliberately to strip the literary language of anything concrete."[118] In his public exhortation that Hester name her lover, Dimmesdale registers a veiled request that she not utter his name. Moreover, his own references to the partner of her sin are scrupulously geared to be vague and universally applicable lest he implicate himself. Thus he dares to describe for the public the miserable depravity of Hester's silent lover, baring his own tortured heart in the process, secure in the gamble that the people will understand his words as evidence of their minister's thorough knowledge of human nature in

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[116] Poulet refers specifically to the criticism of Maurice Planchot, p. 1218.

[117] Poulet, p. 1218.

[118] Poulet, p. 1218.

general rather than as evidence of his having some personal experience in the matter.

This critical attitude of detachment, according to Poulet, is the opposite of sensuous or mimetic criticism[119] which

> is . . . able to provide an admirable equivalent of the vital substratum which underlies all thought, and yet seems incapable of attaining and expressing thought itself. This criticism is both helped and hindered by the language which it employs; helped, insofar as this language allows it to express the sensuous life in its original state, where it is still almost impossible to distinguish between subject and object; and yet hindered, too, because this language, too congealed and opaque, does not lend itself to analysis, and because the subjectivity which it evokes and describes is as though forever mired in its objects.[120]
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> . . . . . .
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> Thus criticism seems to oscillate between two possibilities: a union without comprehension, and a comprehension without union.[121]

These two modes of interaction with the text are richly demonstrated by Hester and Arthur. One is engaged in a sensuous act of mimetic expression, physically bound to a linguistic creation that speaks the meaningless language of beauty, and holding in her arms her "expression of the sensuous life in its original form," an infant in whom subject and object are unquestionably fused. The other

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[119] Poulet refers specifically to the criticism of Jean-Pierre Richard, p. 1217.

[120] Poulet, pp. 1217-18.

[121] Poulet, p. 1218.

stands detached upon the balcony of the meetinghouse as upon the superstructure of linguistic abstraction, speaking the hypersignificant language of absolutes as conventionally understood.

It is only right, then, that when Dimmesdale shifts the burden of confession to Hester, she "shook her head" (p. 53). It is not within this woman to command one of his ghostly brotherhood. Her domain is the experience of particulars, not the knowledge of universals; thus she will not acknowledge that he is her lover as long as he is identified as the ethereal young minister of Boston, guardian of universal truths.

The infant consciousness of the symbol <u>is</u> moved toward recognition of the particular hidden within the universal reference. Upon hearing his voice, ". . . the poor baby . . . directed its hitherto vacant gaze towards Mr. Dimmesdale, and held up its little arms, with a half pleased, half plaintive murmur" (p. 53). But the child's expression of recognition is inarticulate babble; its appropriateness is understood neither by her nor by the crowd of sages and goodwives who hear it. The incomprehensibility of her response is analogous to the obscurity of Dimmesdale's appeal to Hester. Because the nature of the relationship between Pearl and the minister remains unidentified except on a dark, subliminal level, common

awareness is stirred by the feeling vibrating in Dimmesdale's voice but, like Pearl, is unable to rise out of a clouded kind of preconscious response:

> The young pastor's voice was tremulously sweet, rich, deep, and broken. The feeling that it so evidently manifested, rather than the direct purport of the words, caused it to vibrate within all hearts, and brought the listeners into one accord of sympathy. Even the poor baby, at Hester's bosom, was affected by the same influence; for it directed its higherto vacant gaze towards Mr. Dimmesdale, and help [sic] up its little arms, with a half pleased, half plaintive murmur. So powerful seemed the minister's appeal, that the people could not believe but that Hester Prynne would speak out the guilty name; or else that the guilty one himself, in whatever high or lowly place he stood, would be drawn forth by an inward and inevitable necessity, and compelled to ascend the scaffold (p. 53).

Small interprets Dimmesdale's word play as the self-serving tactics of a neurotic for whom words become a "substitute for the very impulses they were intended to control."[122] Through them, Small contends, Dimmesdale expresses aggression against his own ideals, gratifies forbidden sexual desires, and revels in a fantasy of holiness which his past prevents from becoming a reality.[123]

> Because his self-esteen depends so much on living up to a nearly angelic ego-ideal, his sermons attempt to recover that self-esteem destroyed by adultery. Somewhat paradoxically, language also allows him to release impulses

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[122] Michael Small, "Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter: Arthur Dimmesdale's Manipulation of Language," American Imago 37 (Spring, 1980), 117.

[123] Small, pp. 116-17.

> from what Chillingworth calls the minister's "strong animal nature," which is incompatible with his ideal self.[124]

Small concludes that Dimmesdale's gift of eloquence does not lead to fruitful connection with others but isolates him. In this same vein, Edward Davidson contends that Dimmesdale shows himself finally to be a solipsist whose universe consists of himself and God alone, who has "separated himself from those to whom he was most intimately bound,"[125] and who became "that ultimate criminal in Hawthorne's order of humanity, the outcast of the universe."[126] Porte posits the related view that Dimmesdale's "fantastic pride" disables him in his quest for truth and finally damns him.[127] Although Hawthorne's rich portrayal of Dimmesdale as a psychologically viable character lends itself to this kind of psychoanalysis and ad hominem criticism, such analysis tends to preclude the view that Dimmesdale's ironic, even dishonest, manipulation of language is, in the context of the literary process, precisely the mode of verbalization upon which poetic understanding depends.

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[124] Small, p. 113.

[125] Edward H. Davidson, "Dimmesdale's Fall," New England Quarterly, 36 (Sept., 1963), p. 369.

[126] Davidson, p. 370.

[127] Joel Porte, The Romance in America (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1969), p. 111.

In his discussion of the "problem of cognition" which metaphoric expression poses for the reader-critic, Brooks[128] considers the question of how poetic (and, by extension, literary) truth can be interpreted. The problem, as Brooks sees it, is that the "functional metaphors"[129] of literature are metaphors which constitute content expressible in no other form (cf. Jung's "symbols"). Efforts to reduce poetic truth to statements of meaning are guilty of the "heresy of paraphrase."[130] Brooks' solution to the problem which faces would-be interpreters is similar, he points out, to that proposed by W. M. Urban, whom Brooks quotes:

> We have here one of the most difficult problems in connection with language and cognition, as indeed in the entire theory of knowledge. We are apparently faced with a dilemma. If we are to interpret the "sense" of the symbol we must expand it, and this must be in terms of literal sentences. If, on the other hand, we thus expand it we lose the "sense" or value of the symbol <u>as symbol</u>. The solution of this paradox seems to me to lie in an [<u>sic</u>] theory of interpretation of the symbol. It does not consist in substituting <u>literal</u> for symbol sentences, in other words substituting "blunt" truth for symbolic truth, but rather in deepening and enriching the meaning of the symbol.[131]

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[128] Cleanth Brooks, <u>The Well Wrought Urn</u> (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1947).

[129] Brooks, p. 260.

[130] See Brooks' chapter by that title.

[131] Brooks, p. 260, quoting from Urban's <u>Language and Reality</u>.

Just how "expansion" of poetic symbols can be achieved so as to enrich and deepen the symbol's meaning is illustrated, so Brooks hopes, by his style of criticism. It is certainly not the intention of the present study to advocate Brooks' or any other critic's methodology as the proper one, for surely it is through expansion along many different critical paths that poetic symbols can be maximally enriched. Nevertheless, Brooks' penchant for illuminating poetic irony seems particularly well suited to the mode of "critical" discourse practiced by Arthur Dimmesdale.

"If we persist in approaching the poem [any poem] as primarily a rational statement," Brooks explains, "we ought not to be surprised if the statements seem to be presented to us always in the ironic mode."[132] Irony enters poetic language because it presents the complete view of human life and our world: It returns us to "the unity of the experience itself as man knows it in his own experience,"[133] and is thus fraught with paradox and ambiguity. If we think of Dimmesdale as a part of the reader-critic, and if we view his discourse as revealing one tendency within the interpretive process, it would appear that compliance with the pre-propositional nature of literature's

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[132] Brooks, p. 211.

[133] Brooks, p. 213.

expression of truth results in critical language that reflects the complexity and subtle ambiguity of the text's tone. Thus it seems unjust to condemn Dimmesdale's manner of discourse, with Small and Davidson, as symtomatic of the minister's attempt to obscure the truth and block communication between his congregation and his own heart.

Dimmesdale recognizes the partial validity of propositional statements like those so easily formulated by his moralistic elders in their public condemnation of Hester's "sin," and he incorporates these into his own discourse. But he complicates the matter by embedding his assertions in the broad context of sensuous and affective responses which deny the literal truth of what his words say. Thus when he confesses to being "altogether vile, a viler companion of the vilest, the worst of sinners, an abomination" (p. 105), he wins for himself the congregation's awe and worshipful respect:

> They heard it all, and did but reverence him the more. They little guessed what deadly purport lurked in those self-condemning words. "The godly youth!" said they among themselves. "The saint on earth! Alas, if he discern such sinfulness in his own white soul, what horrid spectacle would he behold in thine or mine!" (p. 106).

When the "content" of poetry is rendered into the language of assertion, "the so-called blunt truth," according to Urban, "has a way of becoming an untruth."[134] A similar

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[134] Brooks, p. 262, quoting Urban.

metamorphosis occurs in the enriched context of human sympathy and passion which informs Dimmesdale's pulpit confessions: "He had spoken the very truth, and transformed it into the veriest falsehood" (p. 106).

Thus though his pride may appear to be overweening and his sin of hypocrisy grave, these aspects of Dimmesdale's character are moral weaknesses only when the minister is judged according to realistic social/moral principles. When his "errors" are viewed as a part of the interior process of literary understanding, however, they lose their dark moral coloring and seem justified strategies in the complex pattern instinctively adhered to by the reading mind when complete understanding, rather than the derivation of concise and easily applied abstractions, is sought.[135] His majestic pride, his hypocrisy, and the tone of "passion and pathos" (p. 172) in which all his sermons are delivered qualify his assertions concerning sin and damnation, pointing his listeners toward a complex of attitudes and responses rather than toward any one simple judgment.

In Creation and Recreation, Frye praises Oscar Wilde's essay "The Truth of Masks" as having "said a great

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[135] Urban's distinction between the language of science and that of art is relevant: As quoted by Brooks, "In contrast to scientific symbolism, the object 'in other regions of symbolism, such as those of art and religion . . . is not at all to operate or predict, but to understand" (p. 263).

deal of what modern theories of criticism have been annotating in more garbled language ever since."[136] In this essay, Wilde discusses the necessity of duplicitous language in the interpretive venture:

> For in art there is no such thing as a universal truth. A Truth in art is that whose contradiction is also true. And just as it is only in art-criticism, and through it, that we can apprehend the Platonic theory of ideas, so it is only in art-criticism, and through it, that we can realize Hegel's system of contraries. The truths of metaphysics are the truths of masks.[137]

The peculiar power which Dimmesdale's use of language has over his audience confirms the appropriateness of his style to the task of conveying literary experience, for the spell which he casts over all who hear him speak seems to recreate the spell cast by a literary text when its reader enters its special sphere of influence. The uncanny power of his discourse first makes itself felt as he publicly exhorts Hester to confess her lover's identity:

> The young pastor's voice was tremulously sweet, rich, deep, and broken. The feeling that it so evidently manifested, rather than the direct purport of the words, caused it to vibrate within all hearts, and brought the listeners into one accord of sympathy . . . (p. 53).

His power to move the community by means of his discourse

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[136] Frye, Creation, p. 5.

[137] "The Truth of Masks," in Literary Criticism of Oscar Wilde, ed. Stanley Weintraub (Lincoln, Nebraska: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1968), pp. 157-58.

grows stronger as the romance proceeds until the minister is finally said to be gifted with the "Tongue of Flame"

> . . . symbolizing, it would seem, not the power of speech in foreign and unknown languages, but that of addressing the whole human brotherhood in the heart's native language (p. 104).

This gift is derived, the narrator tells us, from the minister's contact with the representative of lowly sense experience, Hester Prynne. Dimmesdale's merger with her has awakened in him a kind of understanding available only to creatures of the dust for whom immediate sense perception and primitive emotional response, without the intervention of reason, sum up experience. The "true saintly fathers" of Dimmesdale's profession, though "so apostolic" in every other way,

> lacked Heaven's last and rarest attestation to their office, the Tongue of Flame. They would have vainly sought--had they ever dreamed of seeking--to express the highest truths through the humblest medium of familiar words and images (p. 104).

Lacking any real involvement with the sensuous and passionate mode of response, they could not express their view of literary truth in genuinely natural language even if they attempted to do so.

The young minister, however, having formed a secret alliance with the matriarch of this form of sensuous response, has the power to inform supersensible principles with the heat of heart-felt passion. In language which weds notions of divine truth and virtue with the sensuous

complaint of ineffable longing, Dimmesdale awakens within common awareness an imaginative capability whereby the intellect may extrapolate universal principles and ultimate or, one might say, divine essences from the experience of the senses. He has awakened within common awareness that symbolic attitude which finds divinity in a man of clay and urgent meaning in words of falsehood.

Dimmesdale feeds the credulous innocence of his flock with pseudo-disenchanted notions which merely enhance the myth he professes to deflate: "The minister well knew--subtle, but remorseful hypocrite that he was!--the light in which his vague confession would be viewed" (p. 106). His perfunctory denial of their faith in him does not alter their attitude because he stops short of altering the fundamental position which he holds relative to them. The context of his self-condemning words is still the venerable pulpit and the holy church. Although he speaks to them of his own wickedness, he speaks to them with the authority of their saintly minister. Thus he maintains his access to the sacred space within which their belief in him is sheltered.

Fletcher, expanding upon Frye's interpretation of the temple and labyrinth motifs in literature, explains that the traditional House of God is a shrine for symbolic awareness:

> Religious vision sees the temple permitting a perfected symbolic action, as man engages in the ancient rituals of his faith, so that life takes

> on holiness with the church walls. This we can test easily enough--the feeling of both space and time, when we enter the shrine, is one of removal from the ordinary world we live in, into a life beyond the clock and the marketplace.[138]

As the community's perceived link with the spiritual world, Dimmesdale is the guardian of the sacred space within the reader's being where language is ordained to evoke unspeakable mystery.

Delivered within the context of assumptions which the reading community brings to the sanctuary, Dimmesdale's declarations, far from shaking belief, deepen and vastly enrich it. Supported by his paradoxical logic, the faith of the congregation grows to embrace a principle which is more than either simple good or simple evil alone. Through him a vision of the mystery of paradox becomes available to their ordinary awareness. They are being trained to accept the impossible, to believe in spite of damning evidence, to carry into the glaring arena of the marketplace mysteries which normally survive only in the holy of holies, i.e., that the logic of contradiction is meaningless in the larger context of things, and that opposites like good and evil are merely simplistic tools which consciousness is obligated to utilize when contemplating an essence whose nature is unknowable.

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[138] Angus Fletcher, The Prophetic Moment (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 21.

Dimmesdale embodies that faculty within the reader which, hallowing within the sacred space of the symbolic attitude what sense perceives and what affections crave, points ordinary awareness from mortal perception and response to their immortal counterparts. Thus, the father bears an opposite but complementary relation to the chthonic mother in Hawthorne's allegory of the reading mind. Introduced in the narrative as "a being who felt himself quite astray and at a loss in the pathway of human existence" (p. 52), this "godly youth" (p. 106) has an air of otherworldliness about him. His speech, say some, affects them like that "of an angel" (p. 53). Roger Chillingworth later says to him: "'of all men whom I have known, . . . you are he whose body is the closest conjoined, and imbued, and identified, so to speak, with the spirit whereof it is the instrument'" (p. 100).

Chillingworth possesses information which would destroy the town's faith in their minister. His willingness to permit popular belief in the minister's piety is a form of silent consent to the deception which Dimmesdale is perpetrating. From a purely rational standpoint, the one taken by Chillingworth, the illusion of holiness which Dimmesdale casts about himself is a fraud. The physician--and the minister himself in his bitter moments--would say that the people are utterly deluded when they look up to the pulpit "as if the light of heaven were

shining from" (p. 137) Dimmesdale's face. Nevertheless, Dimmesdale continues to play at being the minister of heavenly truth.

Dimmesdale's role in the romance suggests that he is the archetypal "father" described by Frye: the father of the text, its universal shaping spirit elsewhere personified as "some god or lord, whether Apollo, Dionysus, Eros, Christ or (as in Milton) the Holy Spirit. Est deus in nobis, Ovid says."[139] In the world of The Scarlet Letter, Dimmesdale performs the function of revealing universal form, and though he merely plays at being the young "divine" (p. 169), his game is deadly serious. Even as literary discourse is based upon, in Krieger's terms, a "verbal game," a game which turns "the word into the Word,"[140] Dimmesdale is obsessed, throughout the romance, with a kind of "lurid playfulness" (p. 111) whereby, "he put[s] a cheat upon himself" (p. 106) and the town by masquerading as a holy man. He dares to use the finite, flawed word as the mouthpiece of the Word, i.e., to speak in such a way that "the grand and solemn music of [Heaven's] oracles" might be transmitted "through so foul an organ-pipe as he" (p. 160). Literature, Krieger

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[139] Frye, Anatomy, p. 98.

[140] Krieger, "Mediation, Language, and Vision in the Reading of Literature," in Critical Theory Since Plato, ed. Hazard Adams (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1971), p. 1248.

maintains, challenges us to believe that it can perform this "miracle," but "the rational covert guide that threatens to undo the mask by revealing it as no more than mask undercuts the miracle of metaphor."[141] It is in this struggle between the reader's rational intellect and his instinctive propensity to use language imaginatively--and to believe in it--that Chillingworth and Dimmesdale are engaged. In actual reading experiences, belief in or absorption by the symbolic language of the text is an intermittent phenomenon rather than a sustained experience like that dramatized in The Scarlet Letter. But in the romance as in actual reading, belief is never wholehearted. Even when part of the mind is swept away by the appealing vision of a transcendent reality dwelling in the language of the text, the "rational covert guide" is aware that the vision is the product of someone's craft.

As Hester Prynne is material parent of the scarlet letter, Arthur Dimmesdale is spiritual parent. Together they represent the "mutually exclusive" modes of criticism identified by Poulet as "penetration by the senses" and "penetration by the reflective consciousness."[142] Poulet explores the possibility that the two may be combined in a critical approach which makes use of both "through a kind

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[141] Krieger, "Mediation," p. 1248.

[142] Poulet, p. 1219.

of reciprocation and alternation."[143] Such a mode would be "sometimes intimate, sometimes detached" and would pass through "all the degrees of identification and nonidentification."[144] When Hawthorne's romance is viewed as an allegory of the reading mind, it shows that both modes of vision, as represented by Hester and Arthur, operate simultaneously. Though they are fundamentally distinct from one another, they intersect in the reader in the being of his infant consciousness of the text, even as Hester and Arthur are conjoined in their daughter Pearl.

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[143] Poulet, referring specifically to the criticism of Jean Starobinski, p. 1219.

[144] Poulet, p. 1219.

CHAPTER VI

PEARL

The same duality which is evident in the contrasted natures of Hester and Dimmesdale emerges in the description of Pearl's gestation:

> Hester could only account for the child's character . . . by recalling what she herself had been, during that momentous period while Pearl was imbibing her soul from the spiritual world, and her bodily frame from its material of earth. The mother's impassioned state had been the medium through which were transmitted to the unborn infant the rays of its moral life; and, however white and clear originally, they had taken the deep stains of crimson and gold, the fiery lustre, the black shadow, and the untempered light, of the intervening substance (pp. 68-69).

One dimension of the child's being, that which is felt by the senses, Pearl has drawn from her mother. From the Bostonians' point of view, i.e., from the point of view typical of ordinary awareness, Pearl's maternal parent is readily known. An altogether tangible presence, Hester is never absent from the child, so that the origin of Pearl's beauty, passionate nature, and mortality is clearly traceable to her mother. The counterpart of Pearl's natural parent, however, is not available for inspection by the senses of the Bostonian observers. Invisible and mysterious, he is one whose identity and nature can only be surmised. Failing to identify him, the townspeople supply two related surrogates. The popular imagination, on the one hand, supposes that the child is a demon progeny, that

her father is the "Prince of the Air" (p. 172). The more "enlightened" view is that Pearl's "Heavenly Father" sent her, fatherless, into the world. Both suppositions characterize the father as someone supernatural, and it is by no accident that the romance characterizes the real father as the town's expert in matters spiritual. Standing on their respective pedestals of eminence, Hester on the shameful scaffold of the pillory and Arthur on the meetinghouse balcony reserved for dignitaries and clerics, the two are singular representatives of some basic polarities in human experience. Sensuous and metaphysical, adulteress and priest, woman and man, the pair are opposites, but like the poles of a magnet, opposites that "belong to one another" (p. 112).

As the connecting link between her two parents, Pearl reconciles the concrete particular, so richly personified in Hester, and the mysteries of soul-felt universals, embodied in the "godly youth" of Boston. In her the tangible and the intangible, corpus et anima, fuse. As the synthesis of materiality and life-giving spirit, she is Coleridge's "I am," in which "object and subject, being and knowing, are identical, each involving and supposing the other."[145]

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[145] Samuel Tayor Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, in Selected Poetry and Prose of Coleridge, ed. Donald A. Stauffer (New York: Random House, 1951), p. 248.

"Pearl would seem to be the most enigmatic child in literature," wrote Barbara Garlitz in her survey of one-hundred years of criticism on the daughter of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale.[146] Artificial and natural, angelic and demonic, endearing and odious, Pearl's image changes with each different critical point of view, as though what we focus upon when we look at her is not a pearl but a multi-faceted gem. The variety of interpretations is largely due to the "mutability" (p. 68) of Pearl's character: she "was imbued with a spell of infinite variety; in this one child there were many children" (p. 68). She refuses to submit docilely to critical analysis just as she refuses to conform to social principles of child behavior in the romance:

> The child could not be made amenable to rules. In giving her existence, a great law had been broken; and the result was a being, whose elements were beautiful and brilliant, but all in disorder; or with an order peculiar to themselves, amidst which the point of variety and arrangement was difficult or impossible to be discovered (p. 68).

