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ALLEGORY AND SYMBOLISM IN *THE SCARLET LETTER*

POR

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ABSTRACT

The Scarlet Letter has always baffled critics and the reading public in general for the persistent elusiveness of its meaning. The probings of a thousand different interpreters have not yet exhausted its semantic possibilities. This dissertation is an attempt to account for the underlying causes of this semantic complexity. It tries to show that meaning in Hawthorne's text is basically produced by the unresolved tension between two contradictory discursive trends, namely allegory and symbolism. Allegory is a traditional rhetorical device that reduces all reality to clearly ordered, one-sided concepts of language. It thus tends to concentrate its meaning in a single clear statement. The symbol, as a notion characterized by the modern awareness of the complexity and many-sidedness of reality, tends to fragment its meaning into a plurality of disparate concepts. In this dissertation, *The Scarlet Letter* is viewed as consisting basically of an oscillation between these two conflicting approaches to reality. The introductory chapters present a contrastive study of allegory and symbol which draws heavily on the theoretical writings of S. T. Coleridge and S. K. Langer. This study is followed by a detailed analysis of Hawthorne's novel in which its most recurrent images are observed first in their allegorical and then in their symbolic context. The conclusion attempts to examine the two conflicting aspects of the novel together in order to determine how their tensional juxtaposition affects the reader's apprehension of the text as a whole.

RESUMO

The Scarlet Letter sempre causou perplexidade aos críticos e ao público leitor em geral pelo caráter fugidio de seu significado. Embora o romance tenha sido dissecado por inúmeros intérpretes, permanecem inesgotadas as suas possibilidades semânticas. Este trabalho tem como objetivo descrever as causas subjacentes a esta complexidade semântica. Tenta mostrar que o sentido no texto de Hawthorne é produzido basicamente pela tensão não resolvida entre duas forças discursivas contraditórias - alegoria e simbolismo. A alegoria é um dispositivo retórico tradicional que reduz toda a realidade a noções claramente ordenadas e unilaterais. Ela tende, assim, a concentrar o seu sentido num único e claro enunciado. O símbolo, enquanto conceito caracterizado pela moderna consciência do caráter complexo e multiface da realidade, tende a fragmentar o seu significado numa pluralidade de noções díspares. Este trabalho tenta descrever *The Scarlet Letter* como consistindo basicamente numa oscilação entre estes dois modos conflitantes de abordar a realidade. Começa ele com um estudo contrastivo da alegoria e do símbolo que toma como base obras teóricas de S. T. Coleridge e S. K. Langer. A este estudo segue-se uma análise detalhada do romance de Hawthorne em que as imagens mais freqüentes do texto são observadas primeiro em seu contexto alegórico e, em seguida, no simbólico. A conclusão tenta examinar conjuntamente os dois aspectos do romance para determinar como a justaposição conflitante de alegoria e simbolismo afeta a maneira como o leitor apreende o texto como um todo.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Hawthorne and his critics

Critics of *The Scarlet Letter* have usually searched for a *meaning* in the novel. The present study aims at something different: it attempts to investigate rhetorical strategies which are in fact preconditions for the production of meaning. The choice of a rhetorical rather than of a semantic approach needs justification. Let me begin to explain the reasons for this choice by considering a few examples of meaning-oriented analyses of Hawthorne's novel.

Darrel Abel, in an article titled "Hawthorne's Hester," interprets *The Scarlet Letter* as a Calvinistic attack on a woman who has committed adultery. Abel argues that though Hester represents the Romantic individualist who seeks freedom from social restraints, Hawthorne does not adopt her position but uses her merely to demonstrate the inadequacy of the Romantic approach to life.[1] In his view, the author even expresses sympathy and compassion for Hester, who was "more a victim of circumstances than a wilful wrongdoer," but he finally condemns her for an act that was unmistakably evil.[2]

