13. Hawthorne and the Crime against Woman.

In 'The Custom House', Hawthorne's semi-autobiographical introduction to *The Scarlet Letter,* the narrator claims to have found an old document outlining the story of a beautiful young woman, Hester Prynne, who married a scholarly man much older than herself and slightly deformed, Roger Chillingworth, who then sent her ahead to prepare a home in the young Puritan colony of Boston. But her husband did not follow, and all her enquiries drew a blank, until both she and the entire community had to assume him to be dead. After some years of quasi-widowhood, Hester and a charismatic young divine, Arthur Dimmesdale, fall passionately in love. Dimmesdale recoils in horror at his sin, and fails to come forward when Hester, visibly pregnant, is condemned as an adulteress. She bears her child in prison, and is then condemned to wear for the rest of her life a scarlet letter A for adulteress on her breast. The narrator's imagination is aroused by this story, and he resolves to elaborate it in the form of a novel.

The Scarlet Letter has been much misread, for reasons similar to the misreading of *Gulliver's Travels* we have already discussed, that is, a failure to respond adequately to imagery and tone (particularly irony) and to distinguish between the author and the narrator – a problem also, as we shall see, at the root of most misreadings of Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness.*

Taking his lead from Melville's comments on Hawthorne, Leslie Fiedler argues that the great artist should be a truth-teller, and that to be a truth-teller is to be a nay-sayer:

> There is some evidence that the Hard No is being spoken when the writer seems a traitor to those whom he loves and who have conditioned his very way of responding to the world. When the writer says of precisely the cause that is dearest to him what is always and everywhere the truth about all causes – that it has been imperfectly conceived and inadequately represented, and that it is bound to be betrayed, consciously or unconsciously, by its leading spokeman – we know that he is approaching an art of real seriousnes if not of actual greatness. The thrill we all sense but hesitate to define for ourselves – the thrill of confronting a commitment to truth which transcends all partial allegiances – comes when Dante turns on Florence, Molière on the moderate man, de Sade on reason, Shaw on the socialists, Tolstoy on the reformers, Joyce on Ireland, Faulkner on the South, Graham

> Greene on the Catholics, Pasternak on the Russians and Abraham Cahan or Nathaniel West on the Jews. [Fiedler 7]

To this list could be added many more examples including Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes on Greece, the Gawain poet on Christian chivalry, Swift on reason, Hawthorne on Puritanism …

What Fiedler means by a Hard No, is a blanket no, on the assumption, in Melville's words, that 'all men who say *yes,* lie'. All partial, selective, or relative nos Fiedler dismisses as sentimental and righteous. *No! in Thunder* was first published in 1960, and it is perhaps no coincidence that in 1960 the theatre of the absurd was at its most popular, for the blanket no is close to the rather facile no of absurdism, based as it was on the assumption that since the universe itself is meaningless and valueless, so must be everything within it. A Hard No to satisfy Fiedler would presumably be Hamlet's starting point':

> How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
> Seem to me all the uses of this world!
> Fie on't, ah fie, 'tis an unweeded garden
> That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
> Possess it merely.

It follows from this that Ophelia, far from being a rose of May, is as fat a weed as Claudius. Such a starting point precludes action, since what would be the point in operating upon a patient diseased in every organ, every cell. The logical conclusion is Lear's great No! in thunder: 'Crack Nature's moulds, all germens spill at once'. Yet Lear's madness repudiates everything Cordelia lives and dies for, the possibility of redemption. Had he remained in it he would have killed the physician, and the fee bestowed upon the foul disease.

But most of the nay-saying in literature has not been of this kind. The no of satire, for example, invariably implies fundamental truths, positives or norms against which these particular people, this behaviour or belief, can be measured and found woefully inadequate, so the louder the no, the stronger the implied yes. The greatest artists are not content to diagnose the symptoms of the world's diseases. They are in the business of seeking cures, and the hard cure is a hard yes, which is far harder than the hardest no. To opt out is an easy option. In that search the writer must run the risk of both sentimentality and righteousness.

I am also doubtful about Melville's 'thunder'. Surely thundering is more the mode of the preacher than the artist, who is often obliged by the distance between his own way of seeing the world and that of his readers to adopt a more subtle and covert strategy such as that of Swift, Emily Brontë or Conrad, forcing the more receptive readers at least to respond at a deeper, more fully human, level than the narrator, and also, therefore, at a deeper level than their own usual, socially, culturally and morally conditioned, selves. Melville himself elsewhere made exactly this point:

> For in this world of lies, Truth is forced to fly like a sacred white doe in the woodlands; and only by cunning glimpses will she reveal herself, as in Shakespeare and other great masters of the great Art of Telling the Truth – even though it be covertly, and by snatches.
>
> ('Hawthorne and His Mosses')

Those novelists who have chosen to dispense with such strategies and confront their readers with an open challenge have often regretted it. Hardy, writing half a century after Hawthorne, and in a less puritanical culture, subtitled *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* 'A Pure Woman', but the obloquy this earned him marked the beginning of the end of his novel writing; and Lawrence's decision to write honestly and openly about adulterous sex in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* earned him only a lasting reputation as a pornographer.

* * *

Lawrence's heroine Ursula Brangwen devotes herself to discovering how the life that is in her wants to be lived. She is fortunate in belonging to the first generation in which this is, though still with many difficulties, possible. Her predecessors were all tragic figures.

