As She Lay Dying: Mother in "The Custom-House"

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Though every student of American Literature is at one time or other encouraged to read "The Custom-House"——especially the passage about the so-called "moonlit-parlor"——to learn Hawthorne's classic definition of romance, the latent complexity of this preface to *The Scarlet Letter* seems to have been given little notice in the past Hawthorne criticism until recently. Nina Baym once insightfully said that "The Custom-House" is a "commentary" (*Shape* 124) on *The Scarlet Letter*, its subject being the liberation of an entrapped imagination, a pattern which, she claimed, is faithfully followed in the ensuing narrative; however, some recent studies show that this preface is far more problematic and deceitful than major critics including Baym have long assumed. Michael Davitt Bell, for example, argues that the "moonlit-parlor passage" "doesn't quite make sense" in that, rather incongruous as a comment from a "romance" writer, the passage seems to celebrate the imaginative quality inherent only in the objects around him, not in *his own* imagination (38-40).

This preface, which its narrator professes is written under the urge of his unusual "autobiographical impulse" (I: 3), then, surely hides *something*. This essay's objective is to present one possible autobiographical speculation concerning the impact of the death of Hawthorne's mother in August 1849 on Hawthorn's psyche, in order to identify this *something* as the hidden "inmost" part of his mind immediately before he started to write *The Scarlet Letter*: his groundbreaking novel published in February 1850, which, I would like to suggest here, must have been made possible at all by a sort of revolution in his artistic view that was dramatically brought about by his beloved mother's death, and which, furthermore, is *itself* a dramatization of the supposed revolution.

First, let us clarify the nature of this "revolution."

1

Hawthorne has been rightfully considered to be the type of writer who had in his mind something theologically or morally definite to say. Critics have long identified this "something" more or less as some strong sense of universal guilt derived from the Calvinist doctrine of Predestination: an acute sensibility toward what Melville called a "great power of blackness" (243). Calvinism had once been the spiritual mainstay of many of the early American colonies, especially in New England where Hawthorne was to be born and bred; but it had begun to be obsolete and forgotten since around the late eighteenth century with the ongoing secularization of the American culture and politics as a whole. Against its "dark" view that humans are all sinners and therefore should always be severely repentant, emergent Unitarianism, for example, which later influenced Emerson's widely-accepted Transcendentalist way of thinking, urged the people to think that they did not always have to be so "pessimistic" as the past Puritans were in order to be religious at all. With the commencement of so-called Jacksonian Democracy in the late 1820's, the American people almost unanimously plunged into the age of enormous economic and industrial expansion and the concomitant spiritual liberation from the old, religiously restraining world-view. The young Hawthorne, politically a Jacksonian, of course shared much of this predominant air of democracy and self-reliance of the time; he was of course an American citizen willing to *live and hope.*[1]

To *another* part of Hawthorne, however, many aspects of this whole trend of "secularization" looked somehow inanely optimistic. His realistically insightful understanding of America's history amply displayed in his fiction shows that from his early apprenticeship he never ceased to face squarely the nation's past, especially its guilty aspects. His contemporaries, who seemed to have forgotten that the country is founded on tremendous guilt and that some part of human nature is always inscrutably dark, therefore, were merely the "stupid" public to him. Thus, his *artistic* conviction tended more and more toward the universal and almost religious "truth"—"universal guilt," that is—, powerfully distancing his artistic interests from his immediate and personal surroundings, including his own secular desires, which he as a *living* person inevitably craved for; accordingly, his psyche was split seriously between the secular and the religious, which I think is well demonstrated, for example, in "The Maypole of

Merry Mount," one of his early allegories in which two life-celebrating youths sadly yet resolutely abandon their libertine secular pleasures under the religious guidance of a stern yet understanding Puritan, Endicott.

The young Hawthorne's assumed relationship between the artist and the public, then, can be compared to that between the unappreciated "prophet" who is divinely entrusted with the *truth* and the ignorant mass of people; as Harry Levin wrote, "Hawthorne did not altogether put ministry behind when he rejected it as a possible calling" (42). His tales mostly published before *The Scarlet Letter* are fraught with these kinds of artists, ministers, outcasts, and intellectuals who by some chance seize, or are forced against their will to grasp, a kind of horrible truth—the doctrine of Predetermination—that, in a sharp contrast, the "ignorant" contemporary public cannot appreciate or even suspect at all. In "The Minister's Black Veil," a very characteristic Hawthorne allegory, the protagonist-minister wearing a black veil for god-knows-what-purpose dies a very lonely and mystifying death, plunging the whole unknowing congregation into sheer dismay.

Hawthorne's disguised declaration in the preface to "Rappacini's Daughter," another allegory written almost 20 years after "The Maypole," of his "inveterate love" (X: 91) of allegory must be understood in this context; allegory is, after all, traditionally a form of literature for edifying people in some definite values, especially *religious* ones. The Christian didacticism developed within the so-called "sentimental novels" then popular among the public, whose settings are usually matter-of-fact contemporary scenes, was of course ideologically very conservative and pro-middle-class-Victorian that blindly upheld the dominant secular values, focusing mainly on domestic ideals; no matter what his actual ideological preferences may have been, then, as to this kind of fiction he must have thought: *my truth* is of an altogether different order from *their superficial didacticism.* Just as Hester on the outskirts of the Salem village thinks about the redemption of all of womankind, so he probably thought, characteristically for a self-styled hermit-prophet, that his truth had to be seriously concerned with the far bigger problem of the *all people*'s absolution, despising and bemoaning the "low" taste of the contemporary public further.