Ernest Sandeen reads *The Scarlet Letter* differently. He begins by complaining that too many critics have interpreted Hawthorne's novel "as a story of sins and sinners." He suggests instead that "the angle of attention [should be] shifted so that

the novel [will be] seen as a love story, that is as a tragedy of the grand passion rather than as a tale of sinful passion."[3] The shift of attention that Sandeen suggests here is of course from the narrator's perspective to that of the heroine of the story herself, who never really believes in the sinfulness of her love affair with Dimmesdale. Unlike her lover, Hester has no serious commitment to the social and religious institutions which stigmatize the union between the two; she is instead solely committed to passion. As for the narrator's moral condemnation of her, Sandeen interprets this as "Hawthorne's ironic *mock*-moralizing."[4] Darrel Abel explicitly attacks critics holding such a Romantic view of *The Scarlet Letter*. He argues that those who take Hester's perspective as the central one in the story "ignore or even decry the larger tendency of the book, which subordinates her and exposes her moral inadequacy."[5]

A third critic, Frederic Carpenter, subscribes to neither the traditional Puritan view nor the Romantic one, but rather to a Transcendental view which tries to mediate between the two. Like the Romantics, he places the focal point of the novel on Hester rather than on society. Like the traditionalists, he also takes morality into account. According to Carpenter, Hester did go beyond the rigid laws of society in order to fulfill a dream of love, but her "love was neither blindly passionate nor purposeless." Instead of merely escaping traditional morality, Hester aimed to found a higher and more liberal morality than the traditional one guided by the Transcendental ideal of love. In this way, she "transcended both romance and tradition."[6] When viewed as Transcendental, of course, Hester was not perfect. For

Carpenter she committed a "sin" in that she tried to protect her lover by "deceiv[ing him] concerning the identity of her husband." By doing so, she was not *wholly* faithful to the ideal truth that she envisioned.[7] Carpenter points out that Hester's Transcendentalism was presented objectively (i.e. dramatically) in the action but that it was denied subjectively by the narrator, who limited himself to traditional morality. The critic regards these moralistic intrusions as a flaw in the novel.[8]

These are examples of critics taking three clearly distinct and mutually exclusive positions. If we were to expand our list so as to make it include a more significant part of the huge body of criticism on *The Scarlet Letter*, we would certainly find all sorts of positions ranging from those widely distant from the above, to those differing from one or other of these by only a slight degree. In all cases, critics would affirm the specific meanings that they found as the most adequate to explain the novel as a whole.

Our awareness that so many critics have said so many different and sometimes completely irreconcilable things about *The Scarlet Letter* should make it embarrassing for us to force one more meaning into the novel. Insistence on such a reductive procedure would clearly result futile, especially if we consider that the diversity of critical positions may be a sign of richness and complexity in the novel's meaning. Each critic, of course, being committed to the exercise of interpretation, must implicitly deny this complexity and reduce it to his own partial view.

If searching for a meaning leads to no conclusive results but solely to entanglement in an endless dispute, it seems therefore more sensible to turn our attention to the more fundamental problem of finding what rhetorical strategies employed in *The Scarlet Letter* have engendered its meaning. It is to be hoped that with this shift of the focus from a supposed *message* that the novel is intended to give to the very *genesis* of a meaning that the war of critics itself suggests as problematic, we will somehow be able to save the present study from being just another partial, reductive interpretation.

The rhetorical approach: symbol and allegory

I will assume that meaning in *The Scarlet Letter* is basically produced by two conflicting rhetorical devices, namely allegory and symbolism. For the distinction between these I will depend on a theoretical tradition which dates back to the early Romantic period. The Romantics found it necessary to draw a clear opposition between symbol and allegory in order to exclude from the realm of poetry a literary mode that they saw as closely associated with the traditional, Enlightened culture of the eighteenth century against which they were fighting. The Enlightenment was a period in which the human mind was strongly influenced by the scientific obsession for the clear understanding and communication of things. This obsession obviously led man to blindly attach himself to the static and clearly ordered notions of language (the unavoidable instrument of understanding and communication) as though he were in contact

with an absolute reality. The Romantic revolutionaries violently rejected a reality that could not be final because abstracted from the rich inner life of the individual. To the empty, static, lifeless world of the eighteenth century, they opposed a new reality of intuitive perception that was, as the German Romantic August Schlegel once stated, "in an eternal process of becoming, an incessant creation."[9] Allegory needed to be cast out because of its allegiance to the traditional, static view of the world as determined by the limitations of a linear and discursive language. Only the symbol, the Romantics thought, would be able to express their revolutionary visions.

