

THE ORIGINALITY OF HAWTHORNE'S "THE SCARLET LETTER"

GORDON ROPER*

ONE hundred years ago two English and two American authors wrote four books that marked a turning point in the course of fiction in English. Late in the winter of 1850, in the secluded study of his Salem home, Nathaniel Hawthorne was finishing *The Scarlet Letter*: it was published on 15 March, 1850. Equally secluded from the literary capitals of England and America in their Yorkshire parsonage, Charlotte Bronte and Emily Bronte had written *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Wuthering Heights* (1848). In this same winter of 1850, on his farm outside of Pittsfield, Mass., Herman Melville had begun *Moby-Dick*. These four books transvalued England and American fiction. Unlike their contemporaries in fiction, these four wrote from a subjective impulse. In varying degrees they were compelled to write as they did by the demands of their personalities. They created these fictions in the effort to integrate themselves more fully with the outside world. These books express private visions, and were private means of adjustment to reality.

Subjectivity alone is a flimsy source of enduring art, but when an individual vision of human experience is expressed successfully in the appropriate form, and when it grows out of man's common roots, subjectivity can lead to high art. Subjective visions, moulded by skilful artistry, have presented us with much of the literature most prized in our time. This new subjectivity, first apparent in fiction in English in the work of the Brontes, Hawthorne, and Melville, helped open the way for later novelists to write not as merchants or propagandists but as artists. This transvaluation gradually led in English and American culture to the recognition of fiction as a peer among other literary forms; indeed, from a subliterary form in the first half of the nineteenth century, fiction has become the most characteristic literary form in our day. In particular, this development led to, and was helped on by, the work of George Eliot, Henry James, Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence, and Thomas Wolfe; it flowered most profusely in the period between the Wars. Created by these writers, fiction became an art, not

*Associate Professor English, Trinity College, University of Toronto.

merely a means of retailing momentary excitements or of indoctrination.

To see clearly how the work of the Brontes, Hawthorne, and Melville began the transvaluation of fiction in English, one must compare their work with that of their contemporaries. Turn the clock back one hundred years. 1850 was a rare year in fiction; from the rank growth, time has preserved at least three durable productions, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Dickens' *David Copperfield*, and Thackeray's *Pendennis*. In fact, the five years centering on 1850 saw a crop of durable fiction unequalled in English before, and rarely matched since. Among the books that appeared in the few years before *The Scarlet Letter* were Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, Melville's *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*, Dickens' *Dombey and Son*, and Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. Among those in the two years after *The Scarlet Letter* were Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, Dickens' *Bleak House*, and Thackeray's *Henry Esmond*. Some of these were best-sellers in their own day; others, like *Moby-Dick*, remained submerged under the flood of popular fiction: Bulwer-Lytton's *The Caxtons*, Mrs. Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Kingsley's *Alton Locke*, Susan Warner's *The Wide World*, and *Queechy*, Mrs. E. D. E. N. Southworth's *The Curse of Clifton*, Foster's *New York by Gaslight*, or that runaway best-seller, Susanna Cummin's *The Lamplighter*.

Excluding the Brontes, Hawthorne and Melville, one can measure the motivation of all these authors in writing their fictions, on a scale of what the writer wanted to do with his reader. At one end of this scale was the commercial intention of selling entertainment to as many as would buy, for the profit and prestige of the writer; at the other end of the scale was the intention of preaching certain social, political, or religious values, made palatable by fictional form, for the uplift of both reader and writer. Whether he figured prominently in his fiction as the commentator, as Thackeray did so effectively in *Vanity Fair*, or whether he was the invisible and omniscient eye, as Dickens often was, the author tended to be more objective than subjective, more social than individual, more public in viewpoint than private. In observing and commenting he spoke from the standpoint of one or another set of accepted social values — mid-nineteenth century Christian, humanitarian, or even aristocratic. He gained his strong effects by

emotional appeals to one or more sets of widely accepted values. He was most apt to organize his work on the principle of variety—variety of incident, character, setting, pace, tone—something for everybody. His ordering of his material was apt to be episodic, a tangle of plots and sub-plots, shaped into a series of emotional climaxes effective in serial publication. His material often was chosen because other popular fictions had "sales-tested" it, and had demonstrated that it sold. In brief, fiction then, as our films are now, was composed primarily to please—or to instruct by pleasing—the public.