2

It has been in many ways explained why Hawthorne was ever so convinced in his artistic "mission." The most widely accepted way is of course to connect

the situation directly with his outstanding Puritan ancestry. Though his religious stance toward Puritanical values has been considered to be highly ambiguous, as he declared in 1857 that the "spirit of my Puritan ancestors was mighty in me" (XVI: 451) he at least had a strong sense of being a direct descendant of one of the most "important" Puritan families in the history of America. It might be because, then, without his real father who had died when he was four, the young Hawthorne strongly identified himself imaginatively with these "important" paternal ancestors in the past, regarding them as his "ego-ideals" in Freudian terms. This "pride" in his Puritan ancestry, along with the shameful knowledge he acquired after his graduation from Bowdoin of his ancestors' past atrocities—the persecution of the Quakers and the presiding over the Salem Witch Trials—, the explanation goes, must have cultivated in his mind a firm conviction as to the relevancy of the doctrine of Predestination. Most of the major critics, with Frederic Crews at the head of the list, have argued more or less in this line (Crews 36-7).[2]

While I agree to the overall relevancy of these traditional understandings, however, here I would dare to speculate that, in view of many circumstances I will discuss later, the whole problem must have had its source more in his *immediate* and *private* circumstances than in such overtly expressed, yet nonetheless hopelessly *abstract* ones as his past Puritan heritage and his emotional attachment to it.

As I touched upon above, Hawthorne lost his father at a very early age; a reticent and stern sailor, his father died abroad in Surinam of yellow fever. Directly afterward, his mother, unconventional even by the standards of the sailors' widows in those days, almost completely withdrew to her room, denying herself almost any kind of society. This almost "Hindoo-like" (J. Hawthorne 4) self-negation virtually lasted for more than forty years until the end of her life in 1849, immediately before Hawthorne regularly started writing *The Scarlet Letter*; until then, Hawthorne almost always lived with her under the same roof with some brief exceptions here and there. Though it is certain that this behavior of his mother's must have had a deep impact on the character formation of the young Hawthorne, the astounding scarcity of Hawthorne's *direct* epistolary and journal remarks in his adulthood about her makes it almost impossible to know his actual feelings toward the situation. Still, Nina Baym reasonably suggests that this surprising scarcity itself implies at least his strong feelings toward his mother ("Mother" 4); indeed, his boyhood letters amply suggest that he was a gentle boy always seeming to care about his

mother, who was chronically ill and not always very demonstrative in her affection toward him. As is often discussed in the case of Faulkner, who is reputed to have suffered a similar sense of alienation from his proudly undemonstrative mother, we can at least assume more or less here that this kind of emotional distance from the mother might generate a serious complication in the child's Oedipal entry into the subject.[3]

Then, here it would be possible to psychoanalytically speculate that, with his beloved mother always under the same roof, so puritanically denying not only her own secular pleasures in deference to her deceased husband but also consequently the love Hawthorne as a child reasonably sought, the young Hawthorne *should* have harbored a *desperate need* to give her a kind of "compensation" for her grief; having failed in the attempt, he could have ended up vicariously desiring to inflict on himself instead the same kind of *ascetic restraint* on anything secular, young, and alive, as the couple in "The Maypole" are rather ambivalently ordered to by Endicott.[4] Biographies amply indicate that Hawthorne was hot only gentle and caring but also temperamentally very active and cheerful in his boyhood; if so, the more active and healthy he felt himself to be, and the more pity he took on his mother, the *guiltier* he could have unconsciously felt, however *gratuitous* it may have been; on the other hand, accordingly he must also have cultivated in him an acute antagonism toward the blatantly "optimistic" air of the then predominant American culture. Furthermore, if his mother was actually thus responsible for his life-long obsession with guilt, then it is not totally impossible that the young Hawthorne felt some vague *desire* at least to *desert*, or in the worst case even *kill* her, just as Hester felt toward Pearl, complicating his already-existing feelings of unfounded guilt further. The case might have been the one better understood more or less in the context of Julia Kristeva's theory of "abjection," in which a child develops extremely ambivalent feelings toward the mother who is overpowering in her influence on the child.[5 6]

After he learned what "feminism" then burgeoning in the American cultural landscape was, his feelings toward his mother, who must have seemed to him to willingly drown herself in the typical Victorian patriarchal system, must have become still further complicated.[7] Her self-negating retirement could be attributed to many possible circumstances now, yet it is very probable that, at least in Hawthorne's imagination at some point in his youth, it should have been linked primarily with the "ignominious" fact that, rather rare by the practices of the day, she was already pregnant at the time of the wedding[8]; the

fact actually seems to have been considered by her husband's family, especially by the women—the harsh and proud Hathorne women of direct Puritan origin—, as an outright sexual deviancy, and she apparently was virtually banished both emotionally and financially from the family: exactly what Hester Prynne experienced on far harsher terms in her relationship with the Boston community. In this context, then, his own firm artistic "pride" itself that we discussed in the previous section could have triggered in his psyche a critical problem: his own severely "hierarchical" view of the world could have been felt to him to be the very same self-righteousness that the Hathornes had cruelly shown toward his mother. In a line of this kind of reasoning, he could have even felt that it was no other than he himself that had been responsible for her seclusion.