Women have not, of course, been the only victims, since men have been equally pressurized to eradicate or sublimate all those qualities which lie towards the female end of the spectrum of their own natures. Lawrence's snake symbolizes the 'phallic consciousness', which is the bridge or atonement between male and female natures. But the voice of his education says to the protagonist in 'Snake':

> If you were a man
> You would take a stick and break him now, and finish him off.

It was that same voice which drove Oedipus and Creon and Pentheus and Adonis and Angelo and the Ancient Mariner to their self-destruction, the voice which insists on defining manhood and womanhood from the outside, in terms of a spoken or unspoken creed.

Existentialism, though half-baked as a philosophy, provided many terms and concepts which were fertile for the writing and reading of literature. The challenge to every man or woman is to live authentically, in good faith, that is, in terms of how the life that is in us needs to be lived. This is the opposite of selfishness, since the most fundamental needs will be found to involve the interdependence of all individuals not only with each other but also with the whole non-human world for a full and balanced sexual and communal, physical and spiritual life. To live in bad faith is to give up the struggle, to capitulate to the dead forms, collusions and mutilations which any society ('other people') attempts to impose in its pursuit of power at the expense of life.

The greatest novel produced by Existentialism is Sartre's *Nausea,* where there is a wonderful chapter on the Municipal Art Gallery, where generations of worthies, the moral guardians and exemplars of the community, are enshrined. They 'raised fine children, taught them their rights and duties, religion, and respect for the traditions which had gone to the making of France. Bright colours had been banished, out of a sense of decency'. They appear to be sitting in harsh judgement on their successors: 'his judgement pierced me like a sword and called in question my very right to exist'.

> I looked at them in vain for some link with trees and animals, with the thoughts of earth or water. … They had enslaved the whole of Nature: outside themselves and in themselves.

Hawthorne has a very similar passage:

> On the wall hung a row of portraits, representing the forefathers of the Bellingham lineage. … All were characterized by the sternness and severity which old portraits so invariably put on; as if they were the ghosts, rather than the pictures, of departed worthies, and were gazing with harsh and intolerant criticism at the pursuits and enjoyments of living men.

The necessary allegiance of the creative writer to imagination, since imagination is bound to be in opposition to the pseudo-rational structures of

society and its enforced orthodoxies at any time, predisposes him to some form of existential revolt. The writer *must* favour Antigone against Creon, Dionysos against Pentheus, the Green Knight against the Christian/chivalric code, Venus against Adonis, Cleopatra against Octavius Caesar, even Caliban against Prospero and the Yahoos against the Houyhnhnms.

Every age and culture has had its equivalent of Existentialism. In Puritan New England in the seventeenth century it was Antinomianism, a belief that the law which came from within should overrule both civil and religious law. Another explicit connection which Hawthorne also makes twice, once at the beginning and once, as a reminder, well into the story, is with the most famous figure in the history of Antinomianism, Ann Hutchinson. All his original readers would have known that Ann Hutchinson was banished from Massachusetts in 1638 for advocating the intuitive revelation of God in preference to scriptures and laws. Though there was no evidence of any sexual relationship, she seduced intellectually one of the most prominent divines of the time, John Cotton, who later repudiated her.

Hawthorne is at pains to conflate in the reader's mind Ann Hutchinson and his heroine Hester Prynne. He recognizes that the Puritans were right to fear all who claimed such freedom, defying the law, whether in theory, as in the case of Ann Hutchinson, or in practise, as in Hester's case (though the two overlap), since they were in effect proposing an alternative definition of the sacred, an alternative divinity, the same divinity which Hawthorne as imaginative artist, is bound to worship. As priestesses of this divinity, Ann Hutchinson and Hester are both 'sainted'.

Once fully in his imaginative mode what overrides all else is Hawthorne's conviction of the evil, the spiritual corruption and pollution (his own terms) of Puritanism. According to Melville Hawthorne never said yes to anything. On the contrary, so virulent is his hatred of the Puritans that it seems that anyone persecuted by them must be in the right – Quakers, Antinomians, Indians, even adulterers. The Puritan writers frequently described heretical thought as the spawning of bastards. Given the nature of Puritan legitimacy, every form of illegitimacy, including the sexual, becomes, for Hawthorne, a virtue.

* * *

My references to Swift and satire may seem to have little possible relevance to *The Scarlet Letter.* Yet Hawthorne himself makes this very connection quite explicitly in the first paragraph of 'The Custom House', his autobiographical introduction to the novel. There Hawthorne tells us that

'the example of the famous 'P.P., Clerk of this Parish', was never more faithfully followed' than it is to be in 'The Custom House'. Hawthorne must have assumed that *The Memoirs of P.P., Clerk of this Parish* was sufficiently famous for most of his readers at least to know that it was a satirical production of the Scriblerus Club, which consisted of Swift, Pope, John Gay, Thomas Parnell, Dr. Arbuthnot, and Robert Harley, Earl of Oxford, and was an anonymous parody of such tedious autobiographies as Bishop Gilbert Burnet's *A History of His Own Times.* An even more famous joint production of the club was *The Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus*, which contained passages by Swift which he later developed in *Gulliver's Travels.* The concluding part of 'The Custom House' (where Hawthorne reminds us that he is using the 'tone' of *The Memoirs of P.P.*) purports to establish the authenticity of the documents on which *The Scarlet Letter* is based in terms almost identical with those used by Swift in his fictitious publisher's preface to *Gulliver's Travels,* where the publisher promises that 'if any Traveller hath a Curiosity to see the whole Work at large, as it came from the Hand of the Author, I will be ready to gratify him'. Hawthorne writes:

> The original papers, together with the scarlet letter itself, ... 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.