But the motivation of the Brontes, Hawthorne, and Melville must be measured on a new scale. Their motivation primarily was to express their private visions. At one end of this new scale of motivation is a compelled expression that is hurled forth with little check; at the other end is a less intense expression—impelled rather than compelled—and shaped by strict control. None of these books is an example of compelled and uncontrolled expression; examples are not to be found in our fiction until after the First World War. *The Scarlet Letter*, however, is a fair example of the other extreme on this scale, that of impelled expression under cool control. *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Moby-Dick* may be placed at various intermediate points on the scale; they are examples of works where the impulse of self-expression fluctuates (*Jane Eyre*); or where the impulse is high and the control higher (*Wuthering Heights*); or where the impulse is extremely high and at points escapes control (*Moby-Dick*). These last two I would call "compelled", but controlled, works.

Hawthorne, the Brontes, and Melville, of course, were not unique among creators in their controlled use of the drive from within to embody private visions. The controlled shaping of the drive always has been a major source of art. Conflict within the personality forces many persons to seek some means of turning their disunity into integrity. If an integrity can be achieved in an external expression, the person may gain from this achievement a sense of integrity within. In many of us the impulsion to express is high and the impulsion to restrain low; or it may be that reticence smothers a weak expressive impulse; or it may be that we can balance strong conflicting forces but do not have the technical skill to utilize this high tension and thus to create a unified expression. The artist, however, is he who can use the high tension between impulse

to express and impulse to restrain in order to shape effectively an integrated expression. The more accomplished the artist the more complete will be the integration he achieves in his expression. Moreover, the work of art he produces will be unlike any previous work of art, for in order to express his private vision most effectively he will have to find the form uniquely appropriate for expressing the private vision. Hence such a work must be self-integrated; it must find and follow its own law.

What is unique about the four mid-nineteenth century artists, Hawthorne, the Brontes, and Melville is that they expressed themselves in novels, not in poetry or in any other recognized genre at a time when the novel was a sub-literary form, used for popular entertainment or indoctrination. Why they broke away from the kind of fiction written by their contemporaries is not the issue here; what I wish to consider in more detail in the following few pages is how this new motivation led to the creation of a new kind of fiction in English, a fiction that is characterized by an integrity of author's intention, of content, and of form.

II

For clarity's sake, let us isolate one work, and in this centenary year, let it be Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. What was Hawthorne's frame of mind when he created this particular work of art? How did this frame of mind, guided by a new concept of the nature and function of fiction, lead Hawthorne, through the using of old materials for new purposes and the embodying of these in appropriate form, to create an integrated work of art?

Hawthorne was an impelled writer. Just out of college twenty-three years before *The Scarlet Letter*, he turned his back on other occupations, and in a day when one could expect little income from writing fiction in America, he deliberately chose to write for a living. It was for a living in a double sense; he was poor, and could expect little help from his family; more pressing, however, was his growing sense of isolation from his fellow men. He wrote to Longfellow in 1837:

By some witchcraft or other—for I readily cannot assign any reasonable why or wherefore—I have been carried apart from the main current of life, and find it impossible to get back again.

Perhaps he could re-establish communication with others through writing. His early fiction shows him trying to accomplish both ends. He created fictions out of the Gothic and sentimental and historical materials then popular in fiction, and his work appeared in the popular periodicals of his day. But as these tales and sketches continued from his pen we can see the recurrence of certain themes and attitudes that symbolize his interior landscape. We can see that in using the conventional material of his day in his own way, Hawthorne with quiet insistence was expressing a private vision. His impulsion to express, however, was close checked by the contrary impulsion deep within his nature "to keep the inmost Me behind its veil". Writer and reader each had his right to reticence.