The fundamental touch of his imaginative writings as I discussed in the previous section remained almost the same for, surprisingly, more than 20 years. It is rather improbable that such an *abstract* problem as his distant Puritan ancestors' "wrong-doings" could lead him to build up a conviction *this* firm and consistent, or rather an *obsession*, except more or less in such a context as I speculated upon above; as Henry James once intuitively said, his Puritan past was probably in itself too abstract an issue to be *truly* binding and poignant to his psyche.[9] Indeed, unlike Faulkner, for example, whose *whole environment*, immediate or distant, was literally *bound* to the past, in Hawthorne's case the person who seemed to him to be wholly obsessed with the past was only his mother; as we noted earlier, the environment in which he actually spent most of his life was on the whole characterized by its increasingly liberating air of democracy and self-reliance.[10]

All this and other textual evidence I will discuss later considered, I would like to venture to suggest here that at least one of the most important things which some *integral part of his psyche* wanted was to *console* his mother, through the exploration of the reason why his father *had to* die so early and his mother *had to* get herself so secluded, and that he at some point in his early life could have been led to half *believe* it was all because his whole family's "blood," including of course his father's or his own, was *somehow* tainted—even "cursed," as it were—through its past wrong-doings.[11] This irrational yet psychoanalytically reasonable accusation toward his family's blood could have very easily extended itself to include as its object the complacent contemporary American citizens in their enjoyment of secular pleasures, which his mother and he both felt destined to suppress: he wanted to strike back against the

contemporary world that seemed to him to be merely indifferent to his mother's plight.[12] When these private concerns were combined with his literary ambition or other circumstances surrounding it, it could have plunged him abstractly into the "mission impossible" to *improve* the basic nature of whole humankind with his pen, just as Hester's *private* love toward Dimmesdale gorged her further abstractly into envisioning the "hopeless task" of saving "the whole race of womanhood."(I: 205)[13]

What we should not forget here is that, as we already saw, another part of his psyche must have desperately wanted to be free from all of these highly demanding tasks; these cannot have been the only things that he, no doubt a person of ordinary wishes to enjoy secular life as an American citizen, wanted to do. The most important thing here is, however, that Hawthorne probably could never have been aware of these circumstances in any *objective* way. The very scarcity of his public remarks both on his mother and father seems to indicate that the problem of his relationship with his parents must have remained so delicate that all through his life he could not possibly have handled or faced it directly, or even that he could not have even thought it was ever the problem at all, until his mother actually died: if he wanted to believe that his "love" toward his mother was really "genuine," never "tainted" with any "bad" feelings of *hatred*, or even *a desire to kill her*, we can reasonably infer that he could never allow himself to face the situation directly.

3

The meaning of his mother's death has been speculated upon by many critics.[14] Nina Baym demonstrated most convincingly that his shock therein was such that the figure of his mother must have been at the *very* center of Hawthorne's consciousness in creating the character of Hester Prynne: a beautiful young woman of passion and resolution who gets banished along with her child from the community through an act of sexual deviancy ("Mother" 23). Indeed, Hawthorne himself wrote unusually dramatically of the incident that "it had been surely the darkest hour of his life," with him looking down on the dying mother lying in her deathbed and, looking up, seeing through the window his daughter Una playing on the ground with her brother. He "could not possibly check" his tears while holding his mother's hands, he also wrote, and saw "the whole of human existence at once"; he seems not to have anticipated any reaction *this* strong, and afterwards he even fell ill with something like a

"brain fever," unable to rise from the bed for almost one month (XIII: 428-29).

As I suggested in the previous section, the complication of his relationship with his parents was probably such that he could not have appreciated its *nature* objectively. Yet now, lying ill alone in his own bed after his beloved mother's final departure, he probably could not have helped thinking about her life and the whole circumstances that surrounded it, including of course the tragic death of his father or the fact of his having lived almost always for more than forty years together with his mother, in *far more objective* terms than ever before; in so doing, he must have been forced to radically re-examine the meaning of what he had so adamantly pursued all through his life as an artist, as well.

Indeed, as I argued earlier, it is highly unimaginable that Hawthorne simply did not want to celebrate the secular life merely because he was a distant descendant of stern Puritans.[15] Then, here we can suppose that now, in a reassessment of his *entire* past more intense and objective than in any other period of his life until then, he very possibly could have come to this realization, devastatingly painful and regrettable on the one hand, yet at the same time genuinely enlightening and liberating on the other: what he had pursued all through his life was not really a "divine" mission at all but a specifically "private" attempt to find a way to pacify the soul of his eternally-grieving mother by becoming himself a sort of "surrogate husband," and in so doing, to proceed to "bury" her respectfully and go celebrating *his own way through this secular world.* He must have deeply regretted not having been able to express his love toward his mother enough while shu was alive. We can remember here Dimmesdale, one of the most important sources of whose supposedly "divine" public sermon *was* such a hopelessly "secular" element as his own animal-like *desire to live.* Some poignantly important portion in Hawthorne's belief—his adamant pride as a *divine artist*—must have irreparably and inevitably collapsed under this sober realization.

This must have been an experience of transcendence, as if looking down on the entirety of his previous self from above, a gesture strongly reminiscent again of that of Dimmesdale's when he is safely back in his study again: "nothing short of a total change of dynasty and moral code" (I: 217) had occurred to him then. It probably was the completion of an ongoing process of death and regeneration that had been slowly but steadily taking place for a considerable length of time in his psyche; indeed, Hawthorne had already professed in "The Old Manse," published three years before, his dissatisfaction

with his products being "unsubstantial" (X: 91). We might as well remember here the extremely painful yet still bafflingly abstract bemoaning of Ethan Brand, a solitary man who, unprecedented even in his mysterious tales until then, commits suicide after he realizes the failure of his obsessive quest for some such universal idea as "the Unpardonable Sin," in a tale which was written about *7months before* the death of his mother[16]; Hawthorne's psychic complication might have reached at a bursting point at the time of his mother's death.

If we could imagine Hawthorne moderately recovered from his physical and mental illness with this kind of revolutionary awareness, it is reasonable to suppose that, in order to give catharsis to his maddening existential confusion as an important gesture of Freudian "mourning work," or more simply as a sincere gesture to prove to himself his love toward his mother to be genuine, he would try to write *specifically* about and in so doing give *objective* meaning to the entire circumstances concerning his family; the product would have to be a *novel*, not an *allegory*, secular and vivid enough to be commensurate in its thematic weight with his personal experience, both as a son and as an artist[17]; furthermore, all these would still have to be done under the veil of fictive abstractness carried over from his previous artistic self, partly because of his respect for his mother's privacy, and partly because it would safely give him the ample distance with which to mourn for his mother, and probably more poignantly because he still felt he must not wholly abnegate his past self: if the novel is a tribute to his mother and his entire past, then he would inevitably have to respect the whole of the past even when taking farewell; so did Dimmesdale, as we all know, despite the memorably liberating admonitions from Hester.