Why should Hawthorne be at such pains to tell us that he is faithfully following the example of a fake and satirical autobiography (drawing particular attention to his tone), unless to alert the reader of the novel to the distance between himself and the narrator, and to the fact that we are to take the narrator's judgement to be no more reliable than Gulliver's? The narrator tells us, for example, that the illegitimate Pearl is 'an imp of evil, emblem and product of sin' who had 'no right among christened infants'. In the authentic voice of Gulliver he then describes those infants as 'playing at going to church, perchance; or at scourging Quakers; or taking scalps in a sham-fight with the Indians; or scaring one-another with freaks of imitative witchcraft'. In this ironic context the word 'christened' is drained of all positive meaning, and once such terms are subverted, there is no longer any meaning in the words 'evil' and 'sin'. In 'The Gentle Boy', a story about the scourging of Quakers, Hawthorne uses the same Swiftian technique:

> For her voice had been already heard in many lands of Christendom; and she had pined in the cells of a Catholic Inquisition, before she felt the lash, and lay in the dungeons of the Puritans. Her mission had

> extended also to the followers of the Prophet, and from them she had received the courtesy and kindness, which all the contending sects of our purer religion united to deny her.

The word 'pure' is irredeemably tainted in such a context, and a non-Christian religion actually gains in moral and spiritual stature by virtue of being rejected by all Christian 'sects'. Even towards the end of the novel, the narrator is obtuse enough to tell us that Hester has learned 'much amiss' in losing her reverence for 'the clerical band, the judicial robe, the pillory, the gallows, the fireside, or the church'. The actual effect is to devalue both fireside and church by relegating them behind the mere trappings of authority ('gowns and furred robes hide all'), and the instruments of institutionalized cruelty.

Hawthorne's control of tone and narrative voice in *The Scarlet Letter* is not as consistent as Swift's or Emily Brontë's. When the narrator speaks of flowers as 'the floral tribe' he sounds like Lockwood, but he is by no means, like Gulliver or Lockwood, merely absurd. He is more like Nelly Dean in that he incorporates the judgement of society at its best, its most humane and balanced. The reader is temporarily seduced, for example, into accepting the narrator as expressing an adequate degree of criticism and rejection of the early Puritan settlers, Hawthorne's ancestors, founders of the whole culture he had inherited. The narrator expresses the orientation to what he narrates of that part of Hawthorne himself which functions as objective historian, surveyor, custom-house official, would-be member of a community.

The strong emotions which the story aroused in Hawthorne as he wrote it are communicated to the reader in spite of, not because of, the attitude of the narrator. The reader is gradually lured into the position of finding the narrator inadequate to the human situation. He compromises with the moral evil of Puritanism and shows himself to be a true descendent of his witch-burning ancestors in the very act of disowning them. He prides himself on a degree of enlightened tolerance and humanity which distinguishes him from his forbears, but the reader soon becomes impatient with his equivocations, feeling that a more courageous and passionate partisanship, a more thoroughgoing rejection of them, is called for.

Hawthorne deliberately widens the gap between himself and the customs officer by claiming that the latter had lost all interest in literature and in nature; that the faculty of imagination had become 'suspended and inanimate' within him. The customs officer is precisely Hawthorne minus imagination. The figure presented to us in 'The Custom House' and ever-

present as narrator in the story which follows would be totally incapable of writing *The Scarlet Letter.* There is another Hawthorne at work, whose allegiances are elsewhere, Hawthorne the Artist, for whom that calling, with its inevitable Alienation, is an imperative demanding quite the opposite of the narrator's attempt at objectivity, at being fair to all concerned, demanding that the story be told not in a careful historical, social, moral and religious context (or only superficially, deceptively so), but in a manner which subverts all that, subverts Hawthorne himself as ordinary person, in terms of the permanent realities of the human spirit, of human needs at the level of the individual psyche depending as it does on an unmediated relationship with the non-human world. Art is as subversive of law and conventional morality as Adultery, and this is the A which burns on the breast of the customs officer as he instinctively feels a kinship with Esther.

* * *

Any reader who doubts that, despite the apparent identification of Hawthorne with the narrator in 'The Custom-House', they are in fact worlds apart, need only compare the narrator of *The Scarlet Letter* with the narrator of *The Blithedale Romance,* published only two years later. Though Miles Coverdale in *The Blithedale Romance* is not exactly Hawthorne, we can hardly doubt that he is a great deal closer to Hawthorne than the narrator of *The Scarlet Letter.* The *Romance* has a contemporary setting, and is partly autobiographical; and the narrator is presented as a poet with liberal and progressive sympathies. The admiration which Hawthorne clearly feels for Hester he dare not, within the context of *The Scarlet Letter*, express overtly; but his admiration for Zenobia can be expressed through Coverdale, in an explicitly progressive context, quite outspokenly. The other essential difference is that Zenobia does not have the stigma of the scarlet letter to contend with. She keeps her sexual history to herself, and Coverdale is unable to discover it. His interest in it, however, is sympathetic, not judgemental. It seems that she has lived a passionate, somewhat reckless life, and there may well have been adultery involved at some point in it. But one feels that, should Coverdale have discovered this, it would not have made much difference to his estimate of her.