He was aware of the effect of this tension on his work; in 1851, looking back on his first collection, *Twice-Told Tales*, he wrote:

Whether from lack of power or an unconquerable reserve, the Author's touches have often an effect of tameness . . .

But paradoxically:

They have none of the abstruseness of idea, or obscurity of expression, which mark the written communications of a solitary mind with itself . . .

He then offered—to his public—one resolution of this paradox:

This statement of apparently opposite peculiarities leads us to a perception of what the sketches truly are. They are not the talk of a secluded man with his own mind and heart (had they been so, they could hardly have failed to be more deeply and permanently valuable) but his attempts, and very imperfectly successful ones, to open an intercourse with the world.

In the mid-forties, as he continued to write, the insistence within him grew to communicate with those who would understand; along with it grew the insistence that he communicate on his own terms and in his own way. In his introduction to his 1846 volume of tales, *Mosses From an Old Manse*, he wrote that he was resolved to have done with patchwork books of tales and sketches; it was "the last collection, of this nature which it is my purpose ever to put forth. Unless I could do better, I have done enough in this kind." When, dismissed from the Custom House, with a family to support, in his darkest

days he turned to write *The Scarlet Letter*, he wrote what he was impelled to write, not what would sell:

In a letter to his publisher James T. Fields, he said:

If the book is made up entirely of "The Scarlet Letter", it will be too sombre. I found it impossible to relieve the shadows of the story with so much light as I would gladly have thrown in. Keeping so close to its point as the tale does, and diversified no otherwise than by turning different sides of the same dark idea to the reader's eye, it will weary very many people and disgust some.

Yet as the head of a family without an income, he had to make his book sell. This he attempted to do, not by compromising in *The Scarlet Letter*, but by surrounding it with tales in other moods that might attract a wider audience. Continuing his letter to Fields, he added:

Is it safe, then, to stake the fate of the book entirely on this one chance? A hunter loads his gun with a bullet and several buckshot; and, following his sagacious example, it was my purpose to conjoin the one long story with half a dozen shorter ones, so that, failing to kill the public outright with my biggest and heaviest lump of lead, I might have other chances with the smaller bits, individually and in the aggregate. However, I am willing to leave these considerations to your judgement, and should not be sorry to have you decide for the separate publication.

In this latter event it appears to me that the only proper title for the book would be *The Scarlet Letter*, for "The Custom House" is merely introductory,—an entrance hall to the magnificent edifice which I throw open to my guests. It would be funny if, seeing the further passages so dark and dismal, they should all choose to stop there! If *The Scarlet Letter* is to be the title, would it not be well to print it on the title page in red ink? I am not quite sure about the good taste of so doing, but it would certainly be piquant and appropriate, and, I think attractive to the great gull whom we are endeavouring to circumvent.

When *The Scarlet Letter* succeeded beyond his or his publisher's expectations, Hawthorne credited its success to "The Custom House" sketch.

Hawthorne wrote the kind of fiction he had to write, not the kind he admired. In a later letter to Fields, he said:

It is odd enough that my own individual taste is for quite another class of novels than those which I myself am able to write. If I were to meet with such books as mine by another writer, I don't believe I should be able to get through them. Have you read the novels of Anthony Trollope? They precisely suit my taste; solid and substantial written on the strength of beef and

through the inspiration of ale, and just as real as if some giant had hewn a great lump out of the earth, and put it under a glass case, with all its inhabitants going about their daily business, and not suspecting that they were made a show of.

Hawthorne was quite aware, as he wrote *The Scarlet Letter*, that he was writing a book that was not like contemporary fiction in its motivation; he knew also that his whole concept of the nature and function of fiction was unlike that held by almost all of his contemporaries. He may not have read the books by the Brontes; he was not to meet Melville until the following year.