That Hawthorne now decided to write mainly about his own private situation would mean that by finally acknowledging the nature of his most private concerns and wishes he then for the first time in his life *consciously* resolved to quit trying to be a "holy prophet" but instead a "secular novelist" by at once celebrating and yet critically writing about the secular world.[18] He now could very possibly have thought like this: the "truth" must exist somewhere, I still believe, but it is definitely not within my humble reach; it only exists in the deepest part of each and every individual's heart; if so, the "office" of his art now is never to enlighten people with his definite doctrines, but merely to encourage people to realize *their own inmost Mes*. If this recognition, which might be embarrassingly self-evident to the modern reader, was *really* poignant

to Hawthorne, it must have helped finally bring about a kind of dramatic resolution to the long-standing problem of his own adamant artistic pride. Indeed, the narrator in *The Scarlet Letter* toward the end says of Hester mingling with the ordinary suffering women that "[e]arlier in life, Hester had vainly imagined that she might be the destined prophetess, but had long since recognized the impossibility that any mission of divine and mysterious truth should be confided to a woman stained with sin, bowed down with shame, or even burdened with a lifelong sorrow" (I: 263).[19] Every reader knows that the narrator of *The Scarlet Letter* seems to know fully what the "office" (161) of the scarlet letter-shaped cloth—in a way a symbol of *art* itself—*really* is, or *should* be.

As it is, *The Scarlet Letter* turns out to be no less a melancholic story about Hawthorne's poignantly-craved family circle consisting of Dimmesdale, Hester, and Pearl, each roughly representing his absent father, distant mother, and himself, than about the different lives of two types of artists, both of whom are the different projections of Hawthorne's own self-image: Hester, a confidently aloof seamstress-radical, and Dimmesdale, a hesitantly communal preacher. We can see not in Hester but in Dimmesdale the first and the only type of artist in all of Hawthorne's writings that manages to produce an *authentic* work of art, a sermon with "the Tongue of Flame" (I: 142), by concerning himself seriously with and yet at the same time ironically distancing himself from the delicate ways of the secular world through his confrontation with his "inmost Me."[20] The balance that conspicuously emerged in Hawthorne's career after *The Scarlet Letter*, between the consistent technical solicitude toward the taste of the contemporary public and the persistent recurrence nevertheless of his own old preoccupations and, would be fairly understandable in this context.[21]

The sentimentally coherent *story* we speculated on above might strike the modern critic as at worst hopelessly arbitrary, or at best as psychoanalytically stereotypical. However, the close reading of "The Custom-House" we will attempt in the following sections will fully attest to the relevancy of this bafflingly coherent *dramatization* of his actual experience, for the very melodrama is, we will see, covertly yet recognizably re-enacted in a condensed way there; whatever his experience *in actuality* may have been, then, at least *in Hawthorne's own consciousness* the experience must have been sublimated into a consistent story, with a tangible meaning more or less analogous to the one presented here.[22]

4

"The Custom-House" begins with two paragraphs separated from the main body, and this apparently with a solid reason: the first two paragraphs comprise the meta-commentary on the main narrative that follows. In the two paragraphs, the narrator on the one hand calls the ensuing narrative "this Custom-House sketch" and presents himself as the protagonist therein explaining how he "came into possession of" the source of *The Scarlet Letter*, while on the other hand shrewdly adding that the person presented in the sketch as the narrator himself is in fact no more than a literary character fashioned after a famous literary precursor: he says, "The famous example of 'P. P., the Clerk of This Parish' was never more faithfully followed" (I: 3). This remark has heretofore largely been ignored, or, if noticed by a few commentators at all, has merely been the source of puzzlement.[23]

This "P. P." quoted here as "the famous example" is a satire assumed to have been written by Pope, designed to mock an office clerk—P.P., that is—who thinks that his petty career is worth recounting in an irrelevantly grave manner. When the narrator in "The Custom-House" professes that he wrote his sketch following very faithfully the example of this kind of mock-autobiography, then, it inevitably means that the person narrating his own life in the sketch is to be taken as a kind of a "fool." Indeed, though it is true that the narrator has professed his intention to write an autobiography, he in the same breath declares his intention to conceal his "inmost Me behind a veil." (I: 4) What is most intriguing for us here is that, though the preface professes to explain "how a large portion of the following pages came" (I: 4) into the narrator's hand, there is no obvious mention whatsoever in it to the death of his mother, who we can now safely say must have been always at the very center of his consciousness while composing the preface.[24]

This line of interpretation seems to have hardly been pursued in any sustained way in the past Hawthorne criticism, though the unreliability of the narrator has been noticed by many critics including Michael Davitt Bell, who argues that the narrator is deliberately deceiving what Melville called "superficial skimmers of pages" in order to write a "romance," which then was thought to be a subversive genre (29-56), and Charles Feidelson Jr., who regards the narrator as being composed of two different personalities--the one who is "naïve" and "complacent" and the other who is introspective and

obsessed with past (35-45). While I agree with both of these views on the whole, I still have to argue here that they nevertheless are not given in any such sustained way as to make it possible for us to regard the narrator's unreliability itself as part of a consciously strategic design to half jokingly "fictionalize" Hawthorne's own serious "transformation" in his artistic views we postulated upon in the previous sections.

Let us examine the famous "Inspector" passage first.