In the context of English Romanticism, S. T. Coleridge gave the most significant contribution to the distinction between allegory and symbol. His distinction was based on that between fancy and imagination, the two faculties that inspired each mode. Of these faculties, fancy was the lower one because it was content to deal with static and clear-cut images in such a way as to perfectly respect the pre-existing moulds of abstract language. Fancy was the aggregative faculty: it merely put together "fixities and definites" without modifying their original nature.[10] This mode of operation will perhaps be clearer if we consider an actual poem inspired by fancy. It is Coleridge himself who gives this example, taken from Shakespeare's "Venus and Adonis":

> Full gently now she takes him by the hand,
> A lily prisoned in a gaol of snow,
> Or ivory in an alabaster band:
> So white a friend engirts so white a foe.[11]

It is easy to see that these metaphors refer to two kinds of whiteness, and the elements lily/snow and ivory/alabaster neither modify nor are modified by the original abstractions, but are merely added to them. Each element here preserves its own original identity. Coleridge regarded allegory as an unsatisfactory device because it limited itself to reproducing the empty, static images of fancy. "Allegory," he says, "is but a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language, which is itself nothing but an abstraction from objects of the senses."[12] By translating abstract notions into equally abstract images, allegory merely ornamented pre-existing categories of language without re-creating them. For Coleridge, true poetry required the other, higher faculty to be brought into action. Unlike fancy, the imagination did not conform to the limited, linear order of language because it envisioned, at a primary stage, a living and complex whole that could hardly be conceived of through this medium. At a secondary stage, already within the realm of language, it had to disperse the clearly ordered elements that it found in order to blend them into a vivid unity that would be identical with the original vision.[13] Coleridge called this faculty "esemplastic," meaning that it "shaped" a multitude of discordant elements "into one."[14] Another of his own examples should render the esemplastic character of the imagination clearer. The following lines are again from "Venus and Adonis":

> Look! how a bright star shooteth from the sky
> So glides he in the night from Venus' eye![15]

This complex metaphor is rich in meanings that are presented in a

single whole. As Coleridge himself comments,

> How many images and feelings are here brought together without effort and without discord, in the beauty of Adonis, the rapidity of his flight, the yearning, yet hopelessness of the enamoured gazer, and a shadowy ideal character is thrown over the whole.[16]

Contrary to what happens in a metaphor produced by fancy, where each component is kept within its own boundaries, here "each element ... interacts with each other: each affects and is affected by the other,"[17] so that the meaning that the metaphor conveys resides in the whole complex of imaginative relations and therefore can never be translated into abstract words. This kind of metaphor corresponds to Coleridge's concept of symbol, which does not merely reproduce and embellish commonplace reality but rather moulds a new and concrete reality that is undetachable from the specific symbolic form.

The Romantic interest in the symbol as a means of conveying a richer reality than was expressible through ordinary language has reached the twentieth century with unabated vigor. Of the many modern theorists dealing with the problem, S. K. Langer is particularly interesting to us since she explains in great detail the nature of the reality of sensations which the symbol aims at, and how this differs from the more limited world of rational language. According to Langer, what characterizes a form of intuitive perception is that it presents itself as a simultaneous whole to the individual, who cannot divide what he receives into discrete parts but can only perceive internal elements in relation to the total picture.[18] These simultaneous forms of the

imagination, which Langer calls presentational forms, are beyond the grasp of the forms of language - discursive forms - because these are characterized by a temporal ordering of elements that misses the richness of information characteristic of the imaginative ordering. Besides, the elements of discursive forms (words) are discrete and refer to fixed concepts that are obviously distant from living objects of individual experience.[19] It is the function of the symbol to capture the forms of the imagination which escape ordinary language. Though the symbol itself is made up of words that are originally discrete and temporal, Langer believes that it manages, through appropriate poetic artifices, to melt word boundaries so that the poem as a whole will be impressed at once on the reader, as a living presentation.[20]

Based on Coleridge and Langer, we can define the difference between allegory and symbol in terms of the acceptance of the traditional, discursive order of reality in the case of the former, and the rejection of this order and attempt at an alternative version of reality that explodes the usual fixed categories of language in order to effect an immediate presentation in the case of the latter. Allegory can be defined as a system of one-to-one correspondences in which each image of a sequence is made to conform neatly, as ornament, to an abstract concept that remains unchanged by and so can always be considered independently from the image. The neat correspondence between sign and meaning that characterizes allegory is an obvious mark of the naive traditional certainty in the representation of reality. In the case of the symbol, in turn, since the static

notions of language are not accepted as ultimate but are seen instead as a brutal reduction of an ever-changing reality, the image is associated with conflicting, irreconcilable notions in an attempt to defy the temporal order of language and fuse disparate elements into a new and living whole. In the symbol the reader can never rest passively with a secure message delivered by the text; he is forced instead to participate actively and imaginatively in the making of symbolic meaning. For here the representation of reality has really become a problem.