Hawthorne's concept of the nature of fiction differed significantly from those concepts held by most fiction writers of his time. His concept had much more in common with concepts that Wordsworth, Shelley, and Emerson had of the nature of poetry. Fiction, Hawthorne believed, should delineate Truth; actual, everyday human experience should be transmuted by the artist's creative imagination into a picture of Reality that was universal and timeless. To him this reality could be found most near the bone by a probing into the dark but scrutable ways of man's reaction to the inscrutable ways of Fate. In other words, Hawthorne was concerned fundamentally not with the idiosyncracies of individual behavior in any immediate locality at any one time, but with abstractions, the general truths about human behavior. He described himself as a writer:

Burroughing, to his utmost ability, into the common depths of our common nature, for the purpose of psychological romance,—and who pursues his researches in that dusky region, as he need must, as well by the tact of sympathy as by the light of observance. (Pre ace to *The Snow Image* [1851]).

A fictional work that portrayed the "Actual" he called a Novel; *The Scarlet Letter* he called a Romance, giving the term his own peculiar definition in his "Preface" to *The House of the Seven Gables*:

The latter form of composition [a novel] is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience. The former [an ideal Romance]—while as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably so far as it may swerve aside from the truth to the human heart—has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation."

Even more revealing of his concept of the nature of his fiction is his description of his own creative process. In "The Custom House" sketch, which prefaced *The Scarlet Letter*, he described, among other things, the inhibiting effect that his work as Surveyor in the Custom House had on his efforts to bring *The Scarlet Letter* into being.

. . . 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. They would take neither the glow of passion nor the tendencies of sentiment, but retained all the rigidity of dead corpses, and stared me in the face with a fixed and ghastly grin of contemptuous defiance. "What have you to do with us?" that expression seemed to say. "The little power you might once have possessed over the tribe of unrealities is gone! You have bartered it for a pittance of the public gold. Go then, and earn your wages!" In short, the almost torpid creatures of my own fancy twitted me with imbecility, and not without fair occasion.

. . . The same torpor, as regarded the capacity for intellectual effort, accompanied me home, and weighed upon me in the chamber I most absurdly termed my study. Nor did it quit me, when, late at night, I sat in the deserted parlor, lighted only by the glimmering coal-fire and the moon, striving to picture forth imaginary scenes, which, the next day, might flow out on the brightening page in many-hued description.

If the imaginative faculty refused to act at such an hour, it might well be deemed a hopeless case. Moonlight, in a familiar room, falling so white upon the carpet, and showing all its figures so distinctly,—making every object so minutely visible, yet so unlike a morning or noontide visibility,—is a medium the most suitable for a romance-writer to get acquainted with his illusive guests. There is the little domestic scenery of the well-known apartment; the chairs with each its separate individuality; the centre-table, sustaining a work-basket, a volume or two, and an extinguished lamp; the sofa; the bookcase; the picture on the wall—all these details, so completely seen, are so spiritualized by the unusual light, that they seem to lose their actual substance and become things of the intellect. Nothing is too small or too trifling to undergo this change, and acquire dignity thereby. A child's shoe; the doll, seated in her wicker carriage; the hobby-horse,—whatever, in a word has been used or played with, during the day, is now invested with a quality of strangeness and remote-

ness, though still almost as vividly present as by daylight. Thus, therefore, the floor of our familiar room has become a neutral territory, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other. Ghosts might enter here, without affrightening us. It would be too much in keeping with the scene to excite surprise, were we to look about us and discover a form beloved but gone hence, now sitting quietly in a streak of this magic moonshine, with an aspect that would make us doubt whether it had returned from afar, or had never once stirred from our fireside.