> With his florid cheek, his compact figure smartly arrayed in a bright-buttoned blue coat, his brisk and vigorous step, and his hale and hearty aspect, altogether, he seemed—not young, indeed—but a kind of new contrivance of Mother Nature in the shape of man, whom age and infirmity had no business to touch. [...] The original and more potent causes, however, lay in the rare perfection of his animal nature, the moderate proportion of intellect, and the very trifling admixture of moral and spiritual ingredients; these latter qualities, indeed, being in barely enough measure to keep the old gentleman from walking on all-fours. He possessed no power of thought, no depth of feeling, no troublesome sensibilities; nothing, in short, but a few common-place instincts, which, aided by the cheerful temper that grew inevitably out of his physical well-being, did duty very respectably, and to general acceptance, in lieu of a heart. (I: 16-17)

We can see that the Inspector is depicted here as a characteristic seeker of secular pleasures: he is a man of "animal nature." Traditionally this has been interpreted merely as a straightforward expression of Hawthorne's personal venom toward both the Inspector, the original of whom actually helped drive him out of the office, and the entire customhouse, whose atmosphere was supposedly too vulgar and practical for an imaginative artist like him to work in.

However, when we encounter in *The Scarlet Letter* the very same phrase "the animal nature" (I: 130) in Chillingworth's comment on Dimmesdale's personality, the situation becomes simply uncomfortable. "The animal nature" here of course indicates Dimmesdale's strong life force, his "inmost Me," which has all along been severely repressed under the rigid law of the puritan community he has internalized. Indeed, here in the preface the narrator sticks to the point so insistently that it almost seems that he is not so much repelled

as fascinated by with the Inspector, which implies that he might have his own problem here: a kind of unwillingness to accept his own "animal nature" which he feels unconsciously guilty of. Indeed, the narrator in this preface is on the whole depicted to be too obviously and simply self-complacent as to his artistic pride to be the selfsame writer of many short stories, including "Wakefield," in which the aloofness from the ordinary course of life is severely criticized as being sinful.

After the passage, he goes on to narrate how he discovered in the upper room of the customhouse a scarlet cloth and an attached manuscript depicting very briefly the life of "one Hester Prynne"(I: 32), penned by the former Surveyor named Jonathan Pue. The narrator says he felt as if he sensed some burning "heat" when placing the cloth on his breast and dropped it on the floor. This is a striking scene especially for us, because the whole situation—the drama of some physical touch and impulsive reaction—reminds us of the *actual* scene (that Hawthorne so dramatizes in his notebooks) at Hawthorne's own mother's deathbed in the *upper room* of his house, where Hawthorne wrote he was overwhelmed into irrepressible sobs by the touch of his dying mother's own hand. The physical heat of her dying hand itself must have been far from intense, but its *symbolic* effect is well within the limit of our speculation. The actual Hawthorne might even have felt, then, watching the physique, or the expression, of his enfeebled mother lying in her deathbed then, as if he were struggling in vain to read some indecipherably aged "manuscript" documenting a "virtuous widow"'s life of violent passion and its suicidal denial.

This, along with the narrator's obsessive attitude toward the Inspector, allows us here more or less to judge that the ensuing dysfunction in his literary imagination, which is strongly evocative of Hawthorne's own spell of ill-health after the death of his mother, must be concerned not with, as he openly complains, the "practical" atmosphere of the customhouse but with the narrator's own repressive attitude toward what the "heat" seems to represent: literally his animal nature, that is, his desire to celebrate carnal pleasures, and symbolically his complicated relationship with Salem, or more specifically for us here, his feelings toward his mother and father, neither of whom the narrator even remotely mentions here. Then, we can understand that the narrator is presented here to the reader as a caricature of Hawthorne's own previous self we have supposed so far: a proudly aloof artist who misguidedly thinks he is a divine missionary.

In this context, the problem of the narrator's initial reference to Hester's

story is suggestive. He reads in the manuscript that the woman who actually wore the letter was "an old woman, a voluntary nurse, going about the country doing every possible good works," who "gained from many people the reverence due to an angel," adding casually that in prying further into the manuscript he found her "other doings and sufferings." Though it is not clear whether or not Pue's manuscript elucidates Hester's situation in her youth—the ignominiously sad life as a convicted "adulteress"—, judging from the text at this point the narrator seems to be concerned—or merely to pretend to be concerned—only with the "aged woman"'s "good doings." Surely we cannot help seeing here again the young Hawthorne we supposed in the previous sections satirized as trying to be a holy prophet: the narrator here would not see anything but what he thinks he *should* see. His casually-added speculation about the woman having been probably deemed as a "nuisance" (I: 32) by some, which has perplexed many critics in the past, can also be reasonably understood here to suggest the young Hawthorne's prideful despise toward anyone mingling *too directly* with the "vulgar" public.

Furthermore, the narrator's subsequent complaint that his imagination will not work well in trying to write the story of this woman can also be seen to be irrelevant.

> 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 tenderness 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 have once 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!" (I: 34)

The taunting from the "dead corpses" is so vividly incisive that the narrator here even seems almost incapable of knowing which is *really* real, his imaginative world or the actual world in the customhouse. The problem, then, lies not in his imagination itself but in his sensibility toward the characters his imagination creates. Indeed, the characters that appear on the face of the whole preface are all, actual or imaginary, peculiarly aged: the aged ancestors, the aged surveyor, the aged nurse, etc. Though he might have been satisfied with

characters like these for so long, now probably some deeper part of his private sensibility, probably repressed heretofore, has at last been awakened by his encounter with the letter, which carries the symbolic weight of the hand of Hawthorne's actual dying mother; but of course the narrator, a "P. P.," is still unaware of any of it.

Now, let us examine the famous "moonlit-parlor passage."