The terms in which he expresses that estimate are, in relation to *The Scarlet Letter* (of two years earlier), very revealing. Before Coverdale even arrives at Blithedale he sets up a dichotomy between the constricting and joyless pressure of traditional forms and the beauty and freshness of what nature perpetually offers. By the time the snow has passed through city

smoke and immediately been trodden by countless boots, its freshness has been quite extinguished: ‘Thus the track of an old conventionalism was visible on what was freshest from the sky’. Once into the countryside, he fills his lungs with ‘air that had not been spoken into words of falsehood, formality and error, like all the air of the dusky city’. Poetry is by definition the opposite of such words: ‘true, strong, natural, and sweet – something that shall have the notes of wild birds twittering through it, or a strain like the wind-anthems in the woods’.

Zenobia’s only ornament, which she hardly needs, but which perfectly expresses her character, is a fresh exotic flower (no-one knows where they come from) which she wears in her hair every day. What arouses in Coverdale an attitude almost of worship is simply Zenobia’s unconstrained and shameless womanliness. She carries her sex with a nobility which suggests that she is and knows herself to be an avatar of the goddess. The womanliness she embodies is a far cry from the pattern of domesticated and repressed womanliness the puritans had imposed on their women. She scorns the ‘petty restraints which take the life and colour out of other women’s conversation’. In most other women ‘their sex fades away, and goes for nothing’:

> Not so with Zenobia. One felt an influence breathing out of her such as we might suppose to come from Eve, when she was just made, and her Creator brought her to Adam, saying, ‘Behold! Here is a woman!’ Not that I would convey the idea of gentleness, grace, modesty and shyness, but of a certain warm and rich characteristic , which seems, for the most part, to have been refined away out of the feminine system.

‘Warm’ and ‘rich’ are precisely the terms we associate with Hester. These are women whose sexuality is luxuriant. Coverdale speaks of Zenobia’s ‘flesh-warmth’ and ‘full bust’. She is not at all ‘maiden-like’, but mellow, blooming, and generous. Hawthorne presents Zenobia as a prototype for all women, as ‘womanliness incarnated’: ‘The image of her form and face should have been multiplied all over the earth’.

These are the very characteristics which would have forced the Puritan community to take action against Hester whether she had been guilty of adultery or not. The adultery is a pretext. Zenobia is in Coverdale’s eyes admirably ‘free’. In the eyes of the Puritans such freedom in a woman threatens their whole precarious structure. ‘Free’ is seen as ‘wild’, and ‘wild’ is close to ‘demonic’. Both women bring the full power of their womanliness

to bear in attempting to reclaim men who have sacrificed their manhood for the life of the spirit or of an abstract ideal. They are united in the image of the 'perfectly-developed rose', which puts to shame the mean and dismal world of men.

* * *

The narrator in *The Scarlet Letter* is interested in the document he finds as a historical record of events unique to their time and place, and the fates of the individuals caught up in them. So, of course, is Hawthorne. But his imagination seized upon seventeenth century New England not only because of the continuity with his own world and the need he felt to repudiate the cruelty of his Puritan forebears, but because that world offered in a dramatic, extreme, yet realistic form, an image of the persecution of the female, of the passional self, of the individual spirit, which he saw as characteristic of all patriarchal societies. That historical moment presented him with a very clear and extreme image of the sickness of our Western culture almost since its inception. The founders of monotheistic religions and their heirs, the founding fathers of Christianity, had, looming large among their many problems, the problem of the female. In the not-too-distant past the female had reigned supreme as the great Goddess, 'great creating Nature' as Shakespeare called her, by virtue of her magical ability to create life. Many societies had been matriarchal. The male rebellion against the dominance of the female had necessarily involved the degradation not only of actual women, but of Nature herself, and of those qualities in the male psyche which came to be seen as unmanly – the qualities Jung called the anima. Great creating Nature herself becomes that which must be put behind the bars of a prison-house or fenced out in the darkness of the surrounding forest with all its abominations. Nature was handed over to the devil. The great goddess Anath became Anathema, a witch and a whore, a scarlet woman, and that was the primal 'A'.

Peter Redgrove and Penelope Shuttle write:

> As Savramis points out in his splendidly titled *The Satanizing of Women*, the Christian Western world identified woman with sin. She was 'an advance guard of hell', she was 'a frightening worm in the heart of man'. She was 'the devil's gate'. The witch-hunters saw themselves 'As representatives of a theology that satanizes sexuality as such, equates women with sexuality, and seeks to destroy the female sex in order to eliminate "wicked" sexuality in favour of a

> man-ruled Christian world'. The infamous manual for inquisitors that was written for use at witch-trials, *The Hammer of Witches* or *Malleus Maleficarum*, is distinguished from other works on heresy in that it is 'solely and exclusively devoted to the persecution and destruction of the female sex'. [*The Wise Wound*, 214]

Women were condemned to death for curing 'without having studied', by which was meant for studying nature rather than the scriptures.

* * *

Like Nellie Dean the narrator of *The Scarlet Letter* is set up as representative of the best the social, exclusively human and rational world has to offer, only to be exposed as radically inadequate. That inadequacy is conveyed in two ways. First there is the play of irony directed against him in his very tone of voice, which is distinctly more formal, conventional, pious and pompous than the voice of Hawthorne in his other fictions, particularly in the *Romance*. Second there is the imaginative power generated by the prose especially in its imagery (again as in *Wuthering Heights*) on those many occasions where it by-passes the narrator and plays directly (though often subliminally) upon the sensibilities of the reader.