The somewhat dim coal-fire has an essential influence in producing the effect which I would describe. It throws its unobtrusive tinge throughout the room, with a faint ruddiness upon the walls and ceilings, and a reflected gleam from the polish of the furniture. This warmer light mingles itself with the cold spirituality of the moonbeams, and communicates, as it were, a heart and sensibilities of human tenderness to the forms which fancy summons up. It converts them from snow-images into men and women. Glancing at the looking-glass, we behold—deep within its haunted verge—the smouldering glow of the half-extinguished anthracite, the white moonbeams on the floor and a repetition of all the gleam and shadow of the picture, with one remove further from the actual, and nearer the imaginative. Then at such an hour, and with this scene before him, if a man sitting all alone, cannot dream strange things, and make them look like truth, he need never try to write romances.

But for myself, during the whole of my Custom House experience, moonlight and sunshine, and the glow of firelight, were just alike in my regard; and neither of them was of one whit more avail than the twinkle of a tallow candle. An entire class of susceptibilities, and a gift connected with them,—of no great richness or value, but the best I had,—was gone from me . . .

If we oversimplify this metaphorical description, it seems that his creative process as to abstract from his observations of daily experience, and to reorder the material by his intelligence; then he infused the abstraction with the warmth of "the heart and sensibilities of human tenderness", and finally gave his production that symbolic, ambiguous atmosphere which is peculiarly "Hawthornesque". Thus his work is not concerned with picturing apparent truths but the essential truths of the darker side of man's behavior.

This unconventional concept of the nature of fiction dovetails with his equally unconventional concept of the function of fiction. To him the function of his fiction was not to enrich himself or to form—or reform—his fellow man; it was to express effectively the truth as he saw it. Of himself in the Preface to the 1851 edition of the *Twice-Told Tales* he wrote:

. . . he had no incitement to literary effort in a reasonable prospect of reputation or profit, noting but the pleasure itself of composition—an enjoyment not at all amiss in its way, and perhaps essential to the merit of the work in hand, but which, in the long run, will hardly keep the chill out of a writer's heart, or the numbness out of his fingers.

Fiction was written in the 1840's and 1850's for the profit or for the moral elevation of others. A great number of readers, especially those in the United States and more especially those in what is now Canada, felt inflexibly that fiction either elevated or corrupted; they feared that most of it corrupted. One reviewer of *The Scarlet Letter* asked why Hawthorne had pictured illicit love, and answered himself:

Is it in short, because a running undercurrent of filth has become as requisite to a romance as death in the fifth act of a tragedy? Is the French era actually begun in our literature?

To elevate was the function of that outstanding best-seller of 1850, Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*, which through emotional melodrama sought to preach to its readers a conventional dogma of "Christian" humility, acceptance, and optimism. Hawthorne's morality, on the other hand, was not "Calvinistic", nor was it a conventional Christian view of his Salem; it was an examination and acceptance of the darker ambiguities of life. He was being most moral when he was presenting truthfully—and artistically—his vision of life. Morality was to him the artist's pursuit of the Ideal, not a means of winning friends and influencing God, to gain a reward here or hereafter.

Thus *The Scarlet Letter* is the expression of a private vision. The vision it embodies is Hawthorne's mature interpretation of sin and its consequences. Hawthorne's fundamental feeling about life seems to have been his acute awareness that the individual was isolated from his fellow men, hence from his society, and finally, from his God. Man's hope for life lay in his bridging the gulf that separated him from those outside. Love, "the electric chain of human sympathy", was the force that gave him strength to bridge this gulf; as he wrote his wife:

Indeed, we are but shadows; we are not endowed with real life, all that seems most real about it is the thinnest substance of a dream,—until the heart be touched. That touch creates us,—then we begin to be; thereby we are beings of reality, and inheritors of eternity.

Sin was behavior in the individual that violated the integrity of oneself and of other individuals; it led to the widening of the gulf between the sinner and all others. The widening gulf caused deep mental and spiritual suffering, and this suffering accelerated the desire of the individual for reunion. The penance the individual undergoes by isolation and suffering will continue until he can truly repent by accepting responsibility for his sinning and can will himself to ask for forgiveness. True repentance must come from within; it is not to be had by suffering acts imposed from without.