The analogy between her intractibility and that of the text is inescapable, for the narrator explicitly equates the child and the letter: she is "the scarlet letter in another form; the scarlet letter endowed with life" (p. 76). Criticism regarding Pearl has placed more emphasis on the equivalence established between Pearl and the

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[146] "Pearl: 1850-1955," PMLA 72 (1957), 689.

letter in this famous definition than upon the very important qualification it makes. Pearl is not the text per se; she is the text endowed with life. Since the text does not live except in the mind of its reader,[147] it seems natural to regard Pearl as the living consciousness which the text engenders in the reader.

In his description of the reading process, Poulet explains the spell which a text casts upon the reader as the usurpation of the reader's consciousness by an alien subject. Though Poulet at first identifies the subject that takes over the reader as the mind of the writer,[148] he qualifies this definition by saying that it is not the author as he can be biographically defined in "the disordered totality of his outer experiences" or even the author as he is expressed "in the aggregate, better organized and concentrated totality, which is one of his writings," because "the subject which presides over the work can exist only in the work."[149] Finally, Poulet alters his preliminary definition and identifies the usurping subject as the text:

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[147] It lives in the author, too, but only after it is written, i.e., after it exists as a text. When the author confronts it then, he is one of its readers.

[148] Poulet, p. 1215.

[149] Poulet, p. 1216.

> It is the work which traces in me the very boundaries within which this consciousness will define itself. It is the work which forces on me a series of mental objects and creates in me a network of words, beyond which, for the time being, there will be no room for other mental objects or for other words. And it is the work, finally, which, not satisfied thus with defining the content of my consciousness, takes hold of it, appropriates it, and makes of it that I which, from one end of my reading to the other, presides over the unfolding of the work, of the single work which I am reading.
>
> And so the work forms the temporary mental substance which fills my consciousness. . . .
> . . . . . .
> I give it not only existence, but awareness of existence. And so I ought not to hesitate to recognize that so long as it is animated by this vital inbreathing inspired by the art of reading, a work of literature becomes (at the expense of the reader whose life it suspends) a sort of human being, that it is a mind conscious of itself and constituting itself in me as the subject of its own subjects.[150]

Hawthorne has given us, in Pearl, a dramatization of such a "human being," a creature who is the text, but the text endowed with life borrowed from the reader.

Because she is a growing child, Pearl would seem to represent textual understanding as a dynamic, developmental process. From her earliest weeks of life, the narrator tells us, she is irresistibly drawn to Hester's letter, her mother's densely textured and unintelligible interpretation of the creative act to which Pearl's being is intimately linked. Pearl's understanding of the text is necessarily preconscious and unarticulated:

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[150] Poulet, p. 1216.

> The very first thing which she had noticed, in her life, was--what?--not the mother's smile, responding to it, as other babies do, by that faint, embryo smile of the little mouth . . . . By no means! But that first object of which Pearl seemed to become aware was--shall we say it?--the scarlet letter on Hester's bosom! One day, as her mother stooped over the cradle, the infant's eyes had been caught by the glimmering of the gold embroidery about the letter; and, putting up her little hand, she grasped at it, smiling . . . with a decided gleam that gave her face the look of a much older child (p. 72).

Powerfully illustrated here is the fundamental urge toward realization and mastery of the literal and concrete surface of the text, an urge which brings its own joyful reward however meager the enlightenment. But Pearl's search for meaning is not to be satisfied by her mother's letter, representing, as it does, merely the first stage of interpretation. Neither it nor the mother who embroidered it can answer the questions which Pearl's expanding consciousness raises. As she matures, the child's curiosity concerning the letter becomes verbally pointed: "'What does the letter mean, mother?'" (p. 130). Her intuition concerning the letter's relevance to an ambiguous context outside its immediate sphere of applicability, accordingly, grows more profound: "'Why does the minister keep his hand over his heart?'" (p. 130).

The answers to these questions lie outside the world which Pearl inhabits as her mother's child. In a sense, she is asking the right questions but to the wrong person. Her mother's mouth is stopped. "'Thou must gather thine

own sunshine. I have none to give thee'" (p. 83), Hester tells Pearl when the child begs her mother for the light sparkling from the glass-bespeckled stucco of the Governor's mansion. The enlightenment implicit in this structure of conventional wisdom and law is beyond Hester's grasp. The mother's mode of interpretation is the dumb beauty of scarlet cloth and gold thread. Through it she has "said" all she can say about the text to Pearl already. Thus Pearl's vision is locked within the confines of a fundamentally concrete experience of the letter. From birth, she has known it as inextricably attached to the mother of her own flesh. Not until she is able to see the letter's existence in another dimension, that is, upon the breast (though not concretely so) of her saintly father, will she be liberated from her entrapment in the densely textured world of sense perception and initiated by her intellectual and articulate father into mature processes of cognition whereby she may experience, in a more abstract way, the "meaning" of the text.

Until that time she exists as a creature of confusion:

> . . . a being, whose elements were perhaps beautiful and brilliant, but all in disorder; or with an order peculiar to themselves, amidst which the point of variety and arrangement was difficult or impossible to be discovered (p. 68).

Hester despairs of ever understanding her child. The challenge of abstracting Pearl's principle of being, like

"the task [of disciplining the child] was beyond her skill" (p. 69):

> The mother felt like one who has evoked a spirit, but, by some irregularity in the process of conjuration, has failed to win the masterword that should control this new and incomprehensible intelligence (p. 70).

As the understanding which exists in Pearl in potentia struggles against its dear adversary--the matrix of flesh from which it has itself sprung--it abuses and confounds the sensuous mode of perception as if denying to literalism or concretism the right to dominate awareness. Like the child seeking independence from a parent who has nurtured her in her infancy, nascent critical awareness labors to free itself from a critical language that, like the mimetic criticism described by Poulet, is too sensuous and metaphoric, "too congealed and opaque"[151] to express a thought clearly. It is as if Pearl senses that the mode of response made available to her by her mother is, in Poulet's words, "somewhat incomplete in spite of its remarkable successes," that "forever mired in its objects" it "does not lend itself to analysis"[152] of the kind necessary if she is to grow into a mature being who knows herself and her reason for being. At such times Pearl seems inhuman, otherworldly:

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[151] Poulet, p. 1218.

[152] Poulet, p. 1218.

> She seemed rather an airy sprite, which after playing its fantastic sports for a little while upon the cottage-floor, would flit away with a mocking smile. Whenever that look appeared in her wild, bright, deeply black eyes, it invested her with a strange remoteness and intangibility; it was as if she were hovering in the air and might vanish, like a glimmering light that comes we know not whence, and goes we know not whither (p. 69).

The mother characteristically responds by seeking to restore the child to the world of sensation and familiar emotion:

> Hester was constrained to rush towards the child,--to pursue the little elf in the flight which she invariably began,--to snatch her to her bosom, with a close pressure and earnest kisses,--not so much from overflowing love, as to assure herself that Pearl was flesh and blood, and not utterly delusive (p. 69).

Hester is "heart-smitten at this bewildering and baffling spell, that so often came between herself and her sole treasure" (p. 70). Thus the reader's nascent understanding of the text may, in its instinctive recognition that there is something more in the literary experience than the response of the senses and literal imagination to what is concretely present in the text, rebels against the sensuous mode of knowing.

Jung's description of the nature of archetypal contents offers a useful paradigm against which Pearl's character may be viewed. An array of especially peculiar characteristics in the child would indicate that the vision which she personifies is of an archetypal character. Her personality and behavior resist definition and control

just as archetypal contents resist formulation. They may be "circumscribed," but never "described."[153] Baffling and unsettling to those who know her, she, like the archetype, is seemingly alien to the rational world of the observer. To the extent that one misprizes or abandons her, she, like the "violated" archetype, brings the "'perils of the soul,'" e.g., "neurotic and even psychotic disorders," which behave "exactly like neglected or maltreated physical organs or organic functional systems."[154] The similarity between such "perils" and the emotional and physical torture experienced by the parent who deserts Pearl is obvious. But even Hester, the parent who is never seen without Pearl by her side, is punished by her daughter. As she exclaims to the men who plan to take her Pearl away, "'God gave me the child! . . . She is my happiness!--she is my torture, nonetheless! Pearl keeps me here in life! Pearl punishes me too!'" (p. 84). Though the ardent mother has certainly not disavowed the illegitimate child as the father has done, she is tortured by her for her inability to confess who Pearl's father is and thus aid the child in her search for complete identity and self-understanding. But as Hester goes on to say, the

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[153] Carl G. Jung, The Archetypes & the Collective Unconscious, Vol. 9, Part I, of The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968), p. 156.

[154] Jung, The Archetypes, p. 157.

child performs a redemptive function as well: "'See ye not, she is the scarlet letter, only capable of being loved, and so endowed with a million-fold the power of retribution for my sins'" (p. 84). Or, as elaborated by her reticent lover,

> " . . . this boon [Pearl] was meant, above all things else, to keep the mother's soul alive, and to preserve her from the blacker depths of sin into which Satan might else have sought to plunge her! . . . [The child was] confided to her care, . . . to teach her, as it were by the Creator's sacred pledge, that, if she bring the child to heaven, the child will also bring its parent hither!" (p. 85).

The healing and redemptive function of the archetype is an insistent theme in the writings of Jung.[155] The individual who undervalues archetypal symbols is lost, for they provide the structure whereby human consciousness is able to assimilate and integrate unconscious instinct and intuition. The individual, however, who allows them to shape his world experiences "a positive increase in life and well-being."[156] In any discussion of archetypes, it is important to stress, as Jung did repeatedly, that the archetype is <u>not</u> an image or motif, like a bird or the sea or, in the case at hand, a letter and a child. These are merely expressions of "certain ever-recurring psychic

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[155] See <u>The Archetypes</u>, p. 157; <u>Man and His Symbols</u>, pp. 93-99; and <u>Psychological Types</u>, p. 446 (definition of "primordial image").

[156] Jung, <u>Man and His Symbols</u>, p. 99.

experiences."[157] Each archetypal image is one of many possible ways of evoking these experiences:

> The primordial image [archetype] is thus a condensation of the living process. It gives a co-ordinating and coherent meaning both to sensuous and to inner perceptions, which at first appear without order or connection, and in this way frees psychic energy from its bondage to sheer uncomprehended perception. At the same time, it links the energies released by the perception of stimuli to a definite meaning, which then guides action along paths corresponding to meaning. It releases unavailable, damned-up energy by leading the mind back to nature and canalizing sheer instinct into mental forms.[158]

Pearl effects just this liberation and channeling of psychological energy in the second scaffold scene when her father takes her hand:

> The moment he did so, there came what seemed a tumultuous rush of new life, other life than his own, pouring like a torrent into his heart, and hurrying through all his veins, as if the mother and the child were communicating their vital warmth to his half-torpid system. The three formed an electric chain (p. 111).

Elsewhere in the romance Pearl is described as frequently being subject to "a wild flow of spirits . . . like nothing so much as the phantasmagoric play of northern lights" (pp. 71-72) and as emitting "an absolute circle of radiance" (p. 68).

In Pearl lies the power to join "object and subject,

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[157] Jung, Psychological Types, p. 444.

[158] Jung, Psychological Types, p. 445.

being and knowing."[159] She can raise the merely sensuous response to the text to a higher level of signification. She can make the concrete pleasures of the text the medium through which the reader may realize unseen and unspeakable truths, truths available only in the concrete configuration of words and images which define the text and our literal grasp of it. Thus she can redeem the sensuous mode of art's existence and of the reader's response from the moral ambiguity which its indulgence in the erotic or other pleasurable impulses of the senses suggests.

"The primordial image" or archetype, as explained by Jung,

> is the precursor of the idea . . . an idea which differs from all other concepts in that it is not a datum of experience but is actually the underlying principle of all experience.[160]

The idea formulates "the meaning of a primordial image, a meaning that has been abstracted from the concretism . . . of the image."[161] The apprehension of this kind of meaning, not a propositional statement, but an "underlying principle" of our total experience of the text, is the goal of reading as dramatized in The Scarlet Letter, and, to this end, Pearl is the reader's guide, for as a

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[159] Coleridge, p. 248.

[160] Psychological Types, p. 445.

[161] Psychological Types, p. 437.

developing child she enacts the process of the reader's own growing understanding. The reader sees her for the first time when she is carried atop a pedestal where her existence may better be contemplated. At this early stage in reading, however, she is grasped only on the most concrete level, cradled as she is in the arms of her sensuous mother. Implicit in her being is some "underlying principle of all experience," but abstracting that principle from its literal foundation is not a feat which can be accomplished at will by the reader. "'Hath the child any discoverable principle of being?'" (p. 99) Roger Chillingworth asks while contemplating her from the high window of his laboratory. "'None,--save the freedom of a broken law,'" the child's unconfessed father answers, whereupon Pearl dances upon the graves of the dead in the cemetery below this window upon the text "like a creature that had nothing in common with a bygone and buried generation, nor owned herself akin to it" (p. 99). Until Pearl's relationship to conventional modes of knowledge and response is exposed by her father's confession of responsibility for her existence, the principle of her being remains undiscovered and she frisks as lawlessly through the system of ideas and attitudes which constitute the reader's world view as she does through the Boston marketplace.

In the linguistic terminology which Culler applies to poetics, the potential for meaning embodied in Pearl has yet to be "naturalized." "To naturalize a text," Culler explains,

> is to bring it into relation with a type of discourse or model which is already, in some sense, natural and legible. Some of these models have nothing specifically literary about them . . . whereas others are special conventions used in the naturalization of literary works.[162]

Together they constitute the totality of "notions or expectations which make up the 'I' of the reader,"[163] from his fundamental assumptions about human behavior in the "real" world to his intuitive sense of what to expect in the various genres. It is possible to "postpone" naturalization, Culler explains, in order

> to avoid premature foreclosure, to allow the text to differentiate itself from ordinary language, to grant maximum scope to the play of formal features and of semantic uncertainties.[164]

In The Scarlet Letter, the naturalization of Pearl is delayed almost until the end of the novel and is thus coincidental with the resolution of dramatic action. In the meantime, Pearl is regarded by the community and by her mother as a singularly strange and possibly inhuman little creature. It seems as if "destiny had drawn an

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[162] Culler, p. 138.

[163] Culler, p. 140.

[164] Culler, p. 160.

inviolable circle round about her" (p. 70). "Her nature appeared to possess depth . . . but . . . it lacked reference and adaptation to the world into which she was born" (p. 68).

Pearl's creative play demonstrates the manner in which the the reader's grasp of the text, in Culler's words, comes to "differentiate itself" from the world view which dominates the reader's sense of reality:

> The spell of life went forth from her ever creative spirit, and communicated itself to a thousand objects, as a torch kindles a flame wherever it may be applied. The unlikeliest materials, a stick, a bunch of rags, a flower, were the puppets of Pearl's witchcraft, and, without undergoing any outward change, became spiritually adapted to whatever drama occupied the stage of her inner world. . . . The pine-trees, aged, black, and solemn, and flinging groans and other melancholy utterances on the breeze, needed little transformation to figure as Puritan elders; the ugliest weeds of the garden were their children, whom Pearl smote down and uprooted, most unmercifully. . . . The singularity lay in the hostile feelings with which the child regarded all these offspring of her own heart and mind (pp. 71-72).

Pearl's hostility is an expression of the spirit, inspired within the reader by the text, of rebellion against ascendant codes of knowledge and response. In those cases where she is hostile toward the "offspring of her own heart and mind," she shows that she has internalized the larger drama of which she is a part. Now placing herself in the role of the authoritarians who, in the larger world of Boston, have scorned her, she metes out to her sticks and weeds punishment no less severe than that which she

herself has received. Her "ever creative spirit" evidences the fact that the imagination within the reader has come to life, but the fact that it "never created a friend, but seemed always to be sowing broadcast the dragon's teeth" (p. 72), demonstrates its failure, at this point, to feel sympathetic union among its own members. In The Scarlet Letter the emphasis in Pearl's "naturalization" is not upon any set of interpretations made available by the process, as in Culler, but upon the liberating sense of belonging which, when naturalization occurs, breaks the spell of strangeness that set Pearl apart from the rest of humanity.

In Jung's system, "'the child-motif represents the pre-conscious, childhood aspect of the collective psyche[165] in its "original, unconscious, and instinctive state."[166] As such, it forms the link between modern man and his original, elemental self, a self which is still present buried beneath a layer of falsely wise notions about who we are and what we think and feel. In Arthur Dimmesdale, The Scarlet Letter gives us a moving dramatization of a man thus divided from himself by his own idealism.[167] By holding himself at a distance from the

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[165] The Archetypes, p. 161.

[166] The Archetypes, p. 162.

[167] See U. N. Arora for a Jungian based discussion of the conflict between the buried shadow and the artificial

woman in scarlet and by disavowing their child, he divides himself from his own "original, elemental self." The problem which burdens Arthur's existence is relevant to the reader not only with regard to the reader's personal search for meaningful existence through wholeness of being, but also with regard to his search for a holistic understanding of the text through a synthesis of the unconscious connotative and conventional denotative contents of language. In his capacity as a reader, an individual would appear to be plagued by the same "one-sidedness and extravagances of the conscious mind"[168] which Jung found to be a warping factor in general psychology. As in life, so in reading, one might say with Jung that:

> It is in the nature of the conscious mind to concentrate on relatively few contents and to raise them to the highest pitch of clarity. A necessary result and condition of this is the exclusion of other potential contents of consciousness. The exclusion is bound to bring about a certain one-sidedness of conscious content.[169]

Thus the "'advanced' consciousness"[170] of civilized man "has deprived itself of the means by which the auxiliary

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persona in Dimmesdale's life: "Archetypal Approaches to Literature: An Analysis of Hawthorne's Scarlet Letter," in Twentieth Century American Criticism: Interdisciplinary Approaches, ed. Rajnath (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1977), pp. 258-59.

[168] Jung, Psyche & Symbol, p. 126.

[169] Jung, Psyche & Symbol, p. 126.

[170] Jung, Man and His Symbols, p. 94.

contributions of the instincts and the unconscious can be assimilated."[171] These "auxiliary contributions" are the rich fund of connotative meaning which the literary use of words restores to language: the sensuous and emotional value which is pruned away when words are put to mundane and pragmatic purposes, and pruned so severely perhaps that no life at all remains in them:

> . . . in our civilized life, we have stripped so many ideas of their emotional energy, we do not really respond to them any more. We use such ideas in our speech, and we show a conventional reaction when others use them, but they do not make a very deep impression on us. Something more is needed to bring certain things home to us effectively enough to make us change our attitude and behavior. This is what "dream language" does; its symbolism has so much psychic energy that we are forced to pay attention to it.[172]

In the act of assigning to Hester's illicit experience an abstract label, the "'advanced' consciousness" of the Bostonian sages attempts to tame and reduce the lawless complexity of her passionate encounter. They succeed, however, in merely driving these auxiliary components underground and in cutting themselves off from any conscious recognition of them. Their simplistic interpretation, "taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity and enclosing her in a sphere by herself" (p. 61), severs

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[171] Jung, Man and His Symbols, p. 94.

[172] Jung, Man and His Symbols, p. 49.

consciousness from the sensuous and aesthetic foundation of the reading experience.

What Jung says "'dream language'" does for ideas, literature does, or can do, for language in general and the view of the world which it constitutes. The union of the underrated language of the senses and the more conventional forms of discourse honored by society is implicitly embodied in Pearl's parentage, but until this union is acted out overtly in the marketplace of ordinary awareness, the child's being and the union it represents are incomprehensible.

Frye suggests that the dreamer in Finnegans Wake,

> after spending the night . . . in communion with a vast body of metaphorical identifications, wakens and goes about his business forgetting his dream, like Nebuchadnezzar, failing to use, or even to realize that he can use, the "keys to dreamland." What he fails to do is therefore left for the reader to do.[173]

The reader can fail to do it too, of course, and often does. His experience of the text can cease to grow out of the clouded preconscious level of awareness shared by dreamers and children. But in The Scarlet Letter the child grows up and becomes aware of the paradoxical union from which her life, that is the total reading experience, has sprung. Her "sympathies" having been "developed" (p. 181), she stands at the end of the novel on the brink

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[173] Frye, Anatomy, p. 354.

of womanhood as one ready to join in a creative partnership with the world by marrying an aristocrat of some unknown country beyond the sea and bearing a child. Accepted now by her father, she is no longer the adversary of his world. But the fact that she does not join "her wild blood with the lineage of the devoutest Puritan among them all" (p. 184) suggests that she has transcended her father's world. Thus the reader's evolving experience of the text has broken with conventional ways of responding to language and of viewing the world that it may be reunited with them (naturalized), but reunited on a higher plane.

CHAPTER VII

ROGER CHILLINGWORTH

In the usurped husband of Hester Prynne, the reader finds a prototype of his own best intellectual discernment.[174] There is "a remarkable intelligence" (p. 48) in the face of this "learned man" (p. 49). He is, by his own admission, "' . . . a man of thought, -the bookworm of great libraries,'" one who has given his "'best years to feed the hungry dream of knowledge'" (p. 57). Horrified upon his arrival in Boston to find his wife set up to public shame in the marketplace, an illegitimate child in her arms and the flaming letter upon her gown, Chillingworth sets for himself the task of interpreting the enigma implicit in the presence of these two symbols of adultery. Addressing a townsman, he asks, "'And who . . . may be the father of yonder babe . . . which Mistress Prynne is holding in her arms?'" (p. 49). Chillingworth is told that "'that matter remaineth a riddle; and the Daniel who shall expound it is yet a-wanting'" (p. 49). With what appears to be maniacal zeal, Chillingworth

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[174] Taylor Stoehr writes, " . . . Chillingworth holds a privileged position in the narrative, not a protagonist but an evil chorus figure whose perspective has much in common with that of the reader and the author. . . . It is interesting to think of Chillingworth . . . as a facet of Hawthorne's authorial consciousness." Hawthorne's Mad Scientists (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1978), p. 116. Here he will be considered a facet of the reader's.

ordains himself to be the Daniel who will solve the mystery. Like the prophet who interpreted the cryptic writing on the wall during Belshazzar's feast, he will read Hester's insignia of shame with a more penetrating intelligence than any learned man of the colony has been able to apply to the task. When Hester refuses to reveal the name of her lover, her husband warns:

> "Believe me, Hester, there are few things,--whether in the outward world, or, to a certain depth, in the invisible sphere of thought,--few things hidden from the man, who devotes himself earnestly and unreservedly to the solution of a mystery. Thou mayest cover up thy secret from the prying multitude. Thou mayest conceal it, too, from the ministers and magistrates, even as thou didst this day, when they sought to wrench the name out of thy heart, and give thee a partner on thy pedestal. But, as for me, I come to the inquest with other senses than they possess. I shall seek this man, as I have sought truth in books; as I have sought gold in alchemy" (p. 59).