Critics discussing allegory and symbol in The Scarlet Letter

Among the critics who are interested in the rhetorical level of *The Scarlet Letter*, some believe that the novel is allegorical, others that it is symbolic, and still others that it is both.

A critic who follows the allegorical trend is Richard Chase, who devotes part of a chapter of *The American Novel and Its Tradition* to interpreting some of the images found in the novel. Chase's argument, however, does not assume an extreme position. He reproaches the notorious critic Yvor Winters for labelling the novel "pure allegory" and claims that the novel is basically an allegory but a complex one, a view that is suggested by the very labored way with which he assigns meanings to the "allegorical" images of the story.[21] He even defines Hester as "various" and "problematic,"[22] which seems rather to deny her allegorical status.

A view opposite to Chase's is presented by Charles Feidelson, Jr., in *Symbolism and American Literature*. Feidelson acknowledges the inclination in Hawthorne towards allegory but he sees *The Scarlet Letter* as "a special case among Hawthorne's works" for its decidedly symbolistic character.[23] The entire book, Feidelson believes, consists in "a kind of exposition of the nature of symbolic perception." He views *The Scarlet Letter* as not imposing fixed meanings on events and objects but rather as letting these constantly accumulate meaning through the contribution of different interpretive viewpoints. The novel thus becomes for him a simulation of that very act of contemplating objects of reality which generates "persistent meaning."[24]

F. O. Matthiessen, in *American Renaissance*, places the novel closer to Chase than to Feidelson but makes concessions to the latter too. He believes that Hawthorne, at his most typical, is an allegorist rather than a symbolist, and affirms that "even in *The Scarlet Letter*, the abstract, the idea, is often of greater interest than its concrete expression."[25] Matthiessen, on the other hand, praises whatever imaginative symbolism can be found in the novel. He refers, for instance, to a symbolic device used by Hawthorne - multiple choice - by which the author presents the ambiguity inherent in all physical events. After giving some examples of this fertile device, he goes on to the more barren side of Hawthorne, which is his familiar tendency to impose rigid and mechanical delimitations on material that "would otherwise have freer symbolical range."[26]

Another critic, Gabriel Josipovici, makes a point of

emphasizing the double tendency towards allegory and symbol that had already been noted by Matthiessen. According to him, Hawthorne gives in to the human need to make sense of nature, i.e. "to turn nature into allegory," but at the same time he is unhappy about allegory due to his awareness that the allegorical verbalization destroys nature, which is always irreducible to "human and meaningful discourse." In order to satisfy this ambivalent attitude, Hawthorne both attempts to present nature in its inscrutable silence, and forces it to speak rationally.[27] His book thus moves between two polar tendencies: presentation and representation, being and saying, symbol and allegory.[28]

Hypothesis, objectives, and procedure

When these critical views are thus added together, they strongly suggest the presence of both allegory and symbolism in *The Scarlet Letter*. As previously said, this is also the hypothesis of the present study. To explain it in more detail: my assumption here is that the novel expresses two contradictory tendencies on the part of the author. The dominant tendency is allegorical and consists in Hawthorne's forcing the action of the novel to systematically reflect the rigid Puritan notions and values that were so influential on his life. The novel, from this point of view, can be clearly and unequivocally understood as the story of an adulterous woman who suffers the consequences of her misdeed. This is obviously the more traditional and limited side of the novel, an aspect that is related to the rational bias that compelled Hawthorne to search for clarity and

security in his representation of reality. This allegorical tendency, however, is here and there counteracted by a hostile trend - symbolism - which confuses the clear truth of allegory as it opens the action of the novel to other meanings than the rigid Puritan one. The symbolic corresponds to the modern side of Hawthorne, the side that perceives a more complex truth than that rendered by allegory and expresses itself obscurely, ambiguously - through dissipation of meanings. When taken in its complexity, Hawthorne's text becomes a conflict between these two tendencies; it presents itself, in other words, as an allegory that constantly deconstructs itself as it is infected by symbolism.