This pattern of sin, isolation, suffering, and self-willed repentance, Hawthorne saw more subtly than this outline suggests. He assumed a belief current in his day that human nature was made up of three faculties: heart, mind and soul. In the ideal human being these three faculties would be perfectly integrated; in practice, he observed, one of the three will predominate. Therefore while aspiring to a more perfect integration, one must accept what one is, and strive to be true to one's own nature. The Heart will yearn for a mate, and fulfil itself through mate, family, and social unity; the Mind will yearn for intellectual Truth; the Soul will yearn for God. Seeing men in this way, Hawthorne also saw sin not as an absolute, but as relative. When one commits an act in violation of one's own nature, that act is for him a sin; the same act, if performed by an individual of a different nature will not be a sin, unless for a different reason it violates his different nature. Moreover, one's sin can be purified only by undergoing a course of penance and self-willed repentance that is meaningful in terms of one's own nature; what acts as penance and repentance for one does not necessarily act for another. The moral is that one must be true to oneself.

In selecting and handling the material most useful to him in embodying this private vision in *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne used old materials in a new way to achieve an integrated work. To clothe his abstractions he took over much material that was conventional in the fiction, and drama, of his day. Consider the material in the book: the characters; their relationships; their motivations; the nature of the events; the historical setting; the nature of the climaxes; the nature of the ending. Abstracted from the book, they seem the stock material of subliterary fiction. Take, for instance, the characters; a dark woman, of noble but "Oriental" nature, has committed adultery

with a sensitive young man of feeling. The husband is a scientist-philosopher who has sacrificed his heart and spirit in the evil quest for the power that comes from forbidden knowledge. These adults comprise the eternal triangle. Add a child of sin whose actions and comment will keep the noses of these adults to the moral grindstone. The motivations of these characters seem equally the old stuff of popular fiction: instinctive passion in the dark woman; weakness of the flesh in the man of spirit; diabolical revenge in the fiend-like husband. Moreover, abstracted from the book the events seem to be ordered to play upon the easy emotions of the reader: the sinful, noble woman refuses to name the man who wronged her; a mystery is created—"Who was the man?"; the revenge-maddened husband finds him out by supersensitivity, and persecutes him; the lovers plot to escape, and the villain still pursues them. This story takes place against a historical setting, a practice popularized by Sir Walter Scott, Fenimore Cooper, and Simms; the setting provides opportunities for processions, trials, mob-scenes, witches, and sketches of quaint old ways. The climaxes occur in melodramatically set scenes, three on the public scaffold, and one in the dark depths of a Gothic forest. In the ending, the three adults seem to come to three variations of that solution so dear to Victorian fiction readers—renunciation. The book seems to conclude with a distribution of conventional rewards and punishments. Sin does not pay.

But this is not the way this material appears in *The Scarlet Letter*. Popular writers used such stuff to stir passing emotional excitement in their readers; Hawthorne transmuted these materials by using them as symbolic elements that in their interactions fuse to express a complex and profound study of the consequences of sin. His three central characters are not intended to be seen as heroine, hero, and villain; they are personifications; Hester stands for the Heart, Chillingworth the Head, and Dimmesdale the Spirit. Hester is not a "fallen woman"; she is the embodiment of the natural woman, whose life must be integrated in terms of womanly feeling. Chillingworth is a symbol of the personality whose life is dominated by the intellect; his natural course in life is the pursuit of intellectual Truth. Dimmesdale is a symbol of the personality whose life is dominated by the spirit; he seeks his integration in God's terms. To be living personalities each of these must be true unto himself.

The motivations that drive these personifications are love and hate. But love in Hawthorne's scheme of things is not "illicit passion"; it is the great dynamic of life. It is the force that integrates isolated individuals; in its negative state, hate, it leads to further isolation, and hence to corruption and to death. The actions that result from these motivations driving these characters are not ordered merely to induce suspense and excitement in the reader; they are ordered to picture the consequences of sin. Each event is meaningful not in itself but as a unit in its place in the whole course of events. For Hawthorne has arranged these events in an order as logical as that in the demonstration of a geometrical theorem. This is structure primarily to demonstrate meaning, not to engender excitement.