Hester understands his intention of learning the name of her lover as "reading" something written in her heart:

> The eyes of the wrinkled scholar glowed so intensely upon her, that Hester Prynne clasped her hands over her heart, dreading lest he should read the secret there at once (p. 59).

With this gesture, she of course covers the letter stitched over her heart too. Though its rich colors and fanciful design appear to be unintelligible, they are, to Hester, deeply suggestive of the man whose child she bore.175 The learned man goes on to warn that her lover

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175 See Porte's suggestion that, among many other things, the A stands for "Arthur," in "Introduction" to The Scarlet Letter (New York: Dell, 1979), p. 12.

"'bears no letter of infamy wrought into his garment, as thou dost; but I shall read it on his heart'" (p. 59).

Hester's refusal to speak has the effect of sparing her paramour's honorable reputation in the same way that aesthetic response, being mute, preserves the numinous halo of symbols by leaving them unexplicated. Were the purely aesthetic experience to be articulated, or, to use Josipovici's terms, were "feeling" to be replaced by "meaning,"[176] a great loss would be felt because "meaning . . . destroys being."[177] When what is unconscious is verbalized, Josipovici explains, its compulsive character vanishes. Language takes us from experience to understanding.

But it is the silence of the aesthetic experience of the text which instigates the process of interpretation. The written word, to the extent that it is entertained as an object as is surely the case with the scarlet A, does not speak to the reader. It is rather a thing to be contemplated, inspected, perused. Its very unintelligibility arouses the intellect's desire to analyze and understand. Aesthetic experience of the written text and intellectual analysis go together like the woman and her exiled, prying husband in Hawthorne's romance.

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[176] Josipovici, p. 173.

[177] Josipovici, p. 174.

In his apparent attitude toward the letter and toward the task which he feels compelled to undertake, Chillingworth is guilty of an error which, according to Culler, is typical of Western culture. The old alchemist confuses the written and the spoken word in assuming that there is some intentional meaning behind the text, some single idea which, when located, solves the riddle of its existence once and for all. "Interpretation," as erroneously conceived, Culler explains, "is a matter of making present what is absent, of restoring an original presence which is the source and truth of the form in question."[178] Chillingworth seems to believe early on in the narrative that reading the letter is synonymous with knowing the name of the one who is missing in the tableau upon the scaffold. Upon learning that the letter is his wife's penalty for betraying her marriage vow, Chillingworth exclaims:

> "A wise sentence! . . . Thus she will be a living sermon against sin, until the ignominious letter be engraved upon her tombstone. It irks me, nevertheless, that the partner of her iniquity should not, at least, stand on the scaffold by her side. But he will be known!--he will be known!--he will be known!" (p. 50).

As an alchemist in the Old World, Chillingworth had sought to locate the changeless structural principle implicit in the multifold manifestations of natural forms,

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[178] Culler, p. 132.

to identify the prototype underlying the baffling array of appearances which constitutes the phenomenal world. The Platonic assumption upon which his study of matter was based is the same as that from which his manner of reading is derived. Unsatisfied with Hester's aesthetic reading of the text, her beautiful but unintelligible embroidery, itself a work of art, Chillingworth vows immediately to discover its secret.

The scientist quickly ascertains the name of Hester's lover, but the name does not satisfy, and he continues his search for hidden content by entering Dimmesdale's interior world. Probing deeply into the heart of the guilty minister, Chillingworth is likened to "a treasure-seeker in a dark cavern" (p. 92) and

> a miner searching for gold; or, rather 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 (p. 95).

Chillingworth tends to view appearance, in nature and in man, as a veil hiding truth. His alchemical quest for some content in the world exemplifies the manner of reading based on what Culler calls "nostalgic longing for an original or transcendent meaning" fostered by "notions of the literary work as 'representation' and 'expression.'"[179]

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[179] Culler, p. 247.

A man dedicated to the search for the hidden Idea, Chillingworth performs the first of two kinds of interpretation defined by Derrida; one kind

> 'tries to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which lies outside the realm of signs and their play, and it experiences the need to interpret as a kind of exile,' an exclusion from the original plenitude that it seeks; the other accepts its active, creative function and joyfully proceeds without looking back.[180]

Upon his arrival in Boston, Chillingworth is forced to relinquish his claim to a woman in whom he hoped to attain "the simple bliss, which is scattered far and wide, for all mankind to gather up" (p. 58). Forever excluded from that bliss, he is also exiled from the bliss of reading, an experience founded upon total surrender to the sensuous pleasures of the text. Though the aging scholar correctly intuited that in the girl he took to wife lay the key to fecund pleasure, irrational bliss was not to be permitted to one so thoroughly committed as he to the intellectual mode of experience: "'I,--a man of thought,'" he confesses to Hester during their prison interview,

> "--the bookworm of great libraries,--a man already in decay, having given my best years to feed the hungry dream of knowledge,--what had I to do with youth and beauty like thine own!" (p. 57).

The inner imbalance caused by Chillingworth's overdeveloped intellect is reflected in his physical deformity. He is

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[180] Culler, p. 247, quoting Derrida.

> a person who had so cultivated his mental part that it could not fail to mould the physical to itself, and become manifest by unmistakable tokens. Although, by a seemingly careless arrangement of heterogenous garb, he had endeavored to conceal or abate the peculiarity, it was sufficiently evident to Hester Prynne, that one of this man's shoulders rose higher than the other (p. 48).

So committed was he to the intellectual pathway toward knowledge, the scholar had failed to nurture other capacities for knowing.

Crews suggests that Chillingworth's "fiendish passion for knowledge" is a sublimated effort to gratify sexual needs.[181] Without reducing Chillingworth's attraction to Hester to a purely sexual motive, we may generalize Crews' Freudian interpretation somewhat so as to illuminate an important dimension in the aging husband's character. Chillingworth's interest in Hester is, it would seem, part of a fundamental reorientation in his life toward not just the sexual, but toward the sexual as a founding metaphor for the instinctual life of the senses and passions. If, as Freud would have it, all knowledge and culture represent mankind's efforts to satisfy forbidden, primitive needs indirectly, Chillingworth's attraction to Hester late in life seems to demonstrate a kind of spontaneous adjustment strategy whereby an individual unwittingly returns to the sensuous and sensual mode of experience when

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[181] Crews, pp. 125-26.

his sublimated quest for fulfillment leaves him just short of utopia. The picture of Chillingworth's life, as he describes it, is one of a man who had reaped a great harvest of intellectual and material benefits:

> ". . . all my life had been made up of earnest, studious, thoughtful, quiet years, bestowed faithfully for the increase of mine own knowledge, and faithfully, too, though this latter object was but casual to the other,--faithfully for the advancement of human welfare. No life had been more peaceful and innocent than mine; few lives so rich with benefits conferred" (p. 124).

But the refined comforts of the intellectual way of life cannot, in Hawthorne's romance, fully satisfy the elemental needs which they are intended to meet. A highly respected scholar and alchemical philosopher, the scientist confesses that he "'had lived in vain'" (p. 58).

> "The world had been so cheerless! My heart was a habitation large enough for many guests, but lonely and chill, and without a household fire. I longed to kindle one!" (p. 58).

Longing for the warm fulfillment which can be achieved only through imtimate contact with another human being, Chillingworth reveals the motive of reading, for it is his instinctive effort to redeem his meaningless existence by opening up his heart to a subjective center radically different from his own which sets the dramatic machinery of the romance in motion. Though he is unable to fulfill his desire for human intimacy precisely in the way he had originally imagined, Chillingworth does, in taking Hester to wife, initiate the development of a

network of close relationships. The unfulfilled scholar's desire for a "household fire" leads to the establishment of a family of reading modes which functions at the heart of the town:

> "Here, on this wild outskirt of the earth, I shall pitch my tent; for, 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! Thou and thine, Hester Prynne, belong to me. My home is where thou art, and where he is" (p. 59).

Chillingworth's original longing, not just for communication but for communion, is, in the plot of The Scarlet Letter, the sine qua non of reading as a dynamic, multifaceted process. This unfulfilled man of thought demonstrates the reader's instinctive urge to "complete his circle of existence" (p. 7) by finding the lost parts of his own nature through intimate subjective contact with someone else.

Chillingworth's transformation begins as soon as he enters the magic arena of the letter. Upon beholding the spectacle of Hester's public shaming, the scholar, heretofore "a man chiefly accustomed to look inward" (p. 48), is gripped by the visual and the literal. Through the pathway of sight, his emotions are reached and a response elicited which, for him, is unusually physical:

> At his arrival in the market-place, and some time before she saw him, the stranger had bent his eyes on Hester Prynne. It was carelessly, at first . . . . Very soon, however, his look became keen and penetrative. A writhing horror

> twisted itself across his features, like a snake gliding swiftly over them, and making one little pause, with all its wreathed intervolutions in open sight. His face darkened with some powerful emotion, which, nevertheless, he so instantaneously controlled by an effort of his will, that, save at a single moment, its expression might have passed for calmness. After a brief space, the convulsion grew almost imperceptible, and finally subsided into the depths of his nature (p. 48).

Like Frye's ideal reader, "a hero embarked on a quest,"[182] Chillingworth here passes out of his "naive," "precritical" phase into the "fallen world"[183] of critical experience:

> At a certain point in the narrative, the point which Aristotle calls anagnorisis or recognition, the sense of linear continuity or participation in the action changes perspective, and what we now see is a total design or unifying structure in the narrative. . . . Thus the end of reading or listening is the beginning of critical understanding, and nothing that we call criticism can begin until the whole of what it is striving to comprehend has been presented to it.[184]

The chapter in which Chillingworth's critical anagnorisis occurs is appropriately entitled "The Recognition," but it is not until the following chapter that, in conversation with Hester, Chillingworth articulates his vision of what Frye calls the "total design or unifying structure" in

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[182] DeMaria, p. 469.

[183] DeMaria, p. 469.

[184] Northrop Frye, The Stubborn Structure (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1970), p. 164, quoted by DeMaria, p. 469.

which he has heretofore played the part of a naive participant:

> "If sages were ever wise in their own behoof, I might have foreseen all this. I might have known that, as I came out of the vast and dismal forest, and entered this settlement of Christian men, the very first object to meet my eyes would be thyself, Hester Prynne, standing up, a statue of ignominy, before the people. Nay, from the moment when we came down the old church-steps together, a married pair, I might have beheld the bale-fire of that scarlet letter blazing at the end of our path!" (pp. 57-58).

Throughout the remainder of the narrative, Chillingworth's is the most acute sense of a design shaping and integrating the lives of the "family" to which he belongs. When Hester implores him, much later in the novel, to forgive the injury inflicted upon him by her partner in adultery and to lay aside his mission of revenge, Chillingworth answers,

> "It is not granted me to pardon. I have no such power as thou tellest me of. My old faith, long forgotten, comes back to me, and explains all that we do, and all that we suffer. By thy first step awry, thou didst plant the germ of evil; but, since that moment, it has all been a dark necessity. 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. Let the black flower blossom as it may!" (p. 126).

Feidelson understands this passage as Chillingworth's contention:

> that he and the others are committed to roles in a symbolic drama, the "typical illusion" of which he speaks; in effect, their lives, both mental and physical, are a function of the meaning of the scarlet letter, which alone

> remains real amid the appearances that it generates.[185]

Thus Chillingworth seems, from the time of his prison interview with Hester on, to be aware that the experience in which they are caught up conforms to a "unifying structure," to use Frye's phrase, which exists beyond them, a "total design" emanating from the text which shapes their response.

A new character shortly overtakes Hester's cuckolded husband, evidencing the fact that his critical innocence has been forever dispelled. The naive philosopher of the Old World, "kind, true, just, and of constant, if not warm affections" (p. 125) is banished. Resolving that his former name "never more be spoken" (p. 87), he assumes the name with which we are familiar, Roger Chillingworth. With the new name, a new personality emerges in the man. The "former aspect of an intellectual and studious man, calm and quiet," shortly disappears and is replaced "by an eager, searching, almost fierce, yet carefully guarded look" (p. 122).

> Ever and anon, too, there came a glare of red light out of his eyes; as if the old man's soul were on fire, and kept on smouldering duskily within his breast, until, by some casual puff of passion, it was blown into a momentary flame (p. 122).

Chillingworth has the critical wherewithal to explore the meaning implicit in the impassive texture of art and

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[185] Feidelson, Symbolism, p. 12.

in the aesthetic experience of it. But his success in this endeavor depends upon his own descent into the world of silent experience. He cannot solve the riddle of the letter by announcing his identity and his critical purpose. He must enter the hidden world of Hester's lover on its own terms, quietly attuning himself to the subtle nuances of subjective response: "'There is a sympathy that will make me conscious of him,'" Chillingworth tells his unfaithful wife. "'I shall see him tremble. I shall feel myself shudder, suddenly and unawares'" (p. 58). Thus Chillingworth, one "chiefly accustomed to look inward, and to whom external matters are of little value and import, unless they bear relation to something within his mind" (p. 48), employs the introvert's capacity for developing ideas intensively rather than extensively,[186] that is, by turning inward to focus upon his subjective response to objects in the external world rather than by examining the properties of these objects per se. In turning away from Hester and her concrete world of sensuous experience to become the intimate of her secretive partner in the creation of textual awareness, Chillingworth withdraws from the objective presence of the text to explore the inner world of psychological experience which constitutes the other dimension of literary response.

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[186] Jung, Psychological Types, p. 383.

That intellectual curiosity of this kind should create, in the reader, the vindictive attitude synonymous with Chillingworth's subsequent role in the romance is not so alien a notion as it might seem at first. Susan Sontag describes the "modern style of interpretation" as "the revenge of the intellect upon art . . . [and] the world":[187]

> The old style of interpretation was insistent, but respectful; it erected another meaning on top of the literal one. The modern style of interpretation excavates, and as it excavates, destroys; it digs "behind" the text, to find a sub-text which is the true one. The most celebrated and influential modern doctrines, those of Marx and Freud, actually amount to elaborate systems of hermeneutics, aggressive and impious theories of interpretation. . . . To understand is to interpret. And to interpret is to restate the phenomenon, in effect to find an equivalent for it.[188]

In his extended analysis of Hawthorne's corpus, Edgar A. Dryden proposes that the reader of Hawthorne is a sacrilegious interpreter very like the one described by Sontag. The reader takes on this role, Dryden explains, because Hawthorne forces it upon him. In his prefaces Hawthorne takes great pains to insure that the reader will not become enchanted, i.e., will not be lured into any false hope of establishing a pure and authentic relationship with the writer and thus fulfill what is, according

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[187] Against Interpretation (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1961), p. 6.

[188] Sontag, pp. 6-7.

to Dryden, the real goal of reading: to know the "thematic self" of the author.[189] Assuring the reader that he will "keep the inmost Me behind the veil" (p. 7), Hawthorne inadvertently

> creates a suspicious, probing reader who will carry out in reverse the author's work of falsification. The writer's guile will be met with a double guile of his own. Fascination will be countered by its opposite, interpretation--a tactic of suspicion designed to allow the reader to penetrate the writer's mask and demystify his illusions.[190]

Hawthorne's portrait of the hermeneutic intellect in Roger Chillingworth, though it supports the descriptions of the reader advanced by Sontag and Dryden, represents a far more complex view. Sontag's "aggressive and impious" interpreter and Dryden's "suspicious, probing reader" are aspects of the reading intellect as embodied in Chillingworth, but these characterizations tell only part of the story of the hermeneutic mentality as presented in The Scarlet Letter. The "dark and terrible" man's interpretive tactics do not, in Hawthorne's romance, destroy the text; Chillingworth never arrives at a solution which satisfies his insatiable curiosity. Refusing to declare his quest fulfilled, the old man instigates what in Frye's myth of reading is called apocalypse, for

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[189] Nathaniel Hawthorne: The Poetics of Enchantment (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977), p. 10.

[190] Dryden, p. 126, following Paul Ricoeur (Freud and Philosophy).

Chillingworth's continuing critical presence goads the guardian of ultimate symbolic insight to ascend the scaffold in the marketplace of the reader's consciousness, there to make the secret of Hester's letter intelligible. As a result, Pearl, the reader's nascent understanding of the text, is liberated from the spell which alienated her from the rest of humanity and from her own womanhood. At that point, the text truly lives within the reader, harmoniously adjusted to the total context of his being.

The structure of The Scarlet Letter strongly suggests that the apparently sinister role of the intellect is largely instrumental, though not intentionally so, in bringing about this fair outcome. To view his vindictive, probing, mercilessly critical scrutiny of the literary experience as wrong or evil is to see Chillingworth with the short-sighted vision of the Bostonian populace who fancy that he is in league with Satan. But in the cosmology of the total romance, good and evil are not simple opposites; they intersect to form the crux of mystery which leads to ultimate enlightenment. In this grand design, Chillingworth's satanic work is a blessing in disguise. That he is the adversary of confession means that, in the long run, he instigates a deeper kind of confession, though he causes much suffering in the process. Viewed in the context of final beatitude toward which the romance moves, the fate of the characters, though

exquisitely painful, is ultimate victory over the ignorance and isolation which were their true adversaries. By willing his considerable fortune to Pearl, Chillingworth enables his bastard heir to make a new beginning in a land where she meets a man worthy of her royal soul. But, more importantly, Chillingworth's work of dark revenge upon Arthur's heart forces the young divine to find a depth within himself which otherwise would never have been sounded. As Dimmesdale explains, with his dying breath:

> "God . . . is merciful! He hath proved his mercy, most of all, in my afflictions. By giving me this burning torture to bear upon my breast! By sending yonder dark and terrible old man, to keep the torture always at red-heat! By bringing me hither, to die this death of triumphant ignominy before the people! Had either of these agonies been wanting, I had been lost for ever!" (p. 181).

The narrator, as if fully cognizant of the fact that Roger Chillingworth's role in the romance only <u>seems</u> sinister, admonishes the reader to soften his view of the character who will so quickly be assumed to be a villain. He even speculates that in the realm beyond appearances, the "enemy" of Hester's lover may prove to have been his friend:

> In the spiritual world, the old physician and the minister--mutual victims as they have been--may, unawares, have found their earthly stock of hatred and antipathy transmuted into golden love (p. 183-84).

In the light of these references to Roger Chillingworth,

it seems wise to view his role in the romance with as much latitude as we can muster.[191]

On the literal level, Chillingworth has no such beneficent outcome in mind. His object is revenge against the man who blasted his hope for paradise. But in the unerring economy of plot, individuals working to further their own self-interest promote a collective good greater than any which they could have devised individually. Though the characters appear to be lost in a maze of misery, error and illusion, and though they may seem to be working at cross-purposes each with the others, their lives are plotted to converge on the ultimate goal of redemptive revelation.

What makes Chillingworth's sinister motive work for ultimate good is his silence. The "quietness . . . whether imposed or natural [which] marked all his deportment" (p. 90), the "strange secrecy in his nature" (p. 141)--these form the keynote to his character, as suggested by the fact that the gesture which marks Chillingworth's first appearance in the novel is a silent admonition to silence: "he slowly and calmly raised a finger . . . and laid it on

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[191] R. H. Fogle, citing the fact that Chillingworth does preserve the minister's health and reputation, points out that "Seen purely from without, it would be possible to regard him [Chillingworth] as completely blameless . . . outwardly he has done him [Dimmesdale] nothing but good," Hawthorne's Fiction: The Light and the Dark (Norman, Okla.: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1952), pp. 139-40.

his lips" (p. 48). Hester has no doubt but that her husband will keep the secret of her lover's identity. Chillingworth wants neither to speak himself nor to allow her to speak. Had the true identity of either Hester's husband or her lover been made known early in the romance, the opportunity for an intensive exploration of the "communicative presence"[192] behind the text would have been denied. There would have been no death of "triumphant ignominy" (p. 181) to close the romance, which is to say that the romance would not have been a tragedy and would not have sounded the depths within the reader which only tragedy can reach. Thus Chillingworth's silence delays the act of "naturalization" and prevents "premature foreclosure"[193] of the text. It is only by entering the text silently alert to all subtle nuances that the reading intellect can come to know something of the complexity of the text's meaning.

The fascination which grips Chillingworth as he moves further into the interior of literary experience is what ensures his silence. He had planned to approach the problem of his usurper's hidden identity with the attitude of scientific detachment and objectivity favored by the intellect, that is, to pursue his

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[192] Culler, p. 132.

[193] Culler, p. 160.

> investigation . . . with the severe and equal integrity of a judge, desirous only of truth, even as if the question involved no more than the air-drawn lines and figures of a geometrical problem (p. 95).

But Chillingworth is straightway overtaken by what is described as an outside power:

> . . . a terrible fascination, a kind of fierce, though still calm, necessity, seized the old man within its gripe, and never set him free again, until he had done all its bidding (p. 95).

Dispassionate rationalism within the reader has been eclipsed,[194] its powers baptized to a new role and a new name. It is not intellectual curiosity which brings the reader to the apocalyptic experience which closes The Scarlet Letter. The intellect is deeply involved in the reading process as it is dramatized in the romance but not as a cool, rational agent who has charge of directing events. The power of the intellect, in The Scarlet Letter, is a tool used by a higher power, a passionate compulsion to penetrate layer beneath layer, to move deeper and deeper into the heart of the letter's mystery.