> 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 book-case; 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 intellect. Nothing is too small or too trifling to undergo this change, and acquire dignity thereby. [...] Thus, therefore, the floor of our familiar room has become a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other. (I: 35-36)

This passage has so long been hailed as Hawthorne's straightforward definition of the realm of "romance"—as a "neutral territory" between "the Actual" and "the Imaginary"—that few critics have bothered to re-examine its relevancy in the context of his entire career.[25] The most representative view would be, for example, that of A. Robert Lee: a view which regards this passage as "a most privileged glimpse into the workings of his most devious imagination"(I: 61). However, whereas Hawthorne himself famously commented in his letter that *The Scarlet Letter* is a "positively h-ll-fired story"(XVI: 312), in this moonlit-parlor everything is strangely asleep and tranquil; the only person depicted is the calm and composed narrator, apart from some unreal "ghosts" that enter the scene without surprising him. The reader familiar with "The Old Manse," the preface to *Mosses from an Old Manse* cannot help feeling, then, that the tone of this moonlit-parlor passage is strongly evocative of the very *insubstantiality* of his works deplored by the narrator in that preface. The

scene's striking homogeneity, then, implies the narrator's artistic self-complacency. The product in this room will be inevitably nothing more than "allegory," the literary form whose meaning is all under the perfect control of the author.

What he has now by all means to leave is, then, not the customhouse but this sequestered room in his own house. In order to become able to write the story of *this* woman in any satisfactory way, he has by all means to quit it to face his own "inmost Me" objectively; yet of course he is not yet aware of the circumstances: he toils in the literary attempt like he has never done before, prying into his mind to find out what has become of his once-active intellect, all in vain; he "began to grow melancholy and restless" (I: 38). How can he ever succeed?

5

Finally, let us proceed to examine the narrator's transformation as is symbolically both revealed and concealed by Hawthorne. Here, the metaphor the narrator humorously adopts to indicate his own state after the dismissal from the customhouse is important for us. The narrator says that by being "decapitated," which means he was fired, he became a "Headless Horseman" (I: 43): a seemingly careless metaphor, for it is a very familiar character for the reader of Hawthorne's own time from Washington Irving's famous sketch, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." Yet, in the context of our argument, the metaphor could never fail to imply both jokingly and seriously that, by being "decapitated," he himself has at last dramatically become "Headless" (without intellect) "Horseman" (not so much a "jockey" as an "animal-human"). In a dramatic gesture, then, Hawthorne comically yet assuredly condensed in this joking metaphor the essence of what he had learned from his mother's death: dismissed from the customhouse, the narrator, who scorned the narrator before, is *himself* now almost transformed into an "animal," all willing to celebrate secular pleasures. Here, the narrator can be likened to animal-like Dimmesdale returning from the forest safely back in his study, totally becoming "another man" "with a hidden knowledge of hidden mysteries" (I: 223). Though, under the circumstances of the delicate problem in question here, the details of the narrator's actual "hidden mysteries" are never literally revealed to us, we have already speculated on the matter enough to imagine them.

In the end, he gets dismissed from the customhouse *along with* other

officers; indeed, he can now wish them good luck, even feel sympathetic toward them (I: 44). The passage here paradoxically seems to say that, by being dismissed and getting physically and morally distanced from the officers, the heretofore-prideful narrator finally could sincerely regard himself as "one of them," and that in so doing he could finally get out of the sequestered moonlit-parlor. Though he apparently seems to think that by his "timely" "decapitation" he narrowly escaped turning from an intellectual story-writer into a mere tolerably good Surveyor, he in fact is now a far more practical and vulgar writer than before; there is no radical difference, we can see here, between the two modes of existence. He can even speak of his literary project in terms of business as an "investment in ink and pen" (I: 43).

Yet, despite this realization of his, of course the narrator here is never a mere "everyman," who thinks only of his immediate circumstances as his colleagues seem to do: as a "secular novelist," his artistic insight is now far more complex than before. He writes merely that simply by getting out of the imagination-stifling customhouse he managed to get the story told; he even says casually that now he can leave Salem because the city has never had a "genial atmosphere" for a "literary man" (I: 44). Despite the perfectly rational mask the narrator adopts, however, his gesture here implies many things; his mystical "affection" (I: 8) toward Salem, or the supernaturally intense heat-like sensation coming from the red cloth, that he presented earlier in the preface, still resonates covertly in the reader's imagination, as if to encourage the reader to penetrate all the rationalizations of the narrator's. We can imagine that the far more relevant reason why he can now leave Salem must be because now he has at last succeeded in objectifying and displacing his own "inmost Me," his most poignantly personal experiences in the city of Salem, which, now he can understand, has been in its own way inextricably linked with his family's long history. It must have been felt, throughout his life, even like an oppressive spell waiting to be lifted, just as the one trammeling Pearl's existence to the state of defiant solitude, which at last was broken by Dimmesdale's last-minute social recognizance as her parent: "Pearl kissed his [Dimmesdale's] lips. A spell was broken" (I: 256). Pearl can now leave Salem; then so can the narrator now, reasonably, and finally.