Hawthorne was unconventional also in his use of setting. The setting of mid-seventeenth century Boston is not used to add a romantic flavor, or to arouse a nostalgia for things past, or to stir local pride. Hawthorne used his setting as a force in his narrative. The setting here is not a backdrop; it is a community made a community by a certain stiff code of moral values. This community acts upon the three central characters, and is acted upon by them. *The Scarlet Letter* thus is a serious moral study of a culture, as well as a moral study of three individual ways of life.

The climaxes of this book are not renunciations—placed here for the sake of the thrill the reader may get out of vicarious renunciations. They are necessary terms in Hawthorne's demonstration of his abstraction. Each character "renounces" (if renouncing it be) the lesser but to gain the greater value. Dimmesdale's apparent renunciation of Hester and living actually is a symbolic act wherein he reunites himself with his God; in so doing, of course, he is being only true to himself. Hester's return from overseas to Boston is not a renunciation but an acceptance, and is true to her nature. Chillingworth "renounces" his persecution of Dimmesdale only when he realizes that he is powerless to continue it.

The ending of this narrative also is unconventional. It does not distribute the conventional rewards and punishments, as so many endings of fictions in that day did. It concludes by demonstrating the predetermined conclusions to the three courses of action lived out in this narrative by the three principal characters. These three endings illustrate each in its

own appropriate way the moral that Hawthorne was embodying; one must be true to one's self.

Hawthorne did not select all of these elements of his story for their proved value as catchers of "reader interest". He selected them in order to integrate them to symbolize a complex abstraction about human life. In doing so, he used his materials organically, and the materials that had remained sow's ears in conventional fiction were transmuted in his work into rich materials from which Hawthorne wove a silk purse richly full of meaning.

Hawthorne's use of old materials for his own purposes is only one aspect of how he solved the problem of finding an organic form to express his private vision, and in so doing departed from the conventional fictional forms of his day. He believed, as Edgar Allan Poe believed, that fiction must be organic; every element must contribute to a predetermined, single end. But Poe was concerned primarily with achieving a unity of effect; Hawthorne was concerned primarily with achieving a unity that would demonstrate clearly and richly his private vision of the consequences of sin. His formal means were of two kinds: those used to embody the abstraction clearly, and those used to embody the abstraction richly. Of the former kind, he said:

In all my stories, I think, there is an idea running through them like an iron rod, and to which all other ideas are referred and subordinate.

Of the latter kind, he said:

With a story like this [not "The Scarlet Letter"], it is allowable and highly advisable . . . to have as much mist and glorified fog as possible diffused about on all sides, but still there should be a distinct pathway to tread upon—a clue that the reader shall confide in, as being firmly fastened somewhere . . .

In *The Scarlet Letter*, the clarifying elements of his form grew organically out of his intention of presenting his theme "diversified no otherwise than by turning different sides of the same dark idea to the reader's eye". By creating three symbolic characters to personify the three different sides of the same dark idea he had three forces to activate his narrative; by placing these three in the community of Puritan seventeenth century Boston, he created a fourth activating force. The ordered interplay of these four forces produces a narrative

that clearly reveals three courses of sin, isolation, suffering, false penance, and finally true repentance (or final corruption in Chillingworth's case). Hawthorne revealed the interplay of these four forces by building an architectonic structure.¹