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[194] He is no more one "who tries to solve the riddle of man's existence by logical or psychological analysis" as Male describes him (p. 96). That was Chillingworth's Old World modus operandi. Now he is compelled and guided by passion.

CHAPTER VIII

PART I-A OF THE SCARLET LETTER

Though there are a number of ways to organize the chapters of The Scarlet Letter into manageable sections, the simple and symmetrical scheme described by Bradley, Beatty, and Long[195] will be followed here, whereby the novel is divided into two major parts framed by prologue and epilogue chapters. The beginning, middle, and concluding chapters inside the frame (Chapters II, XII, and XXIII, respectively) are the three "major climaxes of the plot . . . all staged in the same setting--the scaffold of the pillory." As the narrative is divided in half by Chapter XII, the midnight scaffold scene, so each of the halves is divided by a pair of chapters (Chapters VII and VIII in the first half and Chapters XVII and XVIII in the second half) in which a "lesser crisis" occurs.

Bradley, Beatty, and Long suggest that the chapters leading to the first medial episode (Chapters VII and VIII) trace "an upward swing of events for Hester" from her humiliating morning upon the scaffold to her "victory over social prejudice" at the Governor's hall. The tension between her affirmation of personal experience and

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[195] Note to The Scarlet Letter in The American Tradition in Literature, 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1967), I, 697-98.

the Puritan leaders' resistance to it is never so strong as in the early chapters of the novel. In this struggle the conflict between the personal and the conventional, the spontaneous and the deliberative, the sensuous and the mental responses to literature is dramatized.

From its early chapters on, The Scarlet Letter suggests that the reader's ordinary consciousness prizes clarity in interpretation. It shows, in the way the Bostonians shun Hester for her refusal to comply with established principles of religion and law, that common critical awareness is conservative and, to an extent, despotic. It endeavors to rise above the tangled web of sensuous participation in the text where literary response is not bound by conventional structures of understanding. Furthermore, the novel suggests that ordinary awareness fears the sensuous mode of response. Hester awakens in her society "terror and horrible repugnance" (p. 64) as if she represented to them a dreaded regression to the level of unenlightened animal instinct.

The response of critics to the style of Keats is a strong historical example of the aversion that may be felt by ordinary critical awareness to literary experience which is "too" sensuous. The tendency of Keats' "explicit and voluptuous"[196] imagery to move ever toward the erotic

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[196] Lionel Trilling, Beyond Culture (New York: Viking Press, 1955), p. 64.

reveals, perhaps, the point which "higher" awareness finds disturbing in the sensuous experience of art: the sensual connotations of sensuous experience. Not all critics, of course, condemn this dimension of the reading experience. It is, in fact, celebrated by Barthes in his meditation on the pleasures of the text. But the more typical critical response, Hawthorne's novel suggests, is to elevate intellectual and even emotional response above immersion in the texture of imagery and the sound of words. Krieger suggests that there is a suspicion "as old as criticism" concerning the appeal of art to the senses, a suspicion which leads the reader to question:

> Is the symbol the incarnate thing (i.e., spirit) itself, a substitute needed by imperfect man in his need to find a sensuous equivalent, or is it a perverse substitution that man in his lowliness lusts to place in his own way.[197]

Hester's interpretation, evidencing "so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy" (p. 43), is a response to the text, i.e., a reading of it, which preserves the forbidden erotic dimension of her sensuous encounter with it, especially when we recall the older definition of "luxury" as "lust and its indulgence."[198] The Bostonians, champions of the "prudery of ideological analysis,"[199] condemn Hester's embroidery for celebrating

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[197] Krieger, "Mediation," p. 1238.

[198] Trilling, p. 64.

[199] Barthes, p. vii.

the sensuous pleasures and condemn Hester personally as the embodiment of pleasure.[200]

Hester's wild, even animalistic, behavior elicits from her society repressive measures, and once again she is confined in the prison chamber. Here she is given over to such violent expressions of her turmoil that the wellbeing and even survival of the child, infant understanding, is jeopardized. Also housed in this darkened chamber, however, is the newly enlightened intellectual principle, Roger Chillingworth. He meets with Hester, and the interview which transpires between these two faculties reburied deeply below the surface of ordinary awareness profoundly influences the subsequent course of discovery which constitutes the rest of the novel. Chillingworth's effect upon Hester is immediate. When she merely senses his presence in her chamber, she becomes "as still as death" (p. 55). Straightway the scholar assures the jailer,

> "Trust me . . . you shall briefly have peace in your house; and, I promise you, Mistress Prynne shall hereafter be more amenable to just authority than you have found her heretofore" (p. 55).

The dubious jailer answers that "'if your worship can

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[200] Trilling points out: "The Oxford English Dictionary takes due note of what it calls an 'unfavorable' sense of the word [pleasure]: 'Sensuous enjoyment as a chief object of life, or end, in itself,' and informs us that in this pejorative sense it is 'sometimes personified as a female deity,'" p. 59.

accomplish that . . . I shall own you for a man of skill indeed'" (p. 55).

Chillingworth effects the promised transformation of the desperate mother by administering a potion concocted according to scientific and savage lore, which, he tells his wife, has the power to "'calm the swell and heaving of thy passion, like oil thrown on the waves of a tempestuous sea'" (p. 57). Along with this cup he administers his interpretation of the situation, in effect, the same potion in another form. Penetrating to the source of her rebellion as no other could, Chillingworth describes her conduct as the natural consequence of their unsatisfying relationship:

> "Hester," said he, "I ask not wherefore, nor how, thou hast fallen into the pit, or say rather, thou hast ascended to the pedestal of infamy, on which I found thee. The reason is not far to seek. It was my folly, and thy weakness. . . . Misshapen from my birth-hour, how could I delude myself with the idea that intellectual gifts might veil physical deformity in a young girl's fantasy!" (p. 57).

As one "who has not thought and philosophized in vain" (p. 58), Chillingworth reacts as an objective analyst to Hester's unwifely behavior. Realizing that he had wronged his wife before she wronged him, the husband feels no desire to punish her. In his judgment, "the scale hangs fairly balanced" (p. 58) between the two of them; justice has been done. "'But, Hester,'" he goes on to say, "'the man lives who has wronged us both'"--without cause.

Before dying upon the scaffold, Dimmesdale praises God for sending "yonder dark and terrible old man, to keep the torture always at red-heat" (p. 181). Had the scholar not sought vindictive justice, Dimmesdale would have been "lost for ever" (p. 181). Thus The Scarlet Letter suggests that the "aggressive and impious"[201] kind of analysis condemned by Sontag as "the revenge of the intellect upon art . . . [and] the world"[202] is an essential part of the total reading experience.

As Chillingworth shares with Hester his critical perspective upon the experience she has recently lived through, he elicits from her a spirit of submissiveness which the demands and threats of the Bostonian sages could not enforce. Now that she understands his motive for marrying her, Hester feels sympathy rather than defiance for her husband: "'I have greatly wronged thee'" (p. 58), she murmurs, understanding his pain as akin to her own. Her rebelliousness, now at least partially verbalized and understood, recedes into the background; the urgency of her need for self-expression is drastically reduced by the intellect's analysis of her situation and response. The change in Hester's attitude is seconded by a dramatic metamorphosis in her outward appearance. The beauty who

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[201] Sontag, p. 7.

[202] Sontag, p. 6.

stood upon the scaffold, expressing in her dress, her bearing, and her responses, the "wild and picturesque peculiarity" (p. 44) of her unique point of view is almost totally effaced in the ensuing chapters. Following the prison interview with her scholar-husband, Hester is never again seen in the elaborate and colorful gown which she wore on the day of her exhibition, having exchanged it for a dress of "the coarsest materials and the most sombre hue" (p. 63). She hides her "dark and abundant hair" (p. 43) beneath a formal cap, humbly ministers to the poor and wretched of the community, and takes up residence on a plot of ground "too sterile for cultivation" (p. 62). After a few years, not merely her individuality, but her life itself seems to have been drained from her:

> Her face . . . showed . . . marble quietude . . . like a mask; or rather, like the frozen calmness of a dead woman's features; owing this dreary resemblance to the fact that Hester was actually dead, in respect to any claim of sympathy, and had departed out of the world with which she still seemed to mingle (p. 161).

Hester's fear that poison lurked in the old scholar's potion has been fulfilled, albeit not as literally as she had imagined. Though not annihilated completely, Hester has become ennervated and walks among the townspeople as a mere shadow of the vibrantly alive woman she once was.

Something drastic has befallen this vigorous champion of aesthetic experience upon being exposed to intellectual analysis:

> Much of the marble coldness of Hester's impression was to be attributed to the circumstance that her life had turned, in a great measure, from passion and feeling, to thought (p. 119).

Her defoliation is the graphic, almost surrealistic, demonstration of the withering impact of intellectual discernment upon the reader's ability to recall and express the text's concrete particularity, that dimension which imparts a sense of immediacy, warmth, and living color to reading. But veiled within this subjugation of the reader's aesthetic response is a compensatory influence. Without Chillingworth's recognition of Hester's motive and the soothing potion in which that recognition is symbolized, Hester would have been unfit for admittance into society. Gripped by uncontrolled passion following her ordeal upon the scaffold, Hester would have been indefinitely confined to the prison chamber of the unconscious where ordinary awareness locks up all those unruly instincts which it cannot abide. Without the intellect's chilling touch, the inconceivable peculiarity of the text would never have been given the opportunity to win the gradual favor of the reader's convention-bound mentality. Thus Roger Chillingworth's "evil" influence proves necessary for the advancement of the narrative and for the reader's growth toward fuller understanding.

The reader's sensuous experience of the pleasures of the text is not terminated, however, by the operation of

the intellect upon it. What is inadmissable to ordinary understanding is held by Hester Prynne in reserve. Though she walks among the townspeople as a duly repentant woman, she is loyal to her role as the champion of unconventional response on a deeper level and cherishes the hope that she and her lover will unite with one another again in a future existence:

> There dwelt, there trode the feet of one with whom she deemed herself connected in a union, that, unrecognized on earth, would bring them together before the bar of final judgment, and make that their marriage-altar, for a joint futurity of endless retribution (p. 61).

She harbors this hope to the very end:

> "Hester," said the clergyman, "farewell!"
> "Shall we not meet again?" whispered she, bending her face down close to his. "Shall we not spend our immortal life together? Surely, surely, we have ransomed one another, with all this woe! Thou lookest far into eternity, with those bright dying eyes! Then tell me what thou seest?" (p. 181).

The sensuous vision held by the reader's feminine mode is stubbornly resistant to the "wisdom" of intellect and tradition. In spite of Hester's efforts to do penance for what she superficially believes to have been a deed of sin, the fallen woman's concrete imagination devises for her a physical marriage with her unlawful paramour in a life beyond the grave.

Hester's aesthetic vision is communicated to the reader's "higher" faculties indirectly through her needlework and her child. In her embroidery upon the ruff of

the Governor, upon the scarves of military officials, and upon the clerical band of the minister, reflections can be seen of the same fantasy which embellishes the scarlet A glowing upon the bodice of her gown. Its same proud message of beauty is voiced by these executives of political and moral order, albeit sublimated in forms which they are willing to admit into their lives. Recalling Feidelson's contention that wearing the letter in this romance "is synonymous with discovery and absorption of its meaning,"[203] it can be said that, although the heads of religion and state do not wear the A as Hester does, they wear unintelligible echoes of it, its preconscious and, therefore, indistinctly articulated images. Thus ordinary awareness gradually accommodates itself to Hester's mode of response. Not only do the townspeople gradually cease to be offended by the appearance of Hester's scarlet letter, they begin to admire it. To be sure, the dogmatic moral code which rules their thinking prevents them from awarding Hester's adultery their conscious approval, but they are drawn by the pleasing appearance of her letter to make room in their lives for the aesthetic point of view.

The gradual softening of the town's attitude toward Hester is a macrocosm of the change in the adulteress' own understanding of her literary experience. Living daily in

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[203] Feidelson, Symbolism, p. 10.

close physical and emotional contact with "the scarlet letter endowed with life" (p. 76), Hester sees her own passionate defiance of convention expressed in this other subjective center: "in the nature of the child seemed to be perpetuated those unquiet elements that had distracted Hester Prynne before Pearl's birth" (p. 71). Since that time, these "unquiet elements" had "begun to be smoothed away by the softening influences of maternity" (p. 71). As a mother, Hester longs to draw her child unto herself, to break the "bewildering and baffling spell" of strangeness "that so often came between herself and her sole treasure" (p. 70). As the agent of eros or knowing founded upon relatedness, the feminine principle within the reader labors to heal the split between herself and the living letter. To do so would be, in Culler's terms, to "naturalize" the text.

At Governor Bellingham's hall, instinctive response, as championed by Hester, overtly challenges and alters external structural principles of reading. Following a line of reasoning suggested by the religious doctrine upon which they regularly cogitate, the Puritan leaders conclude that they are required as Christian men to separate the adulterous mother from her illegitimate and possibly demonic child, the unnaturalized text. Upon learning of their intentions, Hester comes to the Governor's hall to defend her right to be the primary guardian of developing

textual awareness. Though the dwelling place of the Governor, like the structure of convention-bound response, is normally closed to the voice of the senses and passions, Hester ignores custom and, following the deep convictions of her heart, boldly intrudes upon the private sanctum of authority. Pressing deeper in her quest for a hearing, Hester finds, at the back door of the imposing edifice, the heart of the executive mode, a garden where pumpkins and cabbages exist alongside rose bushes and apple trees. Here are the Governor, the clerical leaders, and Roger Chillingworth, the complete body of masculine response modes: structural rules, symbolic insight, and analytic hermeneutics.

Though the chaotic caprices of little Pearl threaten to thwart Hester's purpose by affirming the Governor's suspicions that the child is either demon born or gravely deficient in Christian education, the mother's case is heard and, finally, won for her through the aid of her eloquent advocate, Arthur Dimmesdale. By virtue of his special duplicity, he is able to mediate the conflicting views of authority and experience, of society and the individual, of the head and the heart, here in this struggle between dogma and a mother's natural attachment to her child. Translating the urgent elemental response of feminine sensuousness into terms which are acceptable within the orthodox matrix of understanding, Dimmesdale voices a

synthesizing point of view which prevents the still unnaturalized experience of the text personified in Pearl from being prematurely assimilated into the reader's conscious framework of thought and belief. Thus the reader's nascent understanding of the text is allowed to grow under the guidance of aesthetic vision rather than conventional wisdom, and "premature foreclosure"[204] with ideas of the time is avoided.

At this midpoint in the action of the first half of the romance, the task of accommodating conventional authority to the feminine response mode is taken up by one whose medium of response is lucid language. Whereas before it has been through Hester's needlework that the feminine attitude has been expressed, Dimmesdale now renders in persuasive words what Hester has suggested in a far less articulate medium. "'Speak thou for me!'" she impulsively cries to him when she is unable to convince the Governor that she has a right to keep her child. "'Thou knowest . . . what is in my heart'" (p. 84). Dimmesdale complies with her ardent request and masterfully convinces the Puritan sages that there is "a quality of awful sacredness in the relations between this mother and this child" (p. 85), that they are not joined by nature, merely, and sinful nature at that. His defense

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[204] Culler, p. 160.

translates into terms acceptable to the religious leaders the personal instincts so strongly felt but poorly articulated by Hester.

Dimmesdale's demonstration of his sympathy for Hester's point of view does not escape the keen eye of Roger Chillingworth. Quietly listening to the young minister's appeal from his own privileged position just behind the Governor, Chillingworth remarks, "'You speak, my friend, with a strange earnestness'" (p. 85). A second clue pointing to the minister's personal involvement with Hester and Pearl is readily interpreted by the watchful physician. Pearl, quietly approaching the minister following his impassioned appeal, takes his hand and gently places it against her cheek. He responds by kissing the child's brow, whereupon she laughs and frisks away into the garden. Ever receptive to subtle features of the evolving literary experience, Chillingworth muses:

> "A strange child! . . . It is easy to see the mother's part in her. Would it be beyond a philosopher's research, think ye, gentlemen, to analyze that child's nature, and, from its make and mould, to give a shrewd guess at the father?" (p. 86).

Pearl's unusual display of sympathy clearly reflects the compassion typically expressed by her father in his defense of Hester, the impulsive change of mood which follows being attributable to her mother. The keen eye of the scholar apparently recognizes both resemblances.

Thus Dimmesdale's intervention on Hester's behalf puts the young minister into a vulnerable situation. Following this scene, Chillingworth attaches himself to Hester's unconfessed lover, and an intimate relationship between the two men is formed. The romance thus dramatizes the point at which insufficiently articulated aesthetic response, a response that expresses itself in densely metaphoric interpretation, is explicitly verbalized so that it may be understood and accepted within conventional thought. This change opens the door to intellectual scrutiny of the reading experience. Hereafter, the reader's verbal response to the letter, i.e., the response originating from the eloquent minister, will be subjected to ruthless analysis.

CHAPTER IX

PART I-B OF THE SCARLET LETTER

In the next group of chapters leading to the midpoint of the romance, the second scaffold revelation, the focus moves away from the conflict between Hester and the sages to the relationship between Dimmesdale and Chillingworth. As the first group of chapters (Part I-A) played out the tension between aesthetic and propositional readings, the second group of chapters (Part I-B) dramatizes the tension between symbolic insight and hermeneutic analysis. As the richly embroidered letter recedes into the background and the narrative focus moves to the physician's endeavors to penetrate the facade of Dimmesdale's public image, the reading experience described becomes less concrete and more deeply subjective.

The approach to reading demonstrated by Chillingworth emphasizes insight into interior conditions rather than the examination of surface details. As one who is less concerned with concrete phenomena than with intensity of vision, Hester's husband typifies the introverted mode of thinking described by Jung:

> Facts are of secondary importance for this kind of thinking; what seems to it of paramount importance is the development and presentation of the subjective idea, of the initial symbolic image hovering darkly before the mind's eye.[205]

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[205] Jung, Psychological Types, p. 380.

As Chillingworth strives to read the letter on the heart of Hester's lover,[206] he is, in effect, endeavoring to bring before the intellect an abstraction of the concrete image (Pearl) already born into the reading mind through its pre-analytic experience of the text. To know the father of the "initial symbolic image" would be to know the structuring principle behind it, and to force the father to express the A would be to know it in its social dimension as a mode of communication based upon shared conventions or archetypal forms.[207]

The diffused focus of concretist appreciation in reading does not produce awareness of meaning, which by definition requires the differentiation of an idea from the reader's original network of sensuous and emotional responses. To the extent that interpretation is sought, a trade-off between holistic experience and sharpened focus must be made. Opting for meaning will necessarily injure the fragile constellation of details which constitutes our total experience of the work. But the insistent intellect, like Roger Chillingworth, seems unconcerned about the damage he causes, so intent is he on fastening his gaze upon that point of light which will orient the

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[206] "'He bears no letter of infamy wrought into his garment . . . but I shall read it on his heart,'" p. 59.

[207] See Frye's definition of "archetype" as "communicable unit," Anatomy, p. 99.

darkness around it: the "invaluable gold" (p. 96), the "jewel" (p. 95), the "treasure" (p. 96) locked up in Arthur Dimmesdale's heart.

As Chillingworth begins the work of abstracting the essential motif from the whole which contains and obscures it, he "excavates" and "digs"[208] for buried meaning like the modern critic described by Sontag:

> 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.
>
> Sometimes a light glimmered out of the physician's eyes . . . . The soil where this dark miner was working had perchance shown indications that encouraged him.
>
> "This man," said he, at one such moment, to himself, "pure as they deem him,--all spiritual as he seems,--hath inherited a strong animal nature from his father or his mother. Let us dig a little farther in the direction of this vein!" (p. 95).

An alchemist once more, Chillingworth searches for the changeless structural principle implicit in the character and experience of the minister.

As explained by Jung,

> Abstraction . . . is a form of mental activity that frees this content [the essential element] from its association with the irrelevant elements by distinguishing it from them or, in other words, <u>differentiating</u> it. . . . In its wider sense, everything is <u>abstract</u> that is separated from its association with elements

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[208] Sontag, p. 6.

> that are felt to have no relevance to its meaning.[209]

Chillingworth sifts the minister's character for any evidence which would support his intuition:

> Then, after long search . . . and turning over many precious materials, in the shape of high aspirations for the welfare of his race, warm love of souls, pure sentiments, natural piety, strengthened by thought and study, and illuminated by revelation,--all of which invaluable gold was perhaps no better than rubbish to the seeker,--he would turn back, discouraged, and begin his quest towards another point (p. 96).

He impatiently discards any details which are tangential to the point he wishes to establish.

As Chillingworth narrows and intensifies his focus upon Dimmesdale's interior psychology, ignoring what he considers to be extraneous details, a change occurs in the attitude of the Bostonians toward their minister. Their previous admiration of the man is intensified by their fantasy that he is a sort of demigod. It seems as if a world of powerful unconscious content is opened to ordinary awareness through the introverted physician's scrutiny of the reader's interior experience. This result is consistent with Jung's description of the benefit which introverted thought confers upon consciousness:

> The extraordinary impoverishment of introverted thinking [i.e., through constriction of focus] is compensated by a wealth of unconscious facts.

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[209] Jung, Psychological Types, p. 410.

> The more consciousness is impelled by the thinking function to confine itself within the smallest and emptiest circle--which seems, however, to contain all the riches of the gods--the more unconscious fantasies will be enriched by a multitude of archaic contents, a veritable "pandaemonium" of irrational and magical figures.[210]

The change in the Bostonian's view of the minister is implicitly related to the work of Roger Chillingworth, for it is said that while "given over to the machinations of his deadliest enemy, the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale had achieved a brilliant popularity in his sacred office" (p. 103). The people of Boston

> deemed the young clergyman a miracle of holiness. They fancied him the mouth-piece of Heaven's messages of wisdom, and rebuke, and love. In their eyes, the very ground on which he trod was sanctified (pp. 104-05).

Meanwhile the people's view of Chillingworth is colored by the fantasy that he is "Satan himself, or Satan's emissary" (p. 95).