In the middle of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne has the narrator speak of the reason why Hester lingers in Boston: "It might be, too, — doubtless it was so, although she hid the secret from herself, and grew pale whenever it struggled out of her heart, like a serpent from its hole, — it might be that another feeling

kept her within the scene and pathway that had been so fatal. There dwelt, there trod the feet of one with whom she deemed herself connected in a union, that, unrecognized on earth, would bring them together before the bar of final judgment, and make their marriage-altar, for a joint futurity of endless retribution" (I: 143). She is, at this point, still haughtily convinced of her supposedly divine "mission" as a "prophet," just like Hawthorne more or less must have been while the one with whom he secretly or unconsciously deemed himself "connected in a union" was still alive under the same roof. The narrator also says, "[t]he scarlet letter had not done its office" (I: 166), immediately after he explains how Hester hopelessly thinks she has to radically tear down the existing system to save all womankind, concealing from herself the real motive for thinking that way in the first place.[26] The most relevant reason why the narrator in "The Custom-House" can now at last leave Salem, or why his finished story should have to be so "gloomy and somber" (I: 43), then, would inevitably have to be like this, as we finally identify this narrator with the actual Hawthorne: because his most beloved mother, who must always have looked in his solicitous eyes unflinchingly determined to remain in Salem where the "one with whom she deemed herself connected" was born, has finally left this world for good—becoming, he must have poignantly hoped, an "Angel."[27]

6

Toward the end of *The Scarlet Letter*, the narrator says rather puzzlingly of the relationship between Dimmesdale and Chillingworth: "Philosophically considered, therefore, the two passions [love and hatred] seem essentially the same, except that one happens to be seen in a celestial radiance, and the other in a dusky and lurid glow. In the spiritual world, the old physician and the minister—mutual victims as they have been—may, unawares, have found their earthly stock of hatred and antipathy transmuted into golden love" (I: 260-61). Hawthorne never *clearly* revealed his actual feelings toward his mother, to be sure; however, a reader, who knows that Hawthorne, just like Dimmesdale, even *after* his consummation of a sacred union with a young individual actually kept on living under the very same roof with *another* old one toward whom he kept on having ineffably ambivalent feelings, would surely be able to feel more than mere "perplexity" (Leverenz 257) when reading this apparently perplexing yet heavily loaded passage.

Notes

[1] For example, T. Walter Herbert shows how Hawthorne struggled in the firm grip of the then-dominant ideology of self-supporting manhood ("Masculinity"). Alison Easton argues that Hawthorne's "patrician" attitude was pitted severely against the emergent commercial, competitive bourgeois values, though at the same time he was committed to the ideology of "individualism" ("Women" 81).

[2] Other critics like Gloria Erlich argue that, more than his *paternal* and *Puritan* forefathers, his maternal mercantile relatives, especially his uncle Richard, must have wielded a stronger influence on Hawthorne's puritanical obsession that he had by any means to be "serviceable to mankind," promoting in him the obsession to offer some edifying lessons to the people with his writings (35-50).

[3] Faulkner's most personal and immediate concerns itself—the relationship with his mother, father, brothers, or the black servants and the wet nurse—were in many ways inextricably entwined with such a grandly abstract problem as the "whole historical heritage of the South"; though Hawthorne has been reasonably regarded as an author deeply obsessed with the sense of the past, what I would like to suggest in this paper is that his relationship with the past heritage was in *itself* never so poignant and immediate as Faulkner's: something that was rendered overpowering in its influence on his psyche only in the context of his far more urgent relationship with his mother.

[4] Here Endicott is described to be not only stern but also compassionate, which strikes the reader as reasonably from a kind of loving yet authoritative father. Hawthorne's ambivalent feelings toward his father is also extremely delicate and important subject in considering the problem of his all-out artistic plunge into the problem of guilt and his Puritanical past; here I would not go seriously into the matter, except merely to suggest that if his "Puritan past" problem was important for him it was at least partly because the figures of his past provided for him a kind of father-figures; his attraction toward his forbidding paternal Puritan ancestors could be identified as his Oedipal desire to become a father himself to be able to love his mother or even to punish himself for his insufficiency to do so. As to Hawthorne's ambivalent feelings toward his father, see Herbert (*Beloved* 257-58).

[5] Of course in our context Hawthorne's mother's presence was overpowering in her very absence and self-abnegation. Nina Baym argues to the effect almost the same as mine here ("Mother" 17).

[6] Though the evidence for his feelings toward his absent father is still more scarce, we can nevertheless surmise here that, for example, the life-consuming guilt which Reuben Bourne in "Roger Malvin's Burial" feels throughout his life toward his father-figure Roger Malvin might well directly indicate Hawthorne's own acutely ambivalent feelings toward simply celebrating *his own* life *after* his father's premature death;

indeed, it is likely that in his imaginary oedipal rivalry for the love of his mother he should have felt some *enmity* toward his already-absent father, to whom, it must have appeared to young Hawthorne, his mother always demonstrated steadfast loyalty, denying him *deserved* affection. Hawthorne's mother, who virtually vowed never to "desert" her husband throughout her life, must have played a significant role also here in creating in his psyche some sense of guilt toward his inability to remain so "loyal" to his father.

[7] His strong interest in feminism should be reconsidered in this context: at the core of his interest in feminism there must have been his solicitude toward his self-sacrificing mother. In this sense, Hester's "radical feminism" (Leverenz 263) was almost exactly what Hawthorne actually must have felt toward the system that seemed to bind his mother; yet at the same time it must have also forbidden him to criticize the old ways easily, adding to his sense of guilt toward his mother.

[8] T. Walter Herbert attributes this curious behavior of hers to her pride that was brought about by her marriage to the aristocratic Hathorne family, or to the imbalance between her domestic ideal and her actual financial circumstances. (*Beloved* 66)

[9] James in his *Hawthorne* said, "[n]othing is more curious and interesting than this almost *exclusively imported character* of the sense of sin in Hawthorne's mind; it seems to exist there merely for an artistic or literary purpose. He had ample cognizance of the Puritan conscience; it was his natural heritage; it was reproduced in him; looking into his soul, he found it there. But his relation to it was only, as one may say, intellectual; it was not moral and theological. He played with it and used it as a pigment; he treated it, as the metaphysicians say, objectively" (emphasis mine, 58-9).

[10] The Mannings, in the household of whom Hawthorne spent most of his youth, had long been a successful mercantile family unlike the aristocratic Hathornes.

[11] Turner also suggests the possibility of the father's death and mother's seclusion having a deep influence on Hawthorne's questioning mind (4).