He built his structure in four parts. The first part (Chapters II-VIII) focused on one force acting on the other three forces in general, but only on one in particular. The Puritan community punishes Hester for her sin against it by isolating her on the public scaffold and then by banishment to a dwelling outside of the community. This line of action is developed to a climax wherein the dominant force, the community, loses its power to act on Hester (Chapter VIII) but in so doing creates a situation that releases one of the hitherto dominated forces (Chillingworth), who becomes the new dominating force. In the second part (Chapter IX-XII) Chillingworth first focuses his force upon Hester, and then having been led to suspect the object of his revenge is Dimmesdale, concentrates his evil power in persecuting the minister. His pressure forces the minister to a mock, midnight "repentance" on the scaffold (Chapter XII), a situation wherein Hester is given strength through a re-establishment of "the electric chain of human sympathy" to assert her force. In the third part (Chapter XIII-XX) Hester dominates the action, dealing first with Chillingworth, and then with Dimmesdale. She finally arranges to escape from the community with the minister—for each, in his or her own way, an unnatural solution. But in the conclusion of Chapter XX, Dimmesdale is visited by God's Grace, and thus is given strength to assert his own force. Consequently he dominates the action in the fourth part (Chapter XXI-XXIII). He proceeds to give his Election Sermon, and then, self-willed through God's Grace, he ascends the scaffold, confesses, and by dying, reunites himself with his God. In a concluding chapter Hawthorne completes the two other courses: Chillingworth, whose hate has further corroded his intelligence, is left objectless, and hence dies. Hester, unable to accept the minister's code of values, does her duty to Pearl by removing her to a non-Puritan community; after seeing Pearl married (brilliantly) Hester is true to herself by returning to the community whose values she has transgressed (she refuses to admit that she has sinned against her own nature),

1. The formal devices that Hawthorne used to build his narrative are outlined only briefly here, since I have discussed them in detail in my "Introduction" to *The Scarlet Letter and Selected Prose Works* (New York: Hendricks House, Farrar, Straus & Co., 1949, pp. vii-xlvi.)

and there leads a saintly life in life-long service. The ending is typically unconventional; Hester's sin against the community and her consequent service have almost purified her; they also have begun to humanize the unnatural values of the seventeenth-century Puritan community.

Hawthorne gained clarity by concentrating his action in few characters. He personified his main forces in Hester, Chillingworth, and Dimmesdale, and used the Puritan community and Pearl as framing forces. He employed only a few other characters, and these also were personifications: the Governor, the Reverend Mr. Wilson, and Mistress Hibbins symbolize different aspects of the Puritan community; the Indians, the ship's captain, and the sailors may be seen as personifications of ways of non-Puritan life; they too play symbolic parts.

He gave further clarity to his pattern by building this structure with large blocks of psychological analysis, interspersed with blocks of dramatic action. The pattern of analysis and dramatic action in the first quarter of his structure, he repeated, with significant variations, in the second, third, and fourth quarters. He also achieved clarity in his economic use of scene. The highest dramatic scene in the first quarter is played on the public scaffold (Chapters II and III); in the second quarter the scaffold is used again (Chapter XII); in the third, the high point, significantly, is not in the heart of the community, but in the depths of the forest; in the last, the high scene is played again on the scaffold.

These seem to be the major devices for embodying clearly the theme; if the narrative were built only from these, it would be clear to the point of starkness. By the use of another kind of technical device, Hawthorne added "diffusion" to his narrative, and hence gained his characteristic richness of suggestion and his many-leveled meaning. The major device for gaining richness is the triple-stranded course of the consequence of sin demonstrated in the actions of Hester, Chillingworth, and Dimmesdale. Another device is Hawthorne's all-pervading use of light and dark imagery; he has lit his narrative continuously with shifting patterns of light and darkness to intensify the meaning of the internal and external drama. Another device is that of making his characters perform symbolic acts or gestures. Again, he has used richly the device of deliberate ambiguity of expression; events may be described, then their cause explained on a common-sense level, a scientific level,

and then a supernatural level; the reader is left to accept any one, or all, of these explanations. Similarly the tone of the narrative is made double and deepened by the author's quiet irony, which extends even into the chapter headings.

By skilful use of these devices for obtaining clarity and richness in the presentation of his converted materials, Hawthorne expressed effectively his private vision of sin and its consequences. In so doing he created a work of art unique in itself, and a work that, along with those by the Brontes and Melville, marks decisively the beginning in England and America of an impelled, or compelled, fiction expressed in organic form.