As the image of the minister held by the Bostonian populace drifts further into the realm of unconscious fantasy, it exerts a greater power over their minds. Their imagination is captured by his holy words and saint-like life. The "subjective power of conviction"[211] which Jung attributes to ideas springing from the unconscious has seized the townspeople of Boston.

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[210] Jung, Psychological Types, p. 382.

[211] Jung, Psychological Types, p. 381.

The disadvantage to the town of their deepening receptivity to Dimmesdale and thus to their own interior psychology is that the subjectivity of their response clouds their perception of objective reality. Because their eyes are turned inward by Dimmesdale's moving orations, they apprehend all manner of inner psychic phenomena but are blind to the "facts" of the minister's existence. They see him not as a man of error-prone flesh, but as an angel. Caught up in a dream world, their understanding of Dimmesdale and thus their experience of the letter's meaning takes on a mythological cast. The town's exploration of the mythic dimension of the literary experience will, as Jung suggests, depend upon a reversal of focus whereby they may return with their experience of inner mystery to conventional reality:

> The thinking of the introverted type is positive and synthetic in developing ideas which approximate more and more to the eternal validity of the primordial images. But as their connection with objective experience becomes more and more tenuous, they take on a mythological coloring and no longer hold true of the contemporary situation. Hence his thinking is of value for his contemporaries only so long as it is manifestly and intelligibly related to the known facts of the time.[212]

In The Scarlet Letter, the assimilation of eternal mysteries with "known facts" awaits Dimmesdale's market-place confession "manifestly and intelligibly" relating his

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[212] Jung, Psychological Types, p. 386.

otherworldly self with the common adulteress by revealing the presence on his own breast of a "red stigma" (p. 180) which matches her well-known letter.

For a while Chillingworth's critical search is too intent. His pointed inquiries into the minister's experience succeed only in chasing away, as the novel suggests, the elusive phantom of the unmanifest. In questioning his subject as to the nature of his interior condition, the physician asks:

> ". . . hath all the operation of this disorder been fairly laid open and recounted to me?"
>
> "How can you question it?" asked the minister. "Surely, it were child's play to call in a physician, and then hide the sore!"
>
> "You would tell me, then, that I know all?" said Roger Chillingworth, deliberately, and fixing an eye, bright with intense and concentrated intelligence, on the minister's face. "Be it so! But, again! He to whom only the outward and physical evil is laid open knoweth, oftentimes, but half the evil which he is called upon to cure. A bodily disease . . . may, after all, be but a symptom of some ailment in the spiritual part . . ." (p. 101).

Though Dimmesdale has nervously risen from his chair, Chillingworth continues:

> "Would you, therefore, that your physician heal the bodily evil? How may this be, unless you first lay open to him the wound or trouble in your soul?" (pp. 100-01).

Chillingworth cannot force the Bostonian "priest of the imagination" to render up in words the secret which has disrupted his equanimity, though he does succeed in evoking intense emotional responses which assure him that his critical hypothesis is highly probable. Lashing out at

the physician for intruding too far into the private sphere of the soul, the young man becomes overheated and rushes out of the room. "'It is as well to have made this step,'" Chillingworth says, noting with great interest to what extent the minister has been overwhelmed with emotion. "'As with one passion, so with another!'" he concludes. "'He hath done a wild thing ere now, this pious Master Dimmesdale, in the hot passion of his heart!'" (p. 101).

As if led to the threshold of a revelation by this outburst, Chillingworth soon discovers what appears to be the long sought key to Dimmesdale's character. After many hours of intense concentration devoted to learning Dimmesdale's secret, it is revealed to Chillingworth casually, without words, in a moment when the intellect of each man, and thus of the reader, is relaxed. By chance, Chillingworth discovers Dimmesdale in a deep sleep:

> To such an unwonted remoteness . . . had his spirit now withdrawn into itself, that he stirred not in his chair, when old Roger Chillingworth, without any extraordinary precaution, came into the room. The physician advanced directly in front of his patient, laid his hand upon his bosom, and thrust aside the vestment, that, hitherto, had always covered it even from the professional eye.
>
> Then, indeed, Mr. Dimmesdale shuddered, and slightly stirred.
>
> After a brief pause, the physician turned away.
>
> But with what a wild look of wonder, joy, and horror! (p. 102).

It is clear from the "ghastly rapture" and "ecstasy"

which the vision inspires within him that Chillingworth has found "the spring that controlled the engine" of Dimmesdale's nature, as if "the very soul" of his patient had been "brought out before [Chillingworth's] eyes" (p. 103). But the essential content which he has seen, being so highly abstracted, is inexpressible[213] in the pure form in which Chillingworth experiences it just as it will be in the second revelation at the end of the romance. At neither time is a description offered because there can be none. Any articulation of the idea would be merely another of the many phenomenal manifestations of it rather than the essence behind all manifestations. Chillingworth's apperception of this ultimate idea marks the apex of the reading process for the intellect. He has glimpsed what the remainder of the romance will bring into the purview of the reader's total understanding: not a single interpretation, but the interpretation behind all interpretation, or in Barthes' words, the "empty meaning which supports" all the "meanings of the work."[214]

The power which the discovery of an abstract structural principle in the text gives the intellect is immediately felt and put to use by Chillingworth. Now

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[213] "The more abstract a content is, the more it is irrepresentable," Jung, Psychological Types, p. 411.

[214] Barthes, Critique et vérité, (Seuil, Paris, 1966), p. 57 (quoted by Culler, p. 118).

that he knows Dimmesdale's principle of being, he becomes

> thenceforth, not a spectator only, but a chief actor, in the poor minister's interior world. He could play upon him as he chose. Would he arouse him with a throb of agony? The victim was forever on the rack . . . . Would he startle him with sudden fear? As at the waving of a magician's wand, up rose a grisly phantom,--up rose a thousand phantoms,--. . . all flocking round about the clergyman, and pointing with their fingers at his breast! (p. 103).

Chillingworth has discovered with respect to Dimmesdale what has eluded Hester with respect to her daughter: the mother had "failed to win the master-word that should control this new and incomprehensible intelligence" (p. 70). The reader's imagination is now dominated by his intellect.

Even while the Bostonians are caught up in the "subjective power of conviction"[215] which their fantasy of Dimmesdale's holiness has inspired, Chillingworth works to demystify the aura of ideality surrounding the fathering principle of the text and the reader's experience of it. His analytic mind is satisfied only by the view that the father is a mere sham of perfection, that, in essence, the ideal or super-real aura surrounding the text and the reader's experience of it is false. He achieves this end not by openingly undermining the reverence of the Bostonians for Dimmesdale, but by relentlessly convicting Dimmesdale of his own unworthiness. Exposing Dimmesdale daily to the attitude of critical realism, the physician

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[215] Jung, Psychological Types, p. 381.

awakens in the idealistic priest a new ruthless honesty. Unable to deny the irony of his position in the community any longer, the minister becomes bitterly critical of his own mock holiness.

In the old physician we see in operation the attitude which led Barthes to term the secret of the text "empty meaning"[216] and to regard the romantic experience of absolute meaning as misleading. Hawthorne's scientist would seem to typify an attitude described by Culler which opposes and complements the Jungian "symbolic attitude."[217]

> There is no structuralist method such that by applying it to a text one automatically discovers its structure. But there is a kind of attention which one might call structuralist: a desire to isolate codes, to name the various languages with and among which the text plays, to go beyond manifest content to a series of forms and then to make these forms, or oppositions or modes of signification, the burden of the text.[218]

The "movement of [structural] analysis," Culler states, quoting Barthes,

> . . . consists of shattering the text, the first cloud of meaning, the first image of content. What is at stake in structural analysis is not the truth of the text but its plurality; the labour does not consist of starting from forms in order to perceive, clarify or formulate content . . . but on the contrary of scattering, of postponing, of gearing down, of discharging

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[216] Critique et vérité, p. 57.

[217] Jung, Psychological Types, pp. 475-76.

[218] Culler, p. 259.

> meaning through the action of a formal discipline.[219]

Operating with this attitude, Chillingworth frustrates the belief in absolute meaning which common critical awareness espouses, a belief which has compelled many a reader of The Scarlet Letter to wish Hawthorne had described exactly what was on the breast of the saintly minister and even to upbraid the author for being so vague. As Chillingworth convicts Dimmesdale of his duplicity, the physician is, in effect, directing symbolic thought away from an overly idealized impression of meaning.

"The Minister's Vigil," the middle chapter of the romance, dramatizes the reader's preconscious understanding of the irony implicit in the conflict of responses toward the letter which have been developing. Upon this "obscure night of early May," vision is obstructed not only by the absence of sunlight but by the presence of a barrier, "an unvaried pall of cloud [which] muffled the whole expanse of sky from zenith to horizon" (p. 107). It is in this impenetrable world of darkness that the minister ascends the scaffold. "Walking in the shadow of a dream, as it were, and perhaps actually under the influence of a species of somnambulism" (p. 107), the minister comes to the marketplace in a state of mind which

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[219] Barthes, Le Degré zéro de l'écriture, (1st ed. 1953; Seuil, Paris, 1972), quoted by Culler, pp. 259-60.

epitomizes his normal psychology. His idealistic expectations for himself, that noble dream of human perfection which makes him seem heroic in spite of his weakness, covers him like a cloud. As long as he remains cloaked by this ideal image, the Bostonians cannot see his mortal dimension, and thus cannot imagine that the man who speaks from the pulpit also belongs on the scaffold. The atmospheric conditions on this obscure night seem to externalize the clouded mentality of the town. Lulled into the dream world of unconscious fantasy, they neither see Dimmesdale's sinful nature nor hear his veiled expressions of a reality which contradicts his saintly image. They can no better interpret the cry of shame he raises upon the scaffold than they have been able to construe rightly the many vague confessions of iniquity which he has made from the pulpit.

But on this night in May when the minister speaks from the scaffold, an incomplete version of the resolution of the novel is staged. Stopping short of any clear articulation, Dimmesdale's disclosure is a wordless shriek. Implicit in his outcry is knowledge of the painful reality growing toward clarification out of his sensitive soul: "Mr. Dimmesdale was overcome with a great horror of mind, as if the universe were gazing at a scarlet token on his naked breast, right over his heart" (p. 108). In response to this vision, he cries aloud, and having done so,

expects the people to know all: "The whole town will awake, and hurry forth, and find me here" (p. 108), he mutters, half relieved to think that his burden of falsehood is now to be lifted. The Bostonians do not, however, glean from this revelation the message latent within it because, like Dimmesdale, they are so "drowsy" amid their own cloudy imaginations that they "mistook the cry either for something frightful in a dream, or for the noise of witches" (p. 108). The same overruling conception of absolute opposites which has put Dimmesdale so at odds with his own nature prevents these people from seeing the drama staged at their very doorsteps. Governor Bellingham looks out at his window, "a lamp in his hand, a white night-cap on his head, and a long white gown enveloping his figure. . . . The cry had evidently startled him" (p. 109). The foil to her naive and innocent-looking brother, Mistress Hibbens appears at another window of the same house, "also with a lamp, which . . . revealed the expression of her sour and discontented face" (p. 109). Her interpretation of Dimmesdale's tortured cry as being "the clamor of fiends and nighthags, with whom she was well known to make excursion into the forest" (p. 109), is the irrational view which her order-loving brother has partitioned off from his consciousness. In segregating it thus, he has made it a monster.

A more promising light of awareness is thrown out by Mr. Wilson. More capable than the Governor's one-sided insight of dispersing the shadows of ignorance, Mr. Wilson's light

> threw a gleam of recognition on here a post, and there a garden-fence, and here a latticed window-pane, and there a pump . . . an arched door . . . an iron knocker . . . a rough log . . . (p. 109).

He is, however, unable to perceive anything but the most trivial of particulars. "Surrounded . . . with a radiant halo" borrowed from "the distant shine of the celestial city," the elder clergyman's inner vision is as muffled by his romantic idealism as his eyes are by the Geneva cloak which he draws "closely . . . about him" (p. 110). Though he helped to put Hester Prynne on the scaffold, Wilson cannot see his saintly brother standing there. Wilson comes quite close, however, to receiving revelation during this "dark night of the soul."[220] The professional father of Dimmesdale embodies the traditional understanding which is the foundation upon which the younger clergyman's sensitive communications with eternity depend. "'A good evening to you, venerable Father Wilson!'" Dimmesdale seems to say. "'Come up hither, I pray you, and pass a pleasant hour with me!'" (p. 110). The invitation to avail himself of the heightened perspective of the

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[220] Male, p. 110.

scaffold does not, however, quite reach Wilson's awareness, and he plods on into the gloom.

Dimmesdale laughs aloud "to his own infinite alarm" (p. 111) at the degradation he would have experienced had the town found him there on the shameful pillory. In one part of his being, he recognizes the absurdity of the game he has been playing with the town. His life is a "mockery," a "vain show" (p. 108) of genuine holiness. Pearl hears his derisive laugh and seconds it with her own childish laughter. A "bitter scorn of . . . things . . . which have the taint of falsehood in them" (p. 130) is developing within the child even as it is within the father. As if encouraging her father to deal openly with that within himself with is false, Pearl refuses to hold his hand unless he agrees to "stand here with mother and me, tomorrow noontide" (p. 112). The "scarlet letter endowed with life" (p. 78) is teaching the reader to embody the meaning which he attaches to the text in language which is readily understood.

After calling Pearl and her mother to join him, Dimmesdale stands with them under that unearthly meteoric light which seems to him to have been created especially to define the moral interpretation of "his soul's history and fate" (p. 113). It reveals to him the ambiguity of his symbolic vision:

> There was a singular circumstance that characterized Mr. Dimmesdale's psychological state, at this moment. All the time that he gazed

> upward to the zenith, he was, nevertheless, perfectly aware that little Pearl was pointing her finger towards old Roger Chillingworth, who stood at no great distance from the scaffold. The minister appeared to see him, with the same glance that discerned the miraculous letter (pp. 113-14).

In this strange doubling of vision, the minister searches the heavens for divine insight while being reminded by Pearl of the different response embodied in the man of science. The idealistic minister is thus coming to a more realistic understanding of his experience. Under the strange, unearthly light of the meteor, Chillingworth's aspect seems to the minister so thoroughly malevolent that he "might . . . have passed . . . for the arch-fiend, standing there, with a smile and scowl, to claim his own" (p. 114). The minister longs to see him in a more realistic light, and after the meteor disappears, Dimmesdale desperately begs Hester to help him identify and thus demystify the man who appears to be Satan himself. The minister's situation brings to a crisis the relationship he has had with Chillingworth ever since the old scholar took up lodgings with him: "though he had constantly a dim perception of some evil influence watching over him, [he] could never gain a knowledge of its actual nature" (p. 103). The imagination of the reader is ripe for intellectual enlightenment.

Pearl, who moments ago pointed out to her father the sinister presence of Chillingworth at the foot of the

scaffold, attempts to enlighten her baffled father once again: "'Minister,' said little Pearl, 'I can tell thee who he is'" (p. 114), but her answer is the unintelligible babble of an understanding which is still cognitively immature. She can point toward a fact and even play at verbalizing it, but cannot make it explicitly understood to herself or anyone else. What Dimmesdale lacks and desperately needs in order to liberate himself from an intellectual naivete identical to that of Pearl is a critical anagnorisis like that which Chillingworth experienced when he saw his bride upon the shameful platform of the pillory and immediately grasped the "total design or unifying structure"[221] which determined the letter's meaning. But as long as Dimmesdale is kept ignorant of Chillingworth's role in the human drama of the scarlet letter, he remains critically innocent as to the role of cognition in the psychological drama of literary response.

With "a chill despondency, like one awaking, all nerveless, from an ugly dream, [Dimmesdale] yielded himself to the physician, and was led away" (p. 115), without being seen by the Bostonians. Thus he and they remain locked in the pall of illusion which clouds their intellectual response to the letter. The town's idealistic interpretation of the meteoric apparition "to stand for

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[221] Frye, Stubborn Structure, p. 164.

Angel" (p. 115) in recognition of Governor Winthrop's passage to heaven demonstrates their inability to recall, when they see a red A in the heavens, the same letter they have daily known on earth as the mark of a fallen woman. Like the Bostonians, ordinary critical awareness is slow to see symbols of imaginative truth as metaphors for everyday reality and vice versa. Nevertheless, the seed of an understanding which will liberate the townspeople from their critical naivete has been sown on this fateful night of preconscious revelation.

CHAPTER X

PART II-A OF THE SCARLET LETTER

By what appears to be an act of divine intervention,[222] the meteor has revealed in the tableau upon the scaffold a vivid metaphoric expression of the deep connection between the personal and universal modes of knowing:

> . . . there stood the minister, with his hand over his heart and Hester Prynne, with the embroidered letter glimmering on her bosom; and little Pearl, herself a symbol, and the connecting link between the two. They stood in the noon of that strange and solemn splendor, as if it were the light that is to reveal all secrets, and the daybreak that shall unite all who belong to one another (p. 112).

It seems as if Chillingworth's ruthless analysis and Dimmesdale's tortured introspection have brought the reader's subjective grasp of the text to a point of crisis where a revelation from some supernatural or at least unconscious arbiter has been vouchsafed. The revelation is not, however, immediately understood by the reader. Rather it is one which begins to alter his vision indirectly and from within, starting at the foundation of his perception, with Hester Prynne.

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[222] Recall Jung's description of the power which seems to supervise the expansion of consciousness: "A dark impulse is the ultimate arbiter of the pattern, an unconscious a priori precipitates itself into plastic form . . . Over the whole procedure there seems to reign a dim foreknowledge not only of the pattern but of its meaning," Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche, p. 204.

True to her characteristic receptivity to the world of sight and sense, Hester is moved by the physical contact she has had with Dimmesdale on this night of revelation. She responds emotionally to the graphic demonstration of relatedness which she has experienced upon the scaffold. Stirred to compassion by the wretched condition of her former lover, Hester admits to herself that "there lay a responsibility upon her, in reference to the clergyman, which she owed to no other" (p. 116). Dimmesdale's miserable transformation convinces her that the physician's "analysis of a heart" (p. 120) has gone far enough. The intellectual approach to reading taken by her husband has pushed the reader's search for symbolic meaning to the region of bodiless abstraction where the letter glowing in the sky makes the earth appear strange, unreal. During his brief period of contact with Hester and Pearl, Dimmesdale feels once again the power which resides in the personal, flesh and blood story upon which the letter is based, but he is unable to allow this power to reshape his vision in any permanent way. Seeing this, Hester now feels obligated to make known to Dimmesdale the identity of his tormenter that his eyes may be opened to the human dimension of the struggle in which he is engaged. Thus she resolves to free herself from the oath of silence which she earlier felt it her duty as Chillingworth's wife to honor.

In the confrontation which follows between Hester and Chillingworth, the reader's receptivity to the concrete impresses upon the intellect the fact that hermeneutic analysis is over and that the sensuous, aesthetic response, strongly inclined toward a different way of constructing symbolic meaning, is now leading the reading process.[223] At the same time, Hester is freed from the tyranny of thought over her deepest instincts, freed to express them verbally as never before. Nevertheless, Hester's ability to effect this change in the hierarchy of response appears to be the result of her seven-years consent to the analytic techniques of her scholarly husband. Her secret pact with the intellectual physician seems to have fostered the development of her own intellect.

> Much of the marble coldness of Hester's impression was to be attributed to the circumstance that her life had turned, in a great measure, from passion and feeling, to thought. Standing alone in the world,--alone, as to any dependence on society . . . she cast away the fragments of a broken chain. The world's law was no law for her mind. . . . She assumed a freedom of speculation . . . which our forefathers, had they known of it, would have held to be a deadlier crime than that stigmatized by the scarlet letter (p. 119).

Thus the beneficial role of Hester's long seclusion from ordinary human society becomes clear; it has

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[223] John C. Gerber notes that Hester controls the action in Chapters XIII-XX, "Form and Content in The Scarlet Letter," The New England Quarterly, 17 (1944), 25-55.

strengthened her sense of individuality and enabled her to develop a strong intellectual rationale for her unconventional feelings. Hester is assimilating something of her husband's characteristic mode of response. Nevertheless, her mental growth has been achieved at the expense of her more feminine mode of response: The "graceful foliage of her character" has been "withered up . . . . Some attribute had departed from her, the permanence of which had been essential to keep her a woman" (pp. 118-19). Moreover Hester does not act upon her instincts any more. Mere thought satisfies her, "without investing itself in the flesh and blood of action" (p. 119).

Hester's hour upon the scaffold with Dimmesdale has reawakened her feminine affects. She not only feels compassion and a sense of the responsibility which intimate contact entails, she experiences a renewal of the will to express her thought and instincts concretely in "the flesh and blood of action." Thus from this point in the romance onward, the pace of events seems to quicken and their direction to sharpen. The novel becomes truly dramatic as Hester assumes the role which the townspeople prophetically sensed to be her rightful one: "many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification--They said it meant Able; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength" (p. 117).

Chillingworth defers without argument to Hester's request that he free her from her oath of silence. He appears to recognize that in the earlier phase of his interaction with his wife and her lover, "the vow of secrecy was necessary so that he could direct events; now he is content merely to 'let the black flower blossom as it may.'"[224] It would seem that the intellect acquiesces to the change in the hierarchy of response as if recognizing that analysis is a temporary activity whose aim is to bring into play forces beyond its own control, forces which, once activated, take over the role of structuring subsequent response.

Following her disentanglement from the influence of analytic thought personified by her husband, Hester experiences something of a rebirth of her senses and passions. As in the beginning chapters of the romance, she opens her mind to the concrete images of memory and through her affective response to them revises, as she did seven years ago, her view of reality.

The similarities between the two periods of introspection instigated by Hester's first and second scaffold experiences emphasize her characteristic mode of response. In Chapter II, " . . . the scaffold of the pillory was a point of view that revealed to Hester Prynne the entire

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[224] Gerber, p. 30.

track along which she had been treading, since her happy infancy" (p. 47). She saw, in some detail, the village where she grew up, her home, her parents' faces, herself as a maiden, and finally the face of

> . . . a man well stricken in years, a pale, thin, scholar-like visage, with eyes dim and bleared by the lamp-light that had served them to pore over many ponderous books. . . . This figure of the study and the cloister, as Hester Prynne's womanly fancy failed not to recall, was slightly deformed, with the left shoulder a trifle higher than the right (p. 47).