Once we have realized that we cannot take our bearings from the narrator, we are obliged to take them partly from common humanity, but also largely, whether we realize it or not, from the powerful and persistent imagery. Since the imagery of *The Scarlet Letter* derives almost entirely from the natural world, presented to us in terms of wildness, profusion, variety, fructifying warmth and beauty, the bearings which derive from it are at the polar extreme from the values of the Puritans, expressed, as they are, in terms of order, uniformity, rigidity, coldness, deformity and disease. *The Scarlet Letter* is a dramatic poem, as dependent on patterns and accumulations and clashes of imagery as any Shakespeare play.

Even before Hester makes her appearance, the imagery begins to do its work. The pious and commonplace narrative voice is completely subverted by the far stronger and deeper meaning of the imagery. The prison is presented to us as 'that black flower of civilized society', but the obvious meaning of the wild rose bush at the prison door is evaded. We are told that it 'may serve to symbolize some sweet moral blossom that may be found along the track, or relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow'. Already a gap is created between the natural meaning of a symbol, that is the meaning any reader would give to it if it were left uninterpreted by

the narrator, and the interpretation the narrator in fact gives it. The word 'sweet' is sentimental and the word 'moral' sententious, and Hawthorne knows it. Far from illustrating some sweet moral in a Puritan chapbook, the rose speaks 'from the deep heart of Nature'. It is inherently and traditionally a symbol of sexual love, and the word 'wild' means sexual love not regimented or coerced by Puritanical restrictions. The tale's interpretation of itself is as far removed from the contemporary idea of morality as Ann Hutchinson was from the 17th century Puritan idea of a saint. What the rose at the door of the prison clearly symbolizes is the Puritans' inability to expel Nature entirely from their community, and the inability of their cruellest laws and punishments to expunge the flowering of the human heart, especially in women and in sexual love.

The tale's image patterns and therefore moral bearings are exactly those of Blake in the *Songs of Experience*, for example in 'The Garden of Love':

> I went to the Garden of Love,
> And saw what I never had seen:
> A Chapel was built in the midst,
> Where I used to play on the green.
>
> And the gates of this Chapel were shut,
> And 'Thou shalt not' writ over the door;
> So I turn'd to the Garden of Love
> That so many sweet flowers bore;
>
> And I saw it was filled with graves,
> And tomb-stones where flowers should be;
> And Priests in black gowns were walking their rounds,
> And binding with briars my joys & desires.

So, in *The Scarlet Letter*, the preoccupation with sin demands that the most necessary structures are the prison and the scaffold. Though the scaffold is situated beneath the eaves of Boston's earliest church, it is the scaffold and not the church which is the centre of communal and spiritual life. The church is never described, and no scene takes place within it.

The rose is the true symbol for what the Puritans attempt, with their scarlet letter, to transform into its opposite, shame, the invisible worm in the bud. In this context the word 'moral' takes on a Blake-like irony. Hester is a wild rose flowering even within the prison or Chapel, at the very heart of the

Puritan enterprize, the essential life they cannot destroy. The true home for such a rose is a 'bed of crimson joy' [Blake, 'The Sick Rose'].

The second time in the novel that our attention is drawn to actual roses takes place in a garden with 'closely shaven grass', thought otherwise overgrown, where there are both rose-bushes and apple-trees –

> probably the descendents of those planted by the Reverend Mr. Blackstone, the first settler of the peninsula; that half-mythological personage who rides through our early annals, seated on the back of a bull.

Blackstone had so disliked the Puritans that he had ridden off to join the Indians. Snow's *History of Boston* (1825) describes him seated on a bull. Hawthorne extended his mythology by placing him (in 'The Maypole of Merry Mount'), without any evidence, in the pagan community at Merry Mount. He sounds very like the renegade Catholic priest in Brian Freil's *Dancing at Lughnasa*. In this garden Pearl cries for a red rose. When asked by the Reverend Mr. Wilson who made her, she 'announced that she had not been made at all, but had been plucked by her mother off the bush of wild roses, that grew by the prison-door'.

The attachment of shame not only to sin but to sex and to the human body was still characteristic of Hawthorne's society. Within five years of the publication of *The Scarlet Letter,* Whitman published the first edition of *Leaves of Grass,* and openly confronted the criminality of Puritanism in terms Hawthorne must have applauded. Later Whitman wrote, having given several examples of crippling fear of sex and the body in his own time:

> A civilization in which such things as I have mentioned can be thought or done is guilty to the core. It is not purity, it is impurity, which calls clothes more decent than the naked body … It is not innocent but guilty thought which attaches shame, secrecy, baseness and horror to great and august parts and functions of humanity.

* * *

The opening scene of the novel is a scene of moral outrage directed by an entire community against one woman. The narrator shares the outrage:

> Here, there was the taint of deepest sin in the most sacred quality of human life, working such effect, that the world was only the darker

> for this woman's beauty, and the more lost for the infant that she had borne.

The narrative voice uses all the standard epithets for Hester's 'crime' and 'sin', but we are encouraged to let the novel make quite another valuation. Hester behaves ‘with natural dignity’. The very badge of her shame she has transformed with ‘so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy’ that it becomes a fitting ornament for her beauty, charcterized by abundant hair and richness of complexion. She has thus transformed her punishment into a further act of rebellion, since it is ‘greatly beyond what was allowed by the sumptuary regulations of the colony’. All in all she presents her persecutors with a rival divinity, an image of ‘Divine Maternity’, since ‘her beauty shone out, and made a halo of the misfortune and ignominy in which she was enveloped’. Like Mary Hutchinson, she is ‘sainted’ despite all the community’s efforts to demonize her.