[12] Of course *we* need not, or even *should not*, judge Hawthorne's mother's demeanor as merely "pathetic," for this kind of judgment is very often merely the product of easy projection of *our own* set of *modern* ideologies as to the desirable behavior of a widow onto a woman very possibly with *pre-modern* set of values: she herself could possibly have been merely content, that is, "happy," with her "self-negation." Yet the problem here is not how she *actually* felt but how her behavior must have looked to young Hawthorne, who lived during the period when the modern set of values had already begun to seriously take root in the psyche of the American citizens. We should understand here that this tormenting *ambivalence* itself in his judgment on his mother's situation could have been an important reason for the complication of his feelings toward his mother.

[13] The "other circumstances" here include the well-discussed problem of the choice of

his profession as befitted a descendant of an important Puritan family or of his desire to have some *definite* authority, in the absence of his *actual* father, to punish and castrate himself in the symbolic oedipal triangle.

[14] Brenda Wineapple wrote that "[f]inished after the death of his mother, *The Scarlet Letter* is a tribute to her, written with grief, guilt, and unabashed freedom" (212). E. H. Miller says "that his mother's death had recalled old wounds and unsated hungers, and he would memorialize her by creating a woman worthy of America, of American literature, and, most important, of his fantasy of motherhood" (280).

[15] In 1837 Hawthorne wrote to his friend Longfellow, "[t]here is no fate in this world so horrible as to have no share either in its joys or its sorrows. For the last ten years, I have not lived, but only dreamed of living" (XV: 251); though we can surely detect the tone of his hallmark self-dramatization in this remark, this nevertheless suggests that at least some part of his self must have always wanted to free himself from the burden of the whole of his impossibly demanding literary undertakings, regarding it as some "witchcraft" (XV 251). Besides, if his pride as a divine artist should have triggered a severe guilt toward his own tainted blood, then his whole literary career itself could have been *felt* to be a highly guilty activity, at once fascinating and repelling him.

[16] In the tale, Ethan Brand says that he has finally found in his own heart "the Unpardonable Sin" that he has been looking for so long (XI: 90). This implies for us that Hawthorne at this period might have begun to think that some important problem of his life might lie somewhere *in his own heart;* yet, as the tale is titled "a chapter from an *abortive* romance," the situation also suggests the possibility that Hawthorne at this period still could not face the problem directly.

[17] Miller wrote that "If he [Hawthorne] is in love with Hester, [...] he is also in love, too, it must be acknowledged, with his own image refracted in his artifact and the woman within himself, which may explain in part why he probes the feminine psyche more successfully than most male authors."(298) He suggests further that every character in *The Scarlet Letter* reflects Hawthorne's self image.

[18] Richard Millington writes that "[T]he book's remarkable examination of the psychology of guilt is best understood as an attempt to locate, between the pulse of private feelings, the meaning of living within a community"(*Romance* 59).

[19] In artistic terms, we may here remember Flannery O'Connor's comment that in good fiction "mystery" has to be "deepened" by its dealings with "reality" (79), and vice versa. O'Connor clearly expressed her respect toward Hawthorne in many of her essays; typical characters of O'Connor's fiction, especially its protagonists who are obsessed with some religious ideas, are strongly evocative of the ones from Hawthorne's early tales.

[20] Of course Hester, too, after she returned from Europe to Boston again, strongly demonstrates this trait.

[21] As can be obviously seen in his subsequent popular "novels," he now would not

hesitate even to try his hand even at some "vulgar" methods of the so-called sentimental novels, as long as some important restraint can be maintained therein. His insistent definitions of "romance" in the prefaces to them have to be understood in this context.

[22] This is quite reasonable if we regard as we do in this paper *The Scarlet Letter* as a product of a "mourning work" in the Freudian sense, for, as Kristeva writes, "[f]or those who are racked by melancholia, writing about it would have meaning only if writing sprang out of that very melancholia" (3). Hawthorne had no choice, we can infer them, but to try to interpret the situation like this in order to overcome the damage.

[23] David Van Leer writes that "it is hard to know what to do with the narrator's claim to follow faithfully the example of Pope's *Memoirs of P. P.*"(59).William Bysshe Stein pointed out the narrator's playful rhetoric in the same line of context as mine to some extent, yet his argument puts too much stress on pointing out the preface's tongue-in-cheek touch.

[24] The shadow of his mother is, however, dimly yet unmistakably hovering over the whole text, for example, in the narrator's linguistic preference of "natal" over ordinary "native" in describing his relationship to the city of Salem, as Gloria Erlich points out (27).

[25] Michael Davitt Bell notes the incongruity of this passage in the romance proper, yet seems rather reluctant to go further than that. Evan Carton points out the irrelevancy of the traditional neutral territory theory by noting the incongruity between the atmosphere of moonlit-parlor and that of "The Scarlet Letter" (151-62). My argument is greatly indebted to Carton's claim, though my view differs from his in that his point lies in the delicate balance or reciprocal relationship between actuality and imagination: a "marriage" of the Actual and the Imaginary, a view which, I think, curiously resembles the very theory he sets out to negate. Alison Easton also claims that the moonlit-parlor does not really function as the territory of romance (*Making* 201-2).

[26] Though Hawthorne's conservative view of womanhood is evidently showing here, what is important for us here is not to criticize him for his outright political incorrectness but to imagine as correctly as possible what he *could have thought* while composing his breakthrough novel.

[27] He kept his attachment toward his mother from anyone including even his beloved wife Sophia, which could be understood, for one thing, in the context of American ideology of manhood and womanhood. Nina Baym argues that he wanted to conceal from his wife his feelings toward his mother because he wanted by all means to praise his "conventional" wife by refraining from expressing any wholeheartedly positive remarks about his "morbid" mother ("Mother" 15-20).

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