Returning to the world around her, the "rude market-place," the scaffold, the "infant on her arm, and the letter A, in scarlet, fantastically embroidered with gold thread, upon her bosom" (p. 47), she seized the child to her breast and vowed: "Yes!--these were her realities,--all else had vanished!" (p. 47).

Seven years later following her second trip up the scaffold steps, Hester again reviews her past, especially her past with Roger Chillingworth:

> . . . she thought of those long-past days, in a distant land, when he used to emerge at eventide from the seclusion of his study, and sit down in the fire-light of their home, and in the light of her nuptial smile. . . . Such scenes had once appeared not otherwise than happy, but now, as viewed through the dismal medium of her subsequent life, they classed themselves among her ugliest remembrances. She marvelled how such scenes could have been! She marvelled how she could ever have been wrought upon to marry him! She deemed it her crime most to be repented of, that she had ever endured, and reciprocated, the lukewarm grasp of his hand, and had suffered the smile of her lips and eyes to mingle and melt into his own (p. 127).

Once again, the woman[225] within the reader consults past experiences for her proper orientation in the New World wilderness.[226] The passionate conclusion of Hester's second inspection of the concrete images of her memory is "'Yes, I hate him! . . . He betrayed me!'" (p. 127).

> The emotions of that brief space, while she stood gazing after the crooked figure of old Roger Chillingworth, threw a dark light on Hester's state of mind, revealing much that she might not otherwise have acknowledged to herself (p. 127).

Though Hester intended to free herself merely from her oath of silence to her husband when she met with him by the sea, their meeting has effected a far deeper divorce between them, and the strength of her passionate aversion

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[225] References to the "woman" or the "man" within the reader should not be confused with the Jungian concepts of anima and animus. The woman in the reader is the mode of response demonstrated by Hester and is characterized by a dependence upon an aesthetic involvement with the letter. The man within the reader is the response mode demonstrated by Dimmesdale and is characterized by efforts to articulate and understand the meaning of the text.

[226] Montgomery discusses a similar view about the importance of memory to the reading process: "There is . . . a close connection between Aristotle's basic definition of imagination and a concept of memory, a connection necessary to the continuation of active, conscious life, for without the ability to retain and recall the images of sensory experiences, each impression would be unique, distinct, disconnected, and therefore unfathomable. So the dependence of the imagination on the recollection of sense images--especially those produced by seeing--is what allows the rational powers of the mind to work in an extended and systematic way on its experience of the material world. Whatever else later thinkers might say about the imagination, they could not entirely ignore this fundamental link between matter and mind (p. 17).

to him suggests to her something which she has long tried to deny.

As in the beginning of the romance, the focus of the narrative turns to Hester Prynne's heart. There a belief which she has harbored for seven years strives toward the conscious articulation to come in her forest meeting with Dimmesdale.[227] Since her original scaffold experience, Hester has subconsciously cherished a forbidden vision of the spiritual union which she imagines to be the equivalent of the physical union between herself and the minister:

> . . . it might be that another feeling kept her within the scene and pathway that had been so fatal. There dwelt, there trode the feet of one with whom she deemed herself connected in a union, that, unrecognized on earth, would bring them together before the bar of final judgment, and make that their marriage-altar, for a joint futurity of endless retribution. Over and over again, the tempter of souls had thrust this idea upon Hester's contemplation, and laughed at the passionate and desperate joy with which she seized, and then strove to cast it from her. She barely looked the idea in the face, and hastened to bar it in its dungeon (p. 61).

In its merger of the worldly and heavenly, Hester's vision is an analogue, on the cosmic plane, of the union of adulteress and priest on the human plane and of the union of sensuous and symbolic modes of understanding in the psychological romance of the reader. Hester's concrete

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[227] "'What we did had a consecration of its own'" (p. 140).

imagination intuitively understands the paradoxical union of opposites upon which the literary experience depends, but "she hid the secret from herself, and grew pale whenever it struggled out of her heart, like a serpent from its hole" (p. 61).

Turning to Pearl, in whom the subliminal responses of both parents are growing toward conscious realization, the mother consults her daughter concerning the secret which she herself is struggling to articulate. Quizzing the child concerning her understanding of her mother's letter, Hester finds that Pearl has intuitively located the deep connection which the mother has sought to hide not only from the town but from herself:

> "Dost thou know, child, wherefore thy mother wears this letter?"
> "Truly do I!" answered Pearl, looking brightly into her mother's face. "It is for the same reason that the minister keeps his hand over his heart!" (p. 129).

Hester is strongly tempted to make Pearl a confidante of her feelings in order that her child might

> soothe away the sorrow that lay cold in her mother's heart . . . and [thus] . . . help her to overcome the passion, once so wild, and even yet neither dead nor asleep, but only imprisoned within the same tomb-like heart (p. 130).

Nevertheless, the mother recoils from her daughter's searching questions and denies that any connection exists between her own heart and the minister's. The vision of a sacred union between herself and her illicit lover is still Hester's closely guarded secret. Although, in

Hester's interview with Chillingworth, intellectual recognition of the bond between the concrete and the symbolic has occurred, the deep emotional significance of this fact is yet to be made known.

Nevertheless, the child's curiosity is piqued. Ripe for enlightenment, she persists through the course of the day in asking "'Mother . . . what does the scarlet letter mean?'" and "'Why does the minister keep his hand over his heart?'" (p. 131). Hester's anxiety over the child's penetrating intelligence finally drives the mother to threaten harsh repressive measures:

> "Hold thy tongue, naughty child!" answered her mother, with an asperity that she had never permitted to herself before. "Do not tease me; else I shall shut thee into the dark closet!" (p. 131).

The child's inquiries reflect growing enlightenment within the reader, enlightenment associated with the meteoric light which revealed the man and woman "who belong to one another" (p. 112) and with the "dark light of Hester's state of mind" (p. 127) which showed her that her bond to Dimmesdale superseded her bond to the husband she hated. Thus it is with increasing difficulty that Hester is able to hide the relationship between herself and Dimmesdale, for the connection between aesthetic and symbolic, particular and universal, sensuous and spiritual modes of response and modes of meaning is becoming clearer even as Pearl, the visible link between these opposites, is

growing in awareness of herself and of her relationship with her parents.

Hester unintentionally instigates the disclosure by determining to make known to Dimmesdale the identity of his physician. She chooses to meet him in the "primeval forest," a setting which seems to Hester to embody "the moral wilderness in which she had long been wandering" (p. 132). Here neither the analysis of Chillingworth nor the moralization of the Puritan townspeople can interfere with the free exchange of thought and emotion locked within the hearts of the lovers.

Hester waits for Dimmesdale in the ancient wood where a little brook flows

> . . . over a bed of fallen and drowned leaves. The trees impending over it had flung down great branches, from time to time, which choaked up the current, and compelled it to form eddies and black depths at some points . . . . All these giant trees and boulders of granite seemed intent on making a mystery of the course of this small brook; fearing, perhaps, that, with its neverceasing loquacity, it should whisper tales out of the heart of the old forest whence it flowed, or mirror its revelations on the smooth surface of a pool. Continually, indeed, as it stole onward, the streamlet kept up a babble, kind, quiet, soothing, but melancholy, like the voice of a young child that was spending its infancy without playfulness, and knew not how to be merry among sad acquaintance and events of sombre hue (p. 134).

The secretiveness of the "mother-forest" (p. 147) matches that of Hester. It is with great effort that the silence of nature and of Hester's heart can be overcome.

The narrator notes that "Pearl resembled the brook" (p. 134). She questions the meaning of its babble in much the same way that she has earlier questioned the import of her mother's unintelligible letter and, thus, of her own life. Going to her mother for an interpretation of the brook's meaning just as she has for an interpretation of the letter's, she asks: "'What does this sad little brook say, mother?'" (p. 134). The child rebukes the brook for being so forlorn, but "the little stream . . . still kept telling its unintelligible secret of some very mournful mystery" (p. 135).

Hester finds the minister in a state of weary despondency which matches that of the dark and sombre forest. His very will to live seems to have been destroyed. The real man within, having been given no outlet by his public image of holiness, is wasting away. As he and Hester meet, each questions the other as to whether he or she is still "in life":

> So strangely did they meet, in the dim wood, that it was like the first encounter, in the world beyond the grave, of two spirits who had been intimately connected in their former life, but now stood coldly shuddering, in mutual dread . . . . Each a ghost, and awe-stricken at the other ghost! (p. 136).

Sensation having been frozen by the power of abstraction into "marble coldness" (p. 119) and the symbolic attitude having strayed from reality to "the verge of lunacy" (p. 120), the reader's procreative powers of response seem

hopelessly lost. It is difficult to imagine that the ghosts who meet in the forest could ever have joined in passion to produce Pearl. On the surface of things, there would seem to be, as Hester feared, "no path to guide" the reader out of the "dismal maze" (p. 125) of confusion epitomized by the dark, trackless forest.

But the key to a resolution has already been found by Hester in the experience of genuine familial contact which she, Dimmesdale, and Pearl shared during their dark meeting upon the scaffold. Having been compelled by her emotions on that night to terminate her period of subjectivity to cold intellectualism, Hester takes from the mind the secret of its power to confuse and pervert other lines of response. As she advises Dimmesdale of the true character of his physician, it is as if she is articulating what Pearl unknowingly demonstrated on that dark night in May when the child pointed downward at the old scholar on the ground below the scaffold while the minister held his eyes up to the heavenly apparition. Now by Hester's confession the man who, driven to the insane limit of symbolic insight, saw in the heavens a letter which represented "his soul's history and fate" (p. 113) has had his eyes turned back down to earth. No longer does he see Chillingworth as "the arch-fiend, standing there, with a smile and a scowl, to claim his own" (p. 114), but as a mere man motivated by natural feelings of jealousy and

vindictiveness. Dimmesdale now has the objective "outsight"[228] which gave Chillingworth so great a power of manipulation over him. As the old physician explained to Hester, Dimmesdale

> . . . knew, by some spiritual sense,--for the Creator never made another being so sensitive as this,--he knew that no friendly hand was pulling at his heart-strings, and that an eye was looking curiously into him, which sought only evil, and found it. . . . With the superstition common to his brotherhood, he fancied himself given over to a fiend . . . . But it was the constant shadow of my presence!--the closest propinquity of the man whom he had most vilely wronged! (p. 124).

But the intellectual enlightenment which Hester brings[229] to Dimmesdale does little to resurrect his will. After hearing his lover's confession about her husband, the minister feels he can do nothing but "lie down again on these withered leaves . . . and die at once" (p. 141). Even when Hester admits her repressed feelings for Dimmesdale and expresses her long denied vision of the sacredness of their physical union, Dimmesdale's weakened condition is only mildly improved:

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[228] Male, p. 109.

[229] It is fitting that the matriarch of sensation should illuminate the spiritual imagination to a more realistic assessment of the reading experience, for though her profounder instincts have drawn her toward the visionary minister, the woman's receptivity to concrete reality has made her marriage to the man who demonstrates objective critical insight at least superficially appropriate.

> "What we did had a consecration of its own. We felt it so! We said so to each other! Hast thou forgotten it?"
> "Hush, Hester!" said Arthur Dimmesdale, rising from the ground. "No, I have not forgotten!" (p. 140).

The listless gloom of the forest has not been lifted. It is when Hester communicates her willingness to be Dimmesdale's partner in a new life beyond the sea, to support his physical weakness with her strong material presence, that the life of Dimmesdale's senses and passions is renewed:

> . . . a glow of strange enjoyment threw its flickering brightness over the trouble of his breast. It was the exhilarating effect--upon a prisoner just escaped from the dungeon of his own heart--of breathing the wild, free atmosphere of an unredeemed, unchristianized, lawless region. His spirit rose, as it were, with a bound, and attained a nearer prospect of the sky, than throughout all the misery which had kept him grovelling on the earth (p. 144).

The prospect of having as his partner in life the woman who is the source of his sensuous and passional self frees within the minister the joyous will to live.

In response to Dimmesdale's transformation, Hester casts away the letter, symbol of her past self, whereupon her physical and emotional being is given total freedom to express itself without letters or words in the medium of her flesh:

> By another impulse, she took off the formal cap that confined her hair; and down it fell upon her shoulders, dark and rich, with at once a shadow and a light in its abundance, and imparting the charm of softness to her features. There played around her mouth, and beamed out of her eyes, a radiant and tender smile, that

> seemed gushing from the very heart of womanhood. A crimson flush was glowing on her cheek, that had been long so pale. Her sex, her youth, and the whole richness of her beauty, came back from what men call the irrevocable past, and clustered themselves, with her maiden hope, and a happiness before unknown, within the magic circle of this hour (p. 145).

In flinging away her letter, Hester enables Dimmesdale and herself to evade for a time their responsibility to the social dimension of textual meaning in their long delayed pursuit of an interpretation which would help them to express their personal fantasies. Sunshine pours into the forest, and even the little brook is gladdened. Unlike the light which plays upon the glass-speckled walls of the edifice of reason in which the Governor lives, the light Hester despaired of gathering for her daughter, this light comes from the heart:

> Love, whether newly born, or aroused from a deathlike slumber, must always create a sunshine, filling the heart so full of radiance, that it overflows upon the outward world (p. 145).

Casting aside social responsibility in order to follow this "path to a better life" (p. 144) where what they feel for one another in their hearts can be expressed openly by their living together, Hester and Dimmesdale rediscover the pleasure of the text: "The pleasure of the text is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas--for my body does not have the same ideas I do."[230] Thus

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[230] Barthes, Pleasure, p. 17.

the obscure depths of the reader's emotional life are stirred to delight as his buried personal self anticipates the fulfillment of fantasies heretofore denied.[231] Still sheltered by the subliminal nature of the forest, the sensuous woman and soulful man within the reader blissfully entertain the dream of a state in which their deepest desires will be met.

Hester is quick to realize that in sharing this dream she and Dimmesdale will at last be able to share Pearl: "'Thou must know Pearl!'" (p. 146) she exclaims, joyfully recognizing that the child's father will be able to help not only in loving the child but in managing her as well. But Pearl's petulant return to the site of the lover's renewed commitment disrupts the idyllic scene, ominously foreshadowing the doom of her parents' plans. By refusing to accept her mother unless the "deadly symbol" be reinstated "on the old spot" (p. 151) and by refusing to accept the kiss of parenthood from a father who will not accept her before the world, Pearl, in effect, warns the pair that they cannot become a family outside the governance of the letter, for it/she is the formula in and through which they are united. The reader's nascent understanding of the text is mature enough at this point to

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[231] Holland maintains that the experience of "literary pleasure" comes from the reader's expression of his fantasy life through the "fantasy content of the literary work," Dynamics, p. 54.

reject any climax of response based upon the repudiation of the past, that is, of the traditional structure of meaning. The text cannot be read unless both the personal and social dimensions of its language are taken into account.

CHAPTER XI

PART II-B OF THE SCARLET LETTER

Hester and Dimmesdale's escape in the forest from the letter's conventional meaning has allowed an "hour's free breath" (p. 151) in which the reader's fantasy world has taken over the work of shaping response. Pleasure and excitement have returned to the literary experience as Chillingworth's analysis has ceased to dominate Hester's sensuous response; simultaneously, Dimmesdale's tendency to find symbolic meaning, a tendency which had been carried almost to the point of "lunacy" (p. 120), is tempered now by a new appreciation of what the concrete world can mean in itself. No longer will he search merely for the hypersignificance of objects and thus overlook "the pith and substance . . . of whatever realities there are around us, and which were meant by Heaven to be the spirit's joy and nutriment" (p. 107). Dimmesdale knows not only the deep physical and emotional satisfaction which harmonious adjustment to the world of the senses brings; he also knows the joy of spiritual renewal felt when supernatural processes are understood in and through the concrete medium of sensation and passion. Responding to the return of happiness to his troubled heart, he recognizes Hester as his redeemer:

> "O Hester, thou art my better angel! I seem to have flung myself--sick, sin-stained, and sorrow-blackened--down upon these forest-leaves,

> and to have risen up all made anew, and with new powers to glorify Him that hath been merciful? [sic]" (p. 145).

Then leaving the mossy dell where he and Hester renewed their love for one another, Dimmesdale

> . . . threw a backward glance; half expecting that he should discover only some faintly traced features or outline of the mother and the child, slowly fading into the twilight of the woods. So great a vicissitude in his life could not at once be received as real. But there was Hester, clad in her gray robe, still standing beside the tree-trunk . . . . And there was Pearl, too, lightly dancing from the margin of the brook . . . .So the minister had not fallen asleep, and dreamed! (pp. 152-53).

Unused to being so affected by the concretely real, Dimmesdale marvels that the world of sight and sense is truly coming to life for him.

As the minister passes through the forest and on into the town, "he took an impression of change from the series of familiar objects that presented themselves" (p. 154). His "mind vibrated between two ideas"--that everything was "so very strange, and yet so familiar" (p. 154). The minister's peculiar state of mind at this point resembles that which Wordsworth and Coleridge associated with the effect of genuine poetry:

> "And therefore is it the prime merit of genius and its most unequivocal mode of manifestation, so to represent familiar objects as to awaken in the minds of others a kindred feeling concerning them and that freshness of sensation which is the constant accompaniment of mental, no less than of bodily, convalescence. . . . In poems, equally as in philosophic disquisitions, genius produces the strongest impressions of novelty, while it rescues the most admitted truths from the impotence caused by the very circumstance of

> their universal admission. Truths of all others the most awful and mysterious, yet being at the same time of universal interest, are too often considered as so true, that they lose all the life and efficiency of truth, and lie bed-ridden in the dormitory of the soul, side by side with the most despised and exploded errors."[232]

What Hester's sensuous presence and love have done for Dimmesdale's perception of universal truths is to rescue it from the "impotence" wherein it lay, like Dimmesdale himself, "bed-ridden in the dormitory of the soul." This "faint, sick, miserable" (p. 144) man, whose visionary insight has long served as the window through which his parish perceives universal truth, has been unable to experience truth in any tangible way:

> To the untrue man, the whole universe is false,--it is impalpable,--it shrinks to nothing within his grasp. And he himself, in so far as he shows himself in a false light, becomes a shadow, or, indeed, ceases to exist (p. 107).

Though he spoke often enough of "God's own truth" (p. 98), Dimmesdale could not bring himself to be true. Now that he has the opportunity to achieve "a new life, and a true one, in exchange for . . . heavy doom" (p. 144), he becomes a different being, energetic, hopeful, and strong:

> . . . the same minister returned not from the forest. He might have said to the friends who greeted him,--"I am not the man for whom you take me! I left him yonder in the forest, withdrawn into a secret dell, by a mossy tree-trunk, and near a melancholy brook! Go, seek your minister, and see if his emaciated figure, his thin cheek, his white, heavy, pain-wrinkled brow, be

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[232] Coleridge, p. 155 (quoting from his The Friend).

> not flung down there like a cast-off garment!" (p. 155).

The minister's existence is now infused with the deep satisfaction which freshness of sensation and emotion bring. And as his Election Sermon will show, Dimmesdale's understanding of universal truth is correspondingly more profound. The capacity of the imaginative faculty within the reader to experience abstract ideas as having intense personal relevance has been restored. This momentous change has happened in the forest, however. A "revolution" in the "interior kingdom" (p. 155) of the reader has occurred, but the work of expressing this transformation in public is yet to be done.

Hastening home to rewrite his Election Sermon, Dimmesdale can scarcely resist the impulse to verbalize the fascination which the reality of the flesh now holds for him. Upon meeting a "venerable" and "holy" old deacon in whose character is personified the partriarchal tradition of the Church itself,

> . . . it was only by the most careful self-control that [Dimmesdale] . . . could refrain from uttering certain blasphemous suggestions that rose into his mind, respecting the communion supper (p. 155).

Shortly thereafter the minister is sorely tempted to whisper in the ear of "a most pious and exemplary" (p. 155) old widow an "unanswerable argument against the immortality of the human soul" rather than the "word of warm, fragrant, heaven-breathing Gospel truth" (p. 156) which

she expected to receive from his lips. Meeting next the youngest sister of the Church, "a maiden newly won," Dimmesdale can scarcely resist using her feeling of amorous reverence for him "to blight all the field of [her] innocence with but one wicked look, and develop all its opposite with but a word" (pp. 155-56). Following that encounter, he feels compelled to "teach some very wicked words to a knot of little Puritan children" and to share "a few improper jests . . . and heaven-defying oaths" (p. 157) with a drunken seaman from the Spanish Main. Finally, while striking his forehead with his hand and questioning whether he is mad or "given over utterly to the fiend" (p. 157), Dimmesdale meets the witch lady, Mistress Hibbens. Wagging her high head-dress at Dimmesdale a number of times, she alludes to the fact that, while in the forest, the minister has entered into a pact with Satan.

Dimmesdale is at once fascinated and appalled by the change in his speech which his forest experience threatens to effect. Now that the gate barring expression of internal fantasies has been opened, the aberrant and aggressive character of the buried primitive self is being revealed. Dimmesdale is much under the influence of the feminine response mode. "'Think for me, Hester! Thou art strong. Resolve for me!'" (p. 141) he had begged of his lover in the privacy of the forest. Having accepted her guidance,

Dimmesdale is now experiencing the riotous side of those primitive instincts to which he yielded himself when, in deciding to run away with Hester, he abandoned his responsibility to the town. The cruel self-assertiveness of the goodwives, the perversity of the witch lady, and Pearl's occasional moments of demonic insensitivity to others are all reflected in Dimmesdale's impulses "to do some strange, wild, wicked thing or other" (p. 155) on the road home.

But, as Male[233] and Gross[234] remind us, Hester's way is ultimately rejected by Dimmesdale. Though he could not have survived without the rejuvenation of body and mind which she gave him by imparting to him her dream of sensuous happiness, the minister will return to his masculine mode of response and transform the primitive longings of his heart into something which will contribute to the structure of traditional wisdom upon which his society is based. Were he to express his feelings now, Dimmesdale would be turning language into a means of asserting self-indulgent fantasy in an aggressive and disrespectful way upon the world view of others. Such a pattern of response

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[233] Male, p. 114.