The scene cannot but bring to mind the woman taken in adultery in *St. John* viii. There is no reluctance among Hester’s accusers to cast the first stone, which implies that they all believe themselves to be without sin. Hawthorne’s view of that claim is clear, especially in ‘Young Goodman Brown’. The narrator describes the loss of faith in the goodness of others as ‘one of the saddest results of sin’, but to endorse that, the reader would have to doubt that ‘the outward guise of purity’ is often a lie, and, even where it is not, would have to prefer the ‘unsunned snow’ in a ‘pure’ matron’s bosom to the scarlet letter emblazoned on Hester’s.

What Hawthorne conspicuously refuses to do in the value judgements of the narrator, that is overtly endorse Hester, he does not only in the telling of her tale and depiction of her character, but also through copious powerful symbolism. It is impossible to imagine Hawthorne himself, as opposed to his narrator, to be capable of such moralistic mindless clichés as 'a woman stained with sin'. Even the narrator cannot deny that the scarlet letter itself is transformed by Hester into something startlingly beautiful, scarlet and gold, the colours of rich life, which are also colours associated with the Indians and the seamen, occasional visitors grudgingly tolerated by the community. On the first page the tale establishes a clear polarity between the negative characteristics of the Puritans, uniformity, dreariness, rigidity, inhumanity, and the positives associated with all those they persecute or exclude.

The modern reader feels simply outrage against everyone in that community other than Hester. We feel that it is evil to participate in such sadism or to allow it to proceed without protest or intervention. In so responding, we are not allowing ourselves to respond in terms of modern

sophisticated, emancipated, secular values, but in terms enforced by the tale itself. The scene is presented by Hawthorne in such a way as to force the reader, even his contemporary readers conditioned to stand with the crowd against Hester, to stand rather with her on the scaffold, wishing we had the power to hurl the whole crowd into the pit. The values Hawthorne enforces are not those he declares. His failure to declare them shifts the onus to do so onto the reader.

With great courage and integrity Hawthorne keeps from us all information about Hester's adultery. We learn nothing of her relationship with Dimmesdale, the circumstances, the occasion, who took the initiative. Hawthorne will not pry into any of this. It is all, morally, beside the point. The point is that Hester's judges are as ignorant as we are of these matters, that the law takes no congnisance of them, that the idea of sin has become dissociated from actual human living and needs. The life of the body and all human feelings have been subjugated to a rigid legalistic grid of moral prescriptions and proscriptions. Hawthorne rejects, above all, labels. He knows that a marriage can be evil and an adulterous relationship good, and that one law for the lion and the ox is oppression.

Hester has harmed no-one other than the husband she expects never to see again and believes to be dead. Chillingworth himself admits that, as a man misshapen and in decay, ‘having given my best years to feed the hungry dream of knowledge’ (like George Eliot’s Casaubon), he should have had nothing to do with budding youth and beauty such as Hester’s. Their marriage he describes as ‘false and unnatural’. But she had challenged a sacrosanct patriarchal system. As in Mosaic law, her sin is codified, and, once made public, provides the community with the opportunity to cast almost literal stones in perfect self-righteousness. Sadistic self-righteousness is not codified as a sin. On the contrary it is exalted as the community's primary weapon against the codified sins. This is the point, misunderstood by his entire congregation again and again, of Dimmesdale's sermons. He is misunderstood because he insists on making the point either in general terms or in relation (absurdly in their eyes) to himself. He gets through to some of them at last only by the silent exposing of his breast. Though Hawthorne makes the point early in the novel that some of the ruthless matrons complaining that Hester has been let off so lightly have also committed adultery, or worse, the main point is that even those who are as upright, pure, moral, as they seem, are participants in a conspiracy of evil.

Hester is herself a wild rose bush from which grows Pearl, that 'lovely and immortal flower'. The narrator's gloss about 'rank luxuriance' can do little to offset the superiority of 'rank' to 'rigid' established by the imagery.

The passion the narrator describes as 'rank', Hester describes as 'consecrated'. Since it is consecrated to nature and the human heart, that is, to the Puritan, evil. Hawthorne leaves the reader to decide, on the strength of the tale and its imagery, which is the more appropriate term.

Hester has no wish 'forever to do battle with the world', only to 'be a woman in it'. Certain attributes are ‘essential to keep her a woman’; these are the absolutes she must live by, and they are defined as ‘Love’, ‘Passion’ and ‘Affection’. These, even if they cannot escape it, will always transcend ‘the iron framework of reasoning’. Hawthorne is not proposing any such simplistic distinction as that men live by the mind, women by the emotions. Ann Hutchinson was far more intelligent than her persecutors. Hester ‘imbibed this spirit’:

> She assumed a freedom of speculation, then common enough on the other side of the Atlantic, but which our forefathers, had they known of it, would have held to be a deadlier crime than that stigmatized by the scarlet letter.

(In fact, long after Hawthorne’s day, it was still unacceptable, even across the Atlantic, for women to speculate freely on such matters, as Ibsen’s Mrs Alving, who also offered herself to her pastor, was to learn in *Ghosts.*) Had it not been for her responsibilities to Pearl, Hester

> might have come down to us in history, hand in hand with Ann Hutchinson, as the foundress of a religious sect. She might, in one of her phases, have been a prophetess. She might, and not improbably would, have suffered death from the stern tribunals of the period, for attempting to undermine the foundations of the Puritan establishment.