The present study, then, aims to investigate *The Scarlet Letter* as an unresolved tension between allegorical areas of concentration of truth and symbolic areas of dispersion of truth. The former are those sections of the novel in which Hawthorne is certain of what his images stand for. Truth here is *one*: Hester is a sinner; the A that she wears, by extension, stands for "adultery"; Dimmesdale is even more sinful for concealing his dark truth from the community; Pearl is the evil product of their union; Chillingworth is the devil who tries to win Dimmesdale; and the forest is the gloomy abode of Satan and his sinful offspring. In the symbolic areas, on the other hand, Hawthorne loses faith in tradition as he is invaded by the vision of a richer truth which he can only express by dispersing meanings. Truth here is plural: Hester is not only a sinner but also - and contradictorily enough - pure and sacred; the A is not merely "adultery" but also "affection," "able," "angel"; Pearl ceases to be an "emblem of sin" and becomes rather a natural child beyond

good and evil; and the forest now contains not only the darkness of hell but also the light of heaven. (Chillingworth and Dimmesdale are not given much emphasis in the symbolic areas since they are more clearly allegorical.)

This practical investigation will be preceded by a theoretical study of allegory and symbol in which the concepts briefly exposed here will be expanded. I will focus basically on Coleridge's and Langer's dichotomies (i.e. fancy/imagination, allegory/symbol, discursive/presentational forms) in order to reach a more precise definition of allegory and symbol than is available in Coleridge's sometimes vague and economical statements. The practical part immediately following this will consist of two chapters offering separate treatment to the allegorical and the symbolic aspects of *The Scarlet Letter*. For my division of the novel into these two polar sides, I will take its most recurring images, namely the four main characters, the letter A, and the forest, and see how Hawthorne oscillates in dealing with these images, treating them sometimes univocally as allegorical images and sometimes plurivocally as symbols. The concluding chapter will attempt to see how this oscillation affects the novel as a whole.

NOTES

[1] Darrel Abel, "Hawthorne's Hester," The Scarlet Letter: *A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Sculley Bradley et al. (New York: Norton, 1978) 317.

[2] Abel 324.

[3] Ernest Sandeen, "*The Scarlet Letter* as a Love Story," The Scarlet Letter: *A Norton Critical Edition* 372.

[4] Sandeen 376-78. Italics his.

[5] Abel 318.

[6] Frederic Carpenter, "Scarlet A Minus," The Scarlet Letter: *A Norton Critical Edition* 312.

[7] Carpenter 313.

[8] Carpenter 315.

[9] August Schlegel, "Lectures on Fine Art and Literature," *European Romanticism: Self-Definition*, comp. and trans. Lilian R. Furst (London: Methuen, 1980) 86.

[10] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. George Watson (London: Everyman's Library, 1984) 167.

[11] William Shakespeare, "Venus and Adonis," *The Complete Works*, ed. Alfred Harbage (Baltimore: Penguin, 1969) ll. 361-64.

[12] Coleridge, *The Statesman's Manual*, *English Romantic Writers*, ed. David Perkins (New York: Harcourt, 1967) 503.

[13] Coleridge, *Biographia* 167.

[14] Coleridge, *Biographia* 91.

[15] Shakespeare, "Venus and Adonis" ll. 815-16.

[16] Coleridge, *Coleridge on Shakespeare*, ed. Terence Hawkes

(Penguin, 1969) 65, qtd. in Hawkes, *Metaphor*, The Critical Idiom 25 (London: Methuen, 1972) 48.

[17] Hawkes 49.

[18] Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (New York: Mentor, 1951) 77.

[19] Langer 78.

[20] Langer 212-13.

[21] Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (Garden City: Doubleday-Anchor, 1957) 75.

[22] Chase 79.

[23] Charles Feidelson, Jr., *Symbolism and American Literature* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1981) 13.

[24] Feidelson 10.

[25] F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford UP, 1962) 250.

[26] Matthiessen 277.

[27] Gabriel Josipovici, "Letter into Hieroglyph," The Scarlet Letter: *A Norton Critical Edition* 426.

[28] Josipovici 427-28.