[234] Seymour Gross, "'Solitude, and Love, and Anguish': The Tragic Design in The Scarlet Letter," in The Scarlet Letter, ed. S. Bradley, R. C. Beatty, E. H. Long, and Seymour Gross, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1978), p. 364.

would be the abuse of language in a meanly egoistic way for personal gratification rather than for communication enlightening to both the critic and his audience. Thus the minister, who has always found it "essential to his peace to feel the presence of a faith about him, supporting, while it confined him within its iron framework" (p. 91), hurries for refuge and aid to his study where he has long found in his "library, rich with parchment-bound folios of the Fathers, and the lore of Rabbis, and monkish erudition" (p. 93) the framework which he, as a man, needs to structure his personal response: "In order to grasp the truth in his art form," Male explains, Dimmesdale "must return to the rich intellectual resources of the study . . . to join the new vision with the rich utterances of the past."[235] Dimmesdale writes his sermon in a fever of "earnest haste and ecstasy":

> Left alone, the minister . . . requested food, which . . . he ate with revenous appetite. Then, flinging the already written pages of the Election Sermon into the fire, he forthwith began another, which he wrote with such an impulsive flow of thought and emotion, that he fancied himself inspired; and only wondered that Heaven should see fit to transmit the grand and solemn music of its oracles through so foul an organ-pipe as he (p. 160).

Hawthorne's description of the day on which Dimmesdale is to deliver his new sermon is loaded with signs that a great change in the order of things is at

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[235] Male, p. 114.

hand. A festive holiday mood is everywhere apparent; all the somber Puritans, even the sooty blacksmith and the old jailer, are happy. "'For today,'" Hester explains to Pearl, "'a new man is beginning to rule over them; and so . . . they make merry and rejoice; as if a good and golden year were at length to pass over the poor old world!'" (p. 163).

The procession of ministers and magistrates appears to summarize the evolution of the way men experience the world (or the text), an evolution which has led to this day when "a new man" begins to rule. Music is heard first. It evidences "no great skill," but achieves

> the great object for which the harmony of drum and clarion addresses itself to the multitude,--that of imparting a higher and more heroic air to the scene of life that passes before the eye (p. 167).

Pure emotion, the wordless language of music stirs the sensibilities of men toward the development of the "higher and more heroic" faculties demonstrated by those who follow. The sparkling weapons and colorful plumes of the soldiers, first visible segment of the procession, "had a brilliancy of effect which no modern display can aspire to equal" (p. 168). In these men are preserved the noble heroism and romantic charm of the "ancient and honorable" (p. 168) profession of warriors who threw all their energies into the extremity of physical action. After them come "men of civil eminence . . . better worth a

thoughtful observer's eye" and who make "the warrior's haughty stride look vulgar, if not absurd" (p. 168). Their energies having been subdued as experience gave way to reflection, these heroes of the mind are distinguished for their "solid wisdom" (p. 168) and "activity of intellect" (p. 169). "Next in order . . . came the young and eminently distinguished divine" whose office was the pinnacle which "aspiring ambition" (p. 169) could attain. In him masculine energy seems abstracted to the highest degree. He does not seem to hear the music or even feel his own movement as he marches to the meeting house. His mind is engaged in some "preternatural activity" (p. 169) which carries his intellect to an ethereal region where even the men of civil eminence cannot follow. In the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale, the evolution of emotion to action to experienced wisdom and finally to spiritualized abstraction is climaxed.

But this process whereby the intellect is heightened and refined has taken the hero of consciousness to his furthest point from the life of the senses, for as the minister passes Hester Prynne on his way to the meeting house, he is oblivious of her presence:

> Hester Prynne, gazing steadfastly at the clergyman, felt a dreary influence come over her, but wherefore or whence she knew not; unless that he seemed so remote from her own sphere, and utterly beyond her reach. One glance of recognition, she had imagined must needs pass between them. . . . He, moving proudly past, . . . so unattainable in his worldly position, and still more so in that far

> vista of his unsympathizing thoughts, through which she now beheld him! Her spirit sank with the idea that . . . there could be no real bond betwixt the clergyman and herself. And thus much of woman was there in Hester, that she could scarcely forgive him . . . for being able so completely to withdraw himself from their mutual world; while she groped darkly, and stretched forth her cold hands, and found him not (p. 170).

Pearl is deeply puzzled by the aloofness which brings emotional pain to her mother:

> "What a strange, sad man is he!" said the child, as if speaking partly to herself. "In the dark night-time, he calls us to him, and holds thy hand and mine, as when we stood with him on the scaffold yonder! And in the deep forest, where only the old trees can hear, and the strip of sky see it, he talks with thee, sitting on a heap of moss! And he kisses my forehead, too, so that the little brook would hardly wash it off! But here in the sunny day, and among all the people, he knows us not; nor must we know him! A strange, sad man is he, with his hand always over his heart!" (p. 163).

Both mother and daughter feel that it is only right that some recognition of the familial intimacy expressed in the forest should be made public.

Even though his thoughts are not on Hester now, it is clear from his vigorous gait and commanding posture that Dimmesdale is still under the influence of Hester's sensuous strength. Before he met with her in the forest, his spirit was "so shattered and subdued, that it could hardly hold itself erect" (p. 141). But "instinctively exercising a magnetic power" (p. 141) over him, Hester renewed both his physical and spiritual vitality. The power of the ideas possessing and inspiring Dimmesdale during the

procession seems directly related to the strength imparted to him by Hester,[236] but he is apparently unable, at the time when he is carried aloft by his vision of divine truth, to see the connection between the potency of the material world and the meaningfulness of the spiritual. In attaining so high a degree of abstraction, his ideas have lost touch with their foundation in concrete experience.

Standing beside the scaffold of the pillory while Dimmesdale delivers the sermon inside the meeting house, Hester hears the "indistinct, but varied, murmur and flow of the minister's very peculiar voice" (p. 172), but she cannot hear his words. It is as if a sensibility so sensuous as Hester's is prohibited from understanding, in any intellectual sense, the words of spiritual wisdom spoken by her lover.

> Now she caught the low undertone, as of the wind sinking down to repose itself; then ascended with it, as it rose through progressive gradations of sweetness and power, until its volume seemed to envelop her with an atmosphere of awe and solemn grandeur (p. 172).

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[236] Anne Marie MacNamara ["The Character of Flame: The Function of Pearl in The Scarlet Letter," American Literature, 27 (1956), 551] and Crews (p. 148) speculate that Dimmesdale made up his mind, before the New England holiday, to climb the steps of the scaffold and confess after delivering his sermon. The point taken here is that there is no reason to suppose that the transformation has taken place already and that it is more consistent with other developments in the novel to view it as the spontaneous result of delivering the sermon.

"Comprehending nothing of the language" (p. 172), she is deeply moved by its sound and rhythm. She travels with it physically as it traces the flight of the minister's spirit.

Although the gap separating Hester and Dimmesdale is still wide, it has been bridged in one sense. Although Dimmesdale is "so abstracted" that he cannot hear the music of the procession or see his forest lover while he marches to the meeting house, and although Hester is utterly excluded from any intellectual comprehension of what is on Dimmesdale's mind, they have assimilated parts of one another into their own selves. Hester partakes of Dimmesdale's spiritual ecstasy by virtue of her sensitivity to "the mere tone and cadence" (p. 172) of his voice. Similarly, it is Hester's sensuous potency which empowers Dimmesdale's spiritual and physical being. As Gross demonstrates, the fact that Hester and Dimmesdale "pursue their separate destinies to the end"[237] makes The Scarlet Letter tragic. But the lovers are united in Pearl and, thus, in the reader's growing understanding of the text, for their child is "the material union, and the spiritual idea, in whom they met, and were to dwell immortally together" (p. 148). And though the lovers seem worlds apart while Dimmesdale marches to the meeting house, the reality

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[237] Gross, p. 365.

of a union between them more profound than their separation is apparent when Dimmesdale delivers his most powerful sermon, and Hester, the source of his power, listens outside to the music of his voice. In effect, that part of the reader which, like Dimmesdale, is articulate is realizing literary experience verbally while at a more elemental level within the reader where sensation and emotion dominate the experience is being felt.

Though Hawthorne does not relate the particular words of Dimmesdale's sermon, he does provide a general account of its message:

> His subject, it appeared, had been the relation between the Deity and the communities of mankind, with a special reference to the New England which they were here planting in the wilderness. And, as he drew towards the close, a spirit as of prophecy had come upon him, constraining him to its purpose as mightily as the old prophets of Israel were constrained; only with this difference, that, whereas the Jewish seers had denounced judgments and ruin on their country, it was him mission to foretell a high and glorious destiny for the newly gathered people of the Lord (p. 176).

The words of the sermon were written immediately after the minister had returned from the forest, while his plans to escape with Hester from the judgment of their society were still fresh in his mind. The joy he felt when she promised to accompany him to a land where they could be free had spirited him through the forest and invigorated his will to live. Sensing an analogy between the utopian dream that he and Hester embraced in the forest and the

impulse which brought the Bostonians to the New World, Dimmesdale has written a sermon which prophesies for the colonists the same joy which he believes he and Hester can achieve by starting afresh in a new land. Like the forest-born plans of the desperate lovers, the New England settlement, "which they were here planting in the wilderness" (p. 176), is a hope for "the better life" (p. 145). The sermon explores the dream of an escape from judgment and suffering which led both the colonists and the lovers to devise their plans to flee. In it, Dimmesdale has achieved the critic's goal of finding for his personal literary experience a verbal analogy which is meaningful to society as a whole.[238] But the sermon appears to convince Dimmesdale, on a profoundly spiritual level, that although his dream would liberate him from one kind of judgment, it brings him round to another.[239] The "broad pathway to the sea" (p. 142) which the minister and his

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[238] This process is different, at least in its emphasis, from sublimation. It is important that Dimmesdale has found an analogue to his unacceptable fantasy which is not merely socially acceptable but which is universally valid.

[239] The colony has experienced a similar phenomenon: "The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison" (p. 39), that is, they have had to reckon with natural and social forms of punishment for original and subsequent sins.

lover plan to follow, the road to personal pleasure in the text, where the senses and fantasy direct response, leads away from the ability to exercise critical judgment. The reader who terminates his reading quest there will be lost to the social and conventional view of the text, for if he is not "engulfed, overwhelmed, drowned,"[240] or otherwise lost in the sea of unconscious fantasy, he will be removed by it a great distance from what the rest of his world is saying or can understand about the text.

By the time Dimmesdale has delivered his sermon, he has already missed the boat, so to speak. Because he could not forget his commitment to society ("'At least, they shall say of me,'" he thought as he returned from the forest to write the Election Sermon, "'that I leave no public duty unperformed,'" p. 153), he transforms his private fantasies into a universally meaningful message without actually intending to do so.[241] Speaking in the meeting house, Dimmesdale demonstrates the critical effort to relate his literary experience to "the total dialogue in which all literature exists."[242] Hester, standing alone outside the church, the ornate embroidery on her breast,

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[240] Holland uses these words to describe what happens within (oral) fantasy, Dynamics, p. 35.

[241] Holland notes that a "reading of a literary work in terms of fantasy . . . is the material from which other . . . readings are made," Dynamics, p. 31.

[242] Ong, p. 1164.

is excluded from this kind of contact with the rest of humanity:

> As was usually the case wherever Hester stood, a small, vacant area--a sort of magic circle--had formed itself about her, into which, though the people were elbowing one another at a little distance, none ventured, or felt disposed to intrude (p. 166).

In Hester, the attitude of self-contained aestheticism predominates whereby

> The art "object," insofar as it is an object with at least an oblique spatial reference and not a word, has somehow divorced itself from the flow of conversation and understanding in which human life moves.[243]

Dimmesdale's commitment to the spoken word complements Hester's silent isolation. The minister demonstrates the critical impulse to address the world at large, for whatever reason[244] and turn an utterly personal literary experience into something meaningful for his society. Thus Dimmesdale has abandoned the route to the engulfing sea of personal response.

Following the conclusion of the sermon, the "train of venerable and majestic fathers . . . the Governors and

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[243] Ong, p. 1164.

[244] When Dimmesdale prides himself on the fact that he will be able to deliver his Election Sermon, he seems more concerned with the fact that his reputation will not be marred by this omission than with any genuine concern for the souls of those whom he will be addressing. The point is that he now feels inextricably linked to the social world he moves in. He defines himself and his ideas in relation to the group of which he is a part.

magistrates, the old and wise men, the holy ministers and all that were eminent and renowned" (pp. 176-77) resume their procession through the reverent crowd to the town hall in order to conclude the Election Day ceremonies with a feast. The mode of response typified by those educated and experienced men is at its peak, for Dimmesdale has borne the very souls of his congregation aloft with his eloquence. He has achieved the critical goal of finding, for his personal literary experience, a myth of meaning in which his society can share. The "irrepressible outburst of . . . enthusiasm kindled in the auditors by [his] high strain of eloquence" is a shout, a "mighty swell of many voices, blended into one great voice by the universal impulse which makes likewise one vast heart out of the many" (p. 177). The minister's sermon has made the town a genuine community sharing in the same experience, for "Each felt the impulse in himself, and, in the same breath, caught it from his neighbor" (p. 177). It is for this act of universalizing vision and response that the man within the reader is so highly regarded. His work of abstracting from personal experience an essence in which all people may share makes him a hero, a myth-maker who redeems his world by creating for it an epic story which makes personal fulfillment universally available. Therefore, "Never, on New England soil, had stood the man so honored by his mortal brethren as the preacher!" (p. 177). At

this point the minister's career is "more brilliant and full of triumph than any previous one, or than any which could hereafter be" (p. 176). He commanded

> . . . the very proudest eminence of superiority, to which the gifts of intellect, rich lore, prevailing eloquence, and a reputation of whitest sanctity, could exalt a clergyman in New England's earliest days, when the professional character was of itself a lofty pedestal (p. 176).

Through his sermon, Dimmesdale has taken his auditors to the holy of holies, and they return to prosaic reality "with all their awe and wonder still heavy on them" (p. 175).

But now the minister grows "feeble and pale" (p. 177). While the music still urges the procession "onward to the festival!" (p. 178), he staggers and stops.

> The energy--or say, rather, the inspiration which had held him up . . .--was withdrawn, now that it had so faithfully performed its office. The glow . . . was extinguished (p. 177).

A "deathlike hue" is on his face: "It was hardly a man with life in him, that tottered on his path so nervelessly, yet tottered, and did not fall!" (p. 177). As if the direction taken by masculine response--with its progressive refinement of the intellect--cannot continue, the procession of "wise men" and "holy ministers" (p. 177) is halted as their most exalted member collapses. The crowd half expects to see the fainting minister rapt away to heaven before their eyes, so certain are they that his apotheosis is at hand.

But something different is happening to the minister. He walks toward the scaffold where Hester stands with a motion which "resembled the wavering effort of an infant, with its mother's arms in view, outstretched to tempt him forward" (p. 177). The minister who had been exalted to the highest position which a man of his day could attain has become a little child again. A "new man" is indeed "beginning to rule over" (p. 163) the people, for the old mode of masculine response which, through the application of a trained intellect, attempted to etherealize the literary experience is about to return to the source of its power. The time has come for the man to recognize his tie to woman, not merely in the privacy of the "mother-forest" (p. 147), but in the public marketplace where "wise men" (p. 177) sit in power. It is by acknowledging this tie that Dimmesdale can show the world the new man who has been growing within him ever since he left his old self in the forest "like a cast-off garment" (p. 155).

The change in Dimmesdale has come not in the process of conceiving the sermon but in delivering it. What occurs within the sacred space of the meeting house dramatizes the moment at which the power of one man's private fantasy is made available, through language, to society. In expressing personal response in such a way that it is meaningful to others, i.e., in expressing it in more universal terms, the critic becomes one with his audience.

Personal responses which were aberrant, which were leading toward an engulfing sea of fantasy and, thus, promised to sever him from his culture, cease to be meaningful in any compelling way. Dimmesdale's personal fantasy, having found expression in the epic metaphor of that "high and glorious destiny" (p. 176) which Providence has in store for the wilderness community, is forever wed now for its fulfillment to the collective endeavor of the people of Boston. Thus the minister loses the energy which brought him to the meeting house but gains something in its stead, something that keeps him, as he "tottered on his path so nervelessly" (p. 177) from falling though he "was hardly a man with life in him" (p. 177), for the "sacred message" which he delivered has "brought its own strength along with it from heaven" (p. 177), the strength of universal relevance.

The reversal of purpose which Dimmesdale experiences in this final scene suggests that the act of communicating one's vision of the letter to a more general audience does not destroy or repress the personal level of response but rather changes and enriches it. Dimmesdale has previously feared the judgment of men and imagined that he would never in this life reveal the letter hidden within his heart. That revelation, he assumed, would come on "the great judgment day" (p. 112) spoken of in "Holy Writ" (p. 97). But Dimmesdale's sermon has brought God's

judgment to New England. The spirit of prophecy which descended upon him has revealed to Dimmesdale that the harsh, authoritarian form of judgment which operated in former times is no longer in force. God's judgment of the New World will be acceptance and affirmation.

The two forms of judgment at issue here have special significance in terms of the role of the reader-critic. According to Ong, "criticism means radically [i.e., etymologically] judgment, which in turn means not explaining or diagramming but saying yes or no."[245] To a greater extent than we probably realize, criticism as it is commonly undertaken is often based on the reader's having said "No" to the text, for as Sontag suggests, interpretation typically "indicates a dissatisfaction (conscious or unconscious) with the work, a wish to replace it by something else."[246] Explicatory criticism based on a negative judgment of the text shows a lack of sensitivity to "the sensuous surface of art."[247] Unable to see and respond to "the pure, untranslatable, sensuous immediacy"[248] of its images, sounds, and stories, the insensitive critic misprizes what is purely sensory and seeks to establish

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[245] Ong, p. 1161.

[246] Sontag, p. 10.

[247] Sontag, p. 13.

[248] Sontag, p. 9.

some rational idea as the proper meaning of the work.

This approach to the text is clearly the one taken in the beginning of The Scarlet Letter when the town, condemning Hester for what they consider an excess of sensuousness in her past behavior and in her richly colored embroidery, attempt to force her to yield up the secret hidden within her heart. The magistrates, in mandating that Hester wear the A of adultery, take a ready-made abstraction and impose it upon the reader's personal experience from without. In drawing the magic circle around Hester, they severe themselves from an immediate, personal experience of the text. Negative judgment of this kind stimulates critical analysis like that undertaken by Chillingworth.

But as the New Man labors to reach the scaffold, he ushers in a new form of judgment. Though he stumbles, he refuses to avail himself of the assistance offered by Wilson, Bellingham, and Chillingworth in turn. To accept their support now would be to return to the rule of old men and the Old Man. Their externally imposed authority--on a church, on a society, on a family--fosters a type of judgment from which the minister has just been inwardly released. Dimmesdale is moving toward judgment, but it is not the kind of judgment represented by these men and like that which the "Jewish seers had denounced . . . on their country" (p. 176).

The New Man represents a break with the modern mode of criticism condemned by Sontag and Dryden whereby the intellect probes, digs, and pries into the text, forcing it to yield up its secret.[249] He voluntarily articulates the secret he has known all along, a secret which lay hidden in his heart but which could not be expressed until he had found a universally valid allegory for it. That having been accomplished in the meeting house, an outpouring of sympathy follows: The "great heart" of the people was "overflowing with tearful sympathy, as knowing that some deep life-matter . . . was now to be laid open to them" (p. 179). The marketplace feels what its minister feels and cannot but know what he knows.

The scaffold confession follows the church service as its inevitable sequel. The "explication," i.e., "unfolding," upon the pillory platform dramatizes the moment when the secret of the letter is revealed from the inside out, through empathy, and not the other way around, through analysis. The minister has synthesized "explicatory criticism" and "empathic criticism."[250] The denouement of the romance resembles Dimmesdale's earlier description of God's ultimate judgment when "the dark problem" shall be "made plain," due not to the external imposition of some

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[249] See Chapter VII, pp. 148-49 of this paper.

[250] Ong, p. 1165.

abstract code of judgment but to a spontaneous outpouring from within of the "knowledge . . . needful to the completest solution of that problem" (p. 97). Uttered voluntarily through "Divine mercy," this kind of confession is not coerced and is in no way "part of the retribution" (p. 97), that is, it is not made in an atmosphere of negation:

> "That, surely, were a shallow view of it. No; these revelations, unless I greatly err, are meant merely to promote the intellectual satisfaction of all intellectual beings, who will stand waiting, on that day, to see the dark problem of this life made plain. A knowledge of men's hearts will be needful to the completest solution of that problem. And I conceive, moreover, that the hearts holding such miserable secrets . . . will yield them up, at that last day, not with reluctance, but with a joy unutterable" (p. 97).

The New Man, still a hero of the intellect, has demonstrated that the experience of meaning depends upon confession. Whereas the former Man attempted to take the secret of the letter by storm, his successor delivers it up from his own heart by virtue of the Divine grace made available when, through language, he achieves a meaningful synthesis of personal and universal reference.

There is "victory" (p. 180) in Dimmesdale's death of "triumphant ignominy" (p. 181) because in rejecting the kind of judgment represented by the older men, Dimmesdale institutes a new mode of literary judgment. Calling, therefore, to Hester Prynne for the liberating support

provided by her strong material presence, Dimmesdale is able to mount the platform of the pillory:

> "Hester Prynne," cried he, with a piercing earnestness, "in the name of Him, so terrible and so merciful, who gives me grace, at this last moment, to do what--for my own sin and miserable agony--I withheld myself from doing seven years ago, come hither now, and twine thy strength about me! . . . Come, Hester, come! Support me up yonder scaffold!" (pp. 178-79).