On the contrary, what Hawthorne believed was that a rigid rationality, cut off from all other human attributes, would always be perverse, sterile and inhuman – what Blake called single vision. What Hawthorne sought, what all imaginative artists by definition seek, was wholeness, in man and woman.

The scarlet letter does not do its work on Hester. Her suffering brings wisdom, but not the wisdom of repentance. She comes to see that her husband’s guilt is far deeper than her own:

> She deemed it her crime most to be repented of, that she had ever endured, and reciprocated, the lukewarm grasp of his hand. … And it

> seemed a fouler offence committed by Roger Chillingworth, than any which had since been done him, that, in the time when her heart knew no better, he had persuaded her to fancy herself happy by his side.

Did George Eliot have this in mind when she created the relationship between Dorothea Brooke and Casaubon in *Middlemarch*?

Though the simple request to be a woman in the world is denied to Hester, it is to be realized in her daughter, who represents not simply the next generation, but that inevitable future when the long succession of reincarnations of the victimized goddess will win back that freedom with their suffering. Pearl's name may evoke the painful origins of the actual pearl, a perpetual irritation in the bosom of its mother - beauty growing out of suffering. Since Pearl is the offspring of an adulterous relationship, has not been subjected to the discipline of a formal education which would have extinguished the joy of life in her, and is conspicuously wild and unpredictable in her behaviour, the Puritans have no option but to see her as an 'imp of evil'. In that culture there were no words available even to Hester to describe Pearl's wildness other than those associated with the demonic. This is no excuse for the many critics who have seen her in the same light.

But the stronger association of the name is surely the 'pearl without price' which is an image of the kingdom of heaven in *Matthew* 13. In spite of himself, the narrator has to confess that physically Pearl was immaculate, 'worthy to have been brought forth in Eden'. Moreover, she has a 'native grace', combining the 'wild-flower prettiness of a peasant baby' with the 'pomp of an infant princess'. Indeed the only characteristic he can point to in support of the accusation of perversity is her wildness: her nature 'lacked reference and adaptation to the world into which she was born':

> It was as if she had been made afresh, out of new elements, and must perforce be permitted to live her own life, and be a law unto herself, without her eccentricities being reckoned to her for a crime.

She spontaneously claims an existential or Antinomian freedom, and because her mother is exiled to the forest-fringe of the community, escapes its 'wholesome regimen for the growth and promotion of all childish virtues', not least that 'frequent application of the rod, enjoined by Scriptural authority'. That she should be so 'full of merriment and music' in itself cries out for the repression meted out to the rival community at Merrymount.

Again there are close parallels in Blake. At the centre of Blake's rebellion was the conviction that the main purpose of life was not to enchain

what he called the energies, which only provokes them to destructive manifestations, but to release them into creative activity. Hester observes in Pearl 'so fierce a training of the energies that were to make good her cause, in the contest that must ensue'. Blake's 'A Little Girl Lost' begins with this epigraph:

> *Children of the future Age*
> *Reading this indignant page,*
> *Know that in a former time*
> *Love! Sweet Love! was thought a crime.*

Blake's little girl is somewhat older than Pearl, and has her first experience of sexual love in an unsupervised and therefore unfallen world:

> Once a youthful pair,
> Fill'd with softest care,
> Met in garden bright
> Where the holy light
> Had just remov'd the curtains of the night.
>
> There, in rising day,
> On the grass they play;
> Parents were afar,
> Strangers came not near,
> And the maiden soon forgot her fear.

But her later meeting with her father desecrates her joys and desires, smearing them with the serpent-slime of sin, vomiting poison on the bread and the wine.

> To her father white
> Came the maiden bright;
> But his loving look,
> Like the holy book,
> All her tender limbs with terror shook.

Pearl several times invites her father to join hands with Hester and herself. But it never seems to occur to Dimmesdale that he might have any obligations in the eyes of God towards Hester and Pearl. The only thing he feels he ought to share with them is their public humiliation. He denies Pearl

a family and therefore drives her into greater wildness. She is like the child Anna Brangwen in Lawrence's *The Rainbow,* lacking the security which the rainbow arch of an achieved marriage symbolizes. His desertion leaves Hester, as Lawrence says of Tom Brangwen, 'like a broken arch thrust sickeningly out from support', and that unsupported weight presses on Pearl.

While Dimmesdale moves in perpetual gloom, Pearl generates or attracts her own private pool of sunshine. She has a deep fund of vital energy, the lack of which, as well as guilt, is what Dimmesdale is dying of, a life-giving energy which is denied its circuit in a family, except for one remarkable moment. Dimmesdale takes her hand:

> The moment that he did so, there came what seemed a tumultuous rush of new life, other life than his own, puring 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.

But Dimmesdale, as Pearl sees, is neither bold nor true. He is too self-centred to accept the gift of love and life. He 'had extended his egotism over the whole expanse of nature'.