The kind of criticism "desirable today,"[251] Sontag contends, would "reveal the sensuous surface of art" in a "really accurate, sharp, loving"[252] way. In his demonstration of this kind of criticism, Dimmesdale must call Hester to him, for his new mode of response has grown out of his intimate involvement with her sensuous mode of vision. He has been able to apprehend the universal reference of the letter only because she shared with him her concrete fantasy.

In the final pillory scene, the purely aesthetic experience demonstrated by Hester operates in close relation to the more phenomenological response demonstrated by Dimmesdale. Now her lover supplies an explanatory context for her rich embroidery. The objective correlative which her single, cryptic metaphor represented is now elaborated and made intelligible to society at large by the speaker of the Word. The intellect is not excluded from this

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[251] Sontag, p. 12.

[252] Sontag, p. 13.

experience. Chillingworth is present, but his tyranny is broken. "'Thou hast escaped me!'" he repeats "more than once" (p. 181) to Dimmesdale. The old alchemist stands by in amazement, passively witnessing a revelation which transcends rational understanding. Though analytic interpretation has played an essential role in the literary resolution which is climaxed on the scaffold, its power of comprehension is surpassed at this apocalyptic moment. The knowledge Dimmesdale yields up has been within his heart all along. But the ability to articulate it is the result of a complex interplay of responses. Chillingworth's probing analysis, Hester's sensuous potency, and Pearl's ever expanding will to know the truth have helped bring the minister to the point at which he can use his own gift with words to deliver the secret of the text to consciousness.

Because all of the reader's modes of response to the text are operating in unison, the sense of triumph felt by Dimmesdale is balanced by the feeling of loss expressed by the woman. Clinging to her literal-minded vision that God's ultimate resolution of the "dark problem" (p. 97) involves the marriage of man and woman, Hester questions her dying lover as to the possibility that there is a place in his vision of spiritual triumph for the human needs she feels so strongly: "'Shall we not meet again?" whispered she, bending her face down close to his. "Shall

we not spend our immortal life together?'" (p. 181). Desperately longing for some concrete glimpse of the supernatural peace which, soothing Dimmesdale's long tormented spirit, enables him to sink "into deep repose," the woman beseeches, "'Thou lookest far into eternity, with those bright dying eyes! Then tell me what thou seest?'" (p. 181). But whatever Dimmesdale's dying eyes see is not representable in concrete terms. Signalling the conclusion of the narrative proper with his final "'Farewell'" (p. 181), the minister puts an end to his own magnetic eloquence. To the extent that the reader's sensuous mode is active, the tragedy of the lovers evokes a sense of almost unsupportable grief. Responding to this vivid scene of broken dreams, frustrated love, and physical agony, the reader's human sensibilities are painfully engaged. Though he may intuit, with the dying priest of the imagination, the presence of paradoxical triumph achieved by universalizing his vision, the feminine impulse within him submits to this "inevitable fate" reluctantly, like Hester Prynne "against her strongest will" (p. 178).

Never has the "controlled division of sympathies"[253] been so pronounced as when the action of the romance climaxes upon the scaffold. The extent to which critics disagree over the moral fates of Hester and Dimmesdale

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[253] Lewis, p. 113.

attests to the fact that no single interpretation can sum up the multitude of themes converging upon the novel's conclusion. The presence of the four main characters upon the scaffold signifies that holistic response has been achieved. The object-centered focus of aestheticism, in which literary experience is sensuous, concrete, and untranslatable, is accompanied by the impulse toward verbal criticism whereby the same experience is universalized and shared with others. Pearl's instant maturation reflects the fact that the reader's experience of the text now incorporates the complete range of his response capabilities.

CHAPTER XII

CONCLUSION

When Pearl kisses her father:

> A spell was broken. The great scene of grief, in which the wild infant bore a part, had developed all her sympathies; and as her tears fell upon her father's cheek, they were the pledge that she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow, nor for ever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it (p. 181).

The spell which is broken when Pearl recognizes Dimmesdale as a parent marks her transition from the isolated life she led as an elf-child to acceptance by the world at large. Now that the mystery of her paternity is solved, the gap in her existence which made her appear strange is filled, and her life for the first time shows its relation to the society in which she had seemed such a misfit. In accepting the minister as her father, Pearl accepts the social world of which he was said to be the "head" (p. 143) and is accepted by it.

In the same way that "the scarlet letter endowed with life" gains entry into the world of Boston, so too the reader's experience of the text as a work of art is assimilated into the larger context of his daily experience. No longer "merely" fiction, captivating but unreal or set apart from the actual world, the text is now felt to be intimately related to the reader's life as a whole. In Culler's terms, the reader's understanding of the text has

been "naturalized," for the strangeness of the text has vanished along with the strangeness of Pearl's character.

Culler's discussion of how the difference between the written word and the spoken word influences the process of naturalization may help to clarify further the climactic moment upon the scaffold in terms of the reading process. The distinction between the two modes of language, Culler explains, is

> . . . the source of the fundamental paradox of literature: we are attracted to literature because it is obviously something other than ordinary communication; its formal and fictional qualities bespeak a strangeness, a power, an organization, a permanence which is foreign to ordinary speech. Yet the urge to assimilate that power and permanence or to let that formal organization work upon us requires us to make literature into a communication, to reduce its strangeness, and to draw upon supplementary conventions which enable it, as we say, to speak to us. The difference which seemed the source of value becomes a distance to be bridged by the activity of reading and interpretation. The strange, the formal, the fictional, must be recuperated or naturalized, brought within our ken, if we do not want to remain gaping before monumental inscriptions.[254]

Throughout The Scarlet Letter Hawthorne emphasizes the difference between Hester's and Dimmesdale's modes of expressing their inner experience. Hester is silent, proclaiming her secret to the world in her densely metaphoric embroidery of the letter A. Like Culler's "monumental inscription," Hester's letter has "the effect of a spell,

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[254] Culler, p. 134.

taking her out of ordinary relations with humanity, and inclosing her in a sphere by herself" (p. 44). Even when ministering to her community, Hester does not communicate with them:

> Meeting them in the street, she never raised her head to receive their greeting. If they were resolute to accost her, she laid her finger on the scarlet letter, and passed on (p. 117).

Hester's life is centered upon the written letter. Dimmesdale, however, is a speaker. His rich "vocal organ" (p. 172) is his most striking characteristic. His voice is a special sound which is heard throughout the romance; from the first time he speaks until he utters his dying words, that voice "vibrate[s] within all hearts," bringing "the listeners into one accord of sympathy" (p. 53). Gifted with the "Tongue of Flame," the minister has the power to speak to "the whole human brotherhood in the heart's native language" (p. 104). What is native to the human heart, the romance suggests, is the language of sound, not of letters. The natural medium of communication among persons is speech. Words spoken in the context of a living situation have immediate relevance and meaning. Writing, on the other hand, exists in something of a vacuum and is potentially far more enigmatic than utterances delivered directly between persons. Pearl, brought up within the spell cast by her mother's letter, appears physically "perfect" (p. 68) and magnificently

beautiful but strange, "peculiar" (p. 69), and "unearthly" (p. 71) in the same way that the text,[255] by virtue of its special status as written discourse, seems extraordinary, problematic, and foreign.

> Writing has something of the character of an inscription, a mark offered to the world and promising, by its solidity and apparent autonomy, meaning which is momentarily deferred. Precisely for that reason it calls for interpretation, and our modes of interpretation are essentially ways of constructing communicative circuits into which we can fit it.[256]

Through most of the romance, Pearl is an "incomprehensible" (p. 70) child, unsympathizing and almost inhuman. An alien of Boston, she exists with her mother in a "circle of seclusion from human society" (p. 71).

The child's separation from her father, one of the most important members of Bostonian society and its most eloquent spokesman, suggests the cleavage between our experience of literary art and the language which we typically use to communicate with others. It is the breach which Plato had in mind when he "condemned writing because the written word was cut loose and liberated from the communicative presence which alone could be the source of meaning and truth."[257] Or, as Derrida explains, writing is

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[255] Or the reader's interiorized perception of it, i.e., the "letter endowed with life."

[256] Culler, p. 134.

[257] Culler, p. 132.

> a structure cut off from any absolute responsibility or from consciousness as ultimate authority, orphaned and separated since birth from the support of the father.[258]

At the moment when Pearl kisses her father, the reader has effected the reconciliation within himself of the written text and the stream of spoken language upon which meaningful communication within his society depends. The letter as an aesthetic object, i.e., Hester's scarlet A, and the word as a means of communication, i.e., Dimmesdale's moving oratory, now come together upon the center state of the reading mind to acknowledge their joint relationship to the "letter endowed with life."

It is important to note that the process of literary naturalization, as it is dramatized in The Scarlet Letter, does not depend upon the reader's changing the text so that it will fit in with his view of the world. On the contrary, it depends upon a momentous change in the reader's world view, a change effected through the transformation of the reader's command of language. The process whereby Dimmesdale grows out of his debilitating bondage to the conventions of his society traces the process whereby the reader overcomes his accustomed mode of perceiving the world and himself via language. Guided by Hester's individualistic thinking and strengthened by her firm material presence, Dimmesdale casts off his old self

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[258] Jacques Derrida, Marges de la philosophie (Minuit, Paris, 1967), p. 376, quoted by Culler, p. 132.

and his old manner of speaking even as the reader, receptive to the direction suggested by the text and relying heavily upon the concrete presence of the written word, rises above his old habits of discourse. What Hester does for Dimmesdale in the forest, the aesthetic experience of the text does for the reader-critic; it grants him the power to reshape his world and himself. Dimmesdale, after making the decision to devote himself fully to Hester's concrete vision of personal fulfillment, becomes a new man whose perception of the world is radically different, for he sees the world through the eyes, i.e., the words, of the text and articulates his vision of life with metaphors and structures borrowed thence. Thus when the "spirit as of prophecy" (p. 176) descends upon Dimmesdale while he is delivering his sermon, his description of the new society is deeply structured by the dream of bliss he has come to know through Hester.

His message is less a prophecy of the New World's distant future than a revelation of the new order which prevails in it now, for when the Bostonians leave the meeting house, they appear to <u>be</u> the society which Dimmesdale predicted. No longer a settlement ruled by the severe judgment of Old World law, they are a community knitted together by the common experience of a divine presence among them. The "rapture" they feel inside the meeting house breaks "into speech" (p. 175) when they return to the scene of daily life:

> The street and the market-place absolutely babbled, from side to side . . . His hearers could not rest until they had told one another of what each knew better than he could tell or hear (p. 175).

Here the novel's dramatization of the special power which may be tapped by the spoken word reaches a peak. The people of Boston are united by a sense of accord and mutual understanding which transcends actual words. Their ability to empathize with one another is felt as nothing less than a divine presence among them. Within the sacred space of the meeting house, language has been a kind of ritual celebrating all that they share: a common moment in history, a common location in the world, and a common focus of thought. These things plus the music of a human voice speaking have immeasurably enhanced their experience of the actual words which Dimmesdale spoke. In The Scarlet Letter it is the oral and aural dimension of language and the total living context in which speech is uttered which form the sacred space where people meet and share meaning. An individual who can command the power of this situation is truly a "Tongue of Flame" (p. 104).

The language of the marketplace, i.e., the language of daily life, the medium through which the reader understands the world on an everyday basis, has been enlivened and enhanced. Then, as the power of ordinary language is stretched, the reader-critic discovers the ability to respond verbally to the text as never before, and that is

why, when Dimmesdale leaves the meeting house, he can do what he was unable to do for seven years; he acknowledges Pearl publicly, orally. When Dimmesdale ascends the scaffold with Hester, he demonstrates that spoken language, the Tongue of Flame, the source of living meaning, is intimately related to the written letter. In owning Pearl as his child, Dimmesdale shows that the language of life bears as much responsibility for the development of literary awareness as the language of literature, that, in fact, it is the intersection of these two modes of discourse which generates that great paradox: the living letter, Pearl. Dimmesdale's confession brings to an end the estrangement between the aesthetic and communicative functions of the text and thus heals the split between the feminine and masculine modes of response which made Pearl an incomplete because half-orphaned person. As she is liberated into mature womanhood from the spell which made her an elf-child, the reader's sense that the text is a fictive design, a work of art, is eclipsed by a sense of its agreement with the world of the living. A striking token of this fact is the legacy which Chillingworth leaves Pearl at his death. In making his bastard daughter his heir, Chillingworth makes her a tenured member of the establishment which previously stigmatized her.. Now the conceptual universe which was initially at odds with the text has made a place for it.

The reader's intimate experience of the written word, the stimulation of his everyday language, the change in his world view, and the naturalization of the text--The Scarlet Letter depicts these changes as a rapid sequence of events. But another change is part of the total process. Dimmesdale must die after confessing Pearl and receiving her kiss of acceptance. The image of otherworldly perfection which it was his life's sincerest endeavor to attain is nullified not just by his confession but by Pearl's entry into the world, for the aura of supernatural goodness which has surrounded the minister's parable-like life is synonymous with the spell of ideality which persuades the reader that the text, as art, is divorced from life, that it presents an imaginary version of life unrealizable in the "real" world. When the text merges with life at the moment[259] of naturalization, the reader's impression of its unreality vanishes. The illusion of otherworldliness which governed Dimmesdale's life, a phenomenon closely related to the aura of surreality surrounding the text, is extinguished, and thus the minister dies. Now that the text's relation to the world has been felt, its mysterious, illusory quality, a phenomenon

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[259] It is shown as a moment by the narrative, but in actual reading there are probably a number of "moments" of naturalization as different facets of the text suddenly show their relationship to the "real" world.

which Dimmesdale has personified throughout the romance, disappears.[260]

A number of interpretations "of what had been witnessed" on the scaffold (p. 182) are posed by the people of Boston. Each of the four accounts formulated "after many days, when time sufficed for the people to arrange their thoughts in reference to" (p. 182) the minister's revelation captures some unquestionably valid aspect of the unveiling. They are, as pointed out by Male, "presented in ascending order from the crude to the spiritual."[261] Thus the first is the simplest and most "naturalistic."[262] It suggests that Dimmesdale inflicted "a hideous torture on himself" (p. 182) as an act of

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[260] This is a result which might be predicted according to Holland's model of literary dynamics. Holland contends that the mesmerizing power of literary art arises from our perception that it is merely fiction. When we enter a text, he explains, we agree to let it overpower our minds because we know that it is dissociated from life and will not require us to do anything. "On the contrary, the work of art, indeed the whole artistic experience, presents itself as divorced from usefulness, calling for no action on our part." We would not willingly suspend disbelief and believe in the illusion of art unless we knew it to be illusion merely. (See Holland, Dynamics, pp. 67-71.) The text's power to mystify us ends, or is at least greatly reduced, when we cease to read, but The Scarlet Letter suggests that it may end for another reason. When the reader's verbal construct of the world is so transformed by the text that its language no longer seems foreign to the world and to everyday language, the spell of the text would vanish. In The Scarlet Letter the latter effect coincides with the conclusion of the story.

[261] Male, pp. 115-116.

[262] Male, p. 116.

penance. The second, though more ingenious, is still somewhat mechanical, for it supposes that the mark appeared mysteriously "through the agency of magic or poisonous drugs" (p. 182) employed by Roger Chillingworth. The third interpretation is based upon a balanced appreciation of "the interaction of flesh and spirit."[263] It has it that the mark was a spontaneous physical manifestation of Dimmesdale's moral problem. Having presented the first three interpretations, the narrator concludes:

> The reader may choose among these theories. We have thrown all the light we could acquire upon the portent, and would gladly, now that it has done its office, erase its deep print out of our brain; where long meditation has fixed it in very undesirable distinctness (p. 182).

He then presents a fourth account of the minister's revelation. This explanation is singular in that those who gave it "denied that there was any mark whatever" on the breast of Mr. Dimmesdale "more than on a new-born infant's" (p. 182). Nor did these witnesses glean from his confession reference to

> the slightest connection, on his part, with the guilt for which Hester Prynne had so long worn the scarlet letter. According to these highly respectable witnesses, the minister . . . had desired, by yielding up his breath in the arms of that fallen woman, to express to the world how utterly nugatory is the choicest of man's own righteousness. After exhausting life in his efforts for mankind's spiritual good, he had

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[263] Male, p. 116.

> made the manner of his death a parable, in order to impress on his admirers the mighty and mournful lesson, that, in the view of Infinite Purity, we are sinners all alike. (p. 182).

The fact that these "respectable witnesses" (p. 182) saw in Dimmesdale the innocence of "a new-born infant" suggests perhaps that they sensed the presence of the New Man in the minister and were responding to him. To be sure, they seem to have been caught up in the new mode of judgment which the New Man instituted. Their affirmation of the essential goodness of Dimmesdale in spite of the ignominious manner of his death is their "divine yes" to what they have "read" on his breast. Their response is not an intellectual solution to an enigmatic letter as is the case in the first three accounts or "theories" (p. 182), as the narrator calls them. They see no mysterious letter, nothing which needs to be interpreted. Rather they respond to Dimmesdale's oral confession and to the total context in which it was delivered. They have, moreover, included themselves in that context. Through sympathy rather than through any kind of hermeneutic analysis, they have arrived at an "interpretation" which differs from the other three in that it is genuinely allegorical. Sensing Dimmesdale to be the type of all men and construing his confession as evidence that "we are sinners all alike" (p. 182), they understand what they have seen as a parable of human life in general. Responding to the

minister's revelation as a moment of pure communication intelligible and relevant to all people present, these witnesses lose sight of the text as an object, as a written artifact in need of interpretation. They merely hear, in Ong's words, the "cry" of an individual which involves all who hear it in his "interior condition."[264] Thus in the fourth account, the communicative function of literary art has been fulfilled.

Hawthorne's emphasis is not so much on the truth or error of these four accounts as on the intriguing fact that more than one possibility exists. In relating these explanations to the reader, Hawthorne demonstrates what Barthes calls the "polyvalency"[265] of the text. It is only by responding to "the variations of meaning generated and, as it were, capable of being generated by works" that reader-critics can develop an understanding of the system responsible for the "empty meaning"[266] which supports some interpretations and not others. It is this "empty meaning" whose nature the last witnesses seem to have intuited in denying that there was a letter or any mark at all on the breast of their dying minister. Their

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[264] Ong, p. 1160.

[265] Barthes, Critique et vérité, p. 57, quoted by Culler, p. 118.

[266] Barthes, Critique et vérité, p. 57, quoted by Culler, p. 118.

experience of the unveiling of the secret of the text agrees with Barthes' description of the perspective which a non-hermeneutic point of view brings to the text. The work is not an enigma with a correct solution; it is rather

> a construction of layers (or levels, or systems) whose body contains, finally no heart, no kernel, no secret, no irreducible principle, nothing except the infinity of its own envelopes--which envelop nothing other than the unity of its own surfaces.[267]

But "to read," Culler states in response to Barthes' definition of a work "is to participate in the play of the text."[268] And to participate in the play of the scarlet letter is to entertain the more object-centered responses of the first three groups of witnesses along with that of the last, for the "whole truth," as Male concludes, "is not distilled [even] in the refined perception of the respectable witnesses."[269] Participating "in the play of the text" is what the narrator does in providing the reader with a range of possible responses to consider.

What happens to the "letter endowed with life" (p. 78) after the reader's apocalyptic moment upon the scaffold cannot be known with certainty. Does the change

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[267] Barthes, "Style and its Image," in Literary Style: A Symposium, ed. S. Chatman (Oxford, New York, 1971), p. 10 (quoted by Culler, p. 259).

[268] Culler, p. 259.

[269] Male, p. 117.

which the text effects within the reader endure or die away?

> None knew--nor ever learned, with the fulness of perfect certainty--whether the elf-child had gone thus untimely to a maiden grave . . . (p. 184).

We cannot hold on to the fugitive experience of reading. The living letter inhabits an unknown and unknowable sphere where the experience of reading is lost in the experience of living. What we can hold on to, though, is our concrete experience of the letter, the images we can see and the story we can identify with personally. This is the province of the woman within; accordingly, Hester Prynne is the only member of the reading family who stays in Boston. It is she who ministers to the people there when they are perplexed. Magna mater still, Hester performs a mother's work of nurture for the lowly women of Boston once Pearl is beyond her reach:

> Women, more especially,--in the continually recurring trials of wounded, wasted, wronged, misplaced, or erring and sinful passion,--or with the dreary burden of a heart unyielded, because unvalued and unsought,--came to Hester's cottage demanding why they were so wretched, and what the remedy! (p. 185).

In these women Hester nurtures the primitive feminine element within the reader. She attempts to help it grow beyond the errors in self-expression and communication which sensuous involvement in the world and in the text tends to promote. These are errors generated because the

woman within cannot yield her heart, that is, cannot speak what is in her heart in any intelligible way.

Like Dimmesdale, Hester has a prophecy for her society. As his involved the New Man, hers concerns the New Woman:

> [She] comforted and counselled them, as best she might. She assured them, too, of her firm belief, that, at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven's own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness. Earlier in life, Hester had vainly imagined that she herself might be the destined prophetess, but had long since recognized the impossibility that any mission of divine and mysterious truth should be confided to a woman stained with sin, bowed down with shame, or even burdened with a life-long sorrow. The angel and apostle of the coming revelation must be a woman, indeed, but lofty, pure, and beautiful; and wise, moreover, not through dusky grief, but the ethereal medium of joy; and showing how sacred love should make us happy, by the truest test of a life successful to such an end! (pp. 185-86).

The missing information and misunderstanding which is part and parcel of written language--the "wounded, wasted, wronged, misplaced or erring" passion behind it--will be done away with by the New Woman. Her concrete mode of communion with others, unlike Hester's passionate liaison with Dimmesdale, will not result in enigmatic metaphors which call for interpretive analysis. She will wear no scarlet letter which people will stare at and puzzle over. She will, rather, make her life the symbol of her message to the world. It will be readily understood by all and

will foster perfect harmony among those who commune most intimately with one another. As the New Man transformed spoken language, the New Woman will transform written language as we know it, preventing the failures in communication typically associated with it by enabling it to embody perfectly that which it strives to express. Making use of neither unintelligible metaphors nor lifeless abstractions, the New Woman's word will not refer to the truth but act it out in a "life successful to such an end!"

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