The same discrepancy we noted in the interpretation of the wild rose bush exists on a larger scale in relation to the forest. All the passing references to the forest assume the standard Puritan associations of darkness and evil. The forest is precisely what the colonists have come to eradicate, and Dimmesdale in particular had come from a great English university 'bringing all the learning of the age into our wild forest-land'. But when we actually enter and experience the forest, its meaning is exactly the opposite. Its beauties are not presented as the product of mere rankness. It would be absurd, given his lifelong, minutely recorded love of Nature, to assume that Hawthorne is speaking in his own person when he condemns Hester for 'breathing the wild, free atmosphere of an unredeemed, unchristianized, lawless region' and for being in sympathy with 'that wild, heathen Nature of the forest, never subjugated by human law, nor illuminated by higher truth'. Hawthorne had spent a large part of his life shunning that subjugated humanized world. Not only are such sentiments completely out of keeping with his attitude to Nature as expressed in his Notebooks (was he not a close friend of Thoreau?) but also with the forest as we experience it in this novel.

Dimmesdale behaves as though he had only two alternatives, to keep silent as he does until the end, or to publicly confess and join Hester and Pearl on the scaffold. There is a third alternative, which his role as the

spiritual leader of a Christian community in fact enforces on him, that is to do what Christ would have done, what Christ did in a similar situation with the woman taken in adultery. He should have opposed the communal cruelty in the name of compassion and common humanity. As Hester says to him in the forest: 'What hast thou to do with these iron men, and their opinions? They have kept thy better part in bondage too long already'. It seems for a moment that his better part might yet be redeemable. He feels joy for the first time since his 'sin':

> 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, unchritianized, lawless, region. His spirit rose, as it were, with a bound, and attained a nearer prospect of the sky, than throughout the misery which had kept him grovelling on the earth.

With great daring Hawthorne has Dimmesdale attribute his momentary redemption and resurrection to the forest leaves and his decision to seek the 'better life' in adultery:

> 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?

In the forest 'never subjugated by human law, nor illumined by higher truth', Hester achieves her apotheosis. She frees her abundant hair, 'dark and rich'. Her smile 'seemed gushing from the very heart of womanhood':

> 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. … All at once, as with a sudden smile of heaven, forth burst the sunshine, pouring a very flood into the obscure forest, gladdening each green leaf, transmuting the yellow fallen ones to gold.

For Pearl, especially, it is a moment of atonement with all the flora and fauna of the forest : 'The truth seems to be that the mother-forest, and these wild things which it nourished, all recognized a kindred wildness in the human child'. She decks herself with flowers like Perdita at the sheep-

shearing: ‘See with what natural skill she has made those simple flowers adorn her! Had she gathered pearls, and diamonds, and rubies, in the wood, they could not have become her better’.

What would have happened if Dimmesdale had allowed himself to be persuaded to run away with Hester, and they had escaped the attentions of Chillingworth? Surely we never believe for a moment that this could happen. Chillingworth would necessarily be on the ship with them, since he is a part of Dimmesdale, his chilling worth, his disabling, dehumanizing self-subjection to the quest for spiritual purity. Once out of the forest and the company of Hester and Pearl, his new found freedom can express itself only in the blanket negation of blasphemy. Remove his ‘dynasty and moral code’ and there is nothing for him to fall back on but his ‘buckramed habit of clerical decorum’. His final act, far from being an act of ‘honesty and courage’ as some critics have called it, is his total, fatal capitulation to a set of evil values which have eaten their way into his breast, cauterized his heart. The difference between Hester and Dimmesdale is that her scarlet letter is external; it can be thrown off or worn with ostentatious scorn. His is internal. It defines him. It is his life. The aspiration towards purity and perfection itself emerges as evil.

The forest, for all its positive associations, is not a place where people can live and start a family. They could have tried to found an alternative community, but, apart from physical hardship and the dangers from the Indians, the Puritans would soon have stamped out such an attempt, as they stamped out the attempt at Merry Mount. As for going back to Europe, there would always be the crippling fear of discovery, since even two centuries later the adulterous or ‘impure’ woman is invariably destroyed. Emma Bovary, Anna Karenina, Tess, show that no patriarchal society will (can by definition) tolerate adultery.

Hawthorne is, like Flaubert, Tolstoy, Hardy, strongly aware of marriage as a social institution, of the unlikelihood of fulfilment on the run or in exile. If you are locked into a society which forbids your personal fulfilment, the situation is tragic. There was a powerful convention in fiction that however sympathetic the writer might be to an adulterous heroine, the moral code must be respected to the extent that she must end the novel dead. *Madame Bovary* (1856) and *Anna Karenina* (1873) both end with the death of the heroine; and despite his claim that she is a ‘pure woman’ and the fact that her supposed sin was not in any case adulterous, Hardy’s Tess (1893) ends on the gallows. The mere fact that Hester is still alive and relatively happy at the end is therefore highly subversive. It was not until Lawrence

and Joyce in the nineteen-twenties that novelists dared to openly celebrate adultery.

Hawthorne's heroine is a scarlet woman who glories in her 'sin'; the villain the betrayed husband; the most sinful member of the community its spiritual leader. By the end of the novel, the scarlet letter itself is transformed, even in the eyes of the citizens, until they begin to read it as standing for Able. The reader recognizes, in the pun with Abel, Hawthorne's affirmation of Hester's innocence. But what he has planted in the minds of his readers is that the true interpretation is Angel. Red begins as the colour of evil and shame, but becomes, through Hawthorne's alchemy, the colour of inextinguishable life.

The last we hear of Hester, she is giving comfort and counsel to wounded, wasted and wronged women, assuring them 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.

The Scarlet Letter is Hawthorne's contribution to that ripening and revelation.