CHAPTER II

ALLEGORY AND SYMBOL

In trying to distinguish symbol from allegory it will be useful to go back to the origin of this opposition in the Romantic period. An alternative procedure would be to just leave the past behind and limit ourselves to a modern view of the problem. But in the modern age the same tension of forces that generated the allegory-symbol dichotomy in the late eighteenth century is still active. In other words, in our own time neither has the Enlightened ideal of the rational progress of man been given up, nor has the Romantic imagination ceased to rebel against it. In this way, whenever the twentieth-century literary critic or theorist argues for the superiority of the symbol in relation to allegory, he is in fact defending a position that is ultimately Romantic. In returning to the origin of the debate, therefore, we are likely to gain more than mere chronological information.

The cultural movement that the Romantics tried to defeat had been in preparation since the seventeenth century and was the leading force in the next. Its fundamental aim was to improve the human condition through the development of science and its more visible derivative - technology. The Enlightenment thus represented a shift from the spiritual and religious concerns of previous ages - notably of the Middle Ages - to a thorough materialism. It now no longer laid any hope in a supernatural salvation for humanity but urged man instead to effect his own

redemption by using his rational powers to conquer the natural world that was all around him waiting for his control.

A necessary step towards achieving this dominion over the external world was to impose a rigid control upon the use of language. As used in certain contexts (such as in poems and the spontaneous conversations of rustic people), language displayed a natural tendency to be lively, metaphorical, and ambiguous. Since the Enlightenment was solely concerned with the facts of the outside world that could be clearly observed and shared by everyone, it was important to protect language from the constant threat of ambiguity and fix it as a clear and secure instrument for the description and ordering of these facts. Only by using words in this restricted way would it be possible for man to know and thus to control his world.

The new movement reacted against this obsession for facts and their clear representation, which seemed to dominate all spheres of life in that period. Though the factual world was indeed attractive and obvious enough to lead most people to fix it as a final reality, the Romantics preached resistance to such a temptation. Instead of naively trusting in so-called "bare facts," as the Enlightenment did, they realized that facts were not bare but were a product of the very scientific mentality of the age that was committed to the building up of a clear and secure picture of the world.

It is easy to see that the Romantic position has shifted the focus of interest from external objects to modes of thought. Indeed, if the central concern of the eighteenth century was to know the world clearly and securely, it is evident that the mind

of the age was confined to the kind of thinking that occurs within rational, discursive language, the only instrument that can afford clear and secure knowledge. The Enlightenment, of course, insisted on the existence of an external and independent world of which language was merely "descriptive." Yet such a world, being divided up into clear-cut facts, was itself a product of the discursive medium that dominated the Enlightened mind and made it see everything in accordance with its own fixed and clearly defined categories. Such a dominion was in fact so thorough that the individual did not even notice its agency. He accepted the world as static as though this were the natural thing to do; he could not consciously reflect on what he was really doing.

The Romantic revolution was an attempt to liberate the eighteenth-century mind from its slavery to discursive thinking. Its aim was to re-awaken the human mind to a different mode of thinking that reached beyond the fixity and clarity of discursive language and envisioned the world as living, dynamic, and in constant creation. Its task in other words was to open the mind to the world of intuitive perception - or imagination. But of course the Romantics had before them a dead and static world that would offer the greatest resistance to change. Such a world was clearly and firmly established and would repress any foreign intrusions. It would do its best to block the fluid world of the imagination, which was much weaker because not backed up by clarity. So this imaginative world required constant struggle in order to be seen.

It is the tension between a fixed and lifeless reality that everybody took for granted due to the overwhelming authority of discursive thinking on the one hand, and the new vision of a richer but elusive reality of imagination on the other that accounts for the Romantic interest in the symbol as an alternative to allegory. Allegory was a traditional, widely accepted rhetorical device in the Enlightened Age. As a chiefly didactic strategy, it served to propagate fixed notions that were commonly shared by eighteenth-century society. It did this job by providing notions with explanatory or decorative pictures that would help people to hold the original abstractions more firmly in their minds. At a time however when there was an increasing awareness that there were already too many notions around and that it was these notions (as discursive elements) that rendered the world dead, the didacticism of allegory would no longer do. It was now necessary to resort to an alternative device that would undermine rather than perpetuate the discursive order in which the age lived. It was necessary to find some sort of expression to an imagination that had hitherto been condemned to silence by discursive supremacy.

Early approaches to the nature of the imagination and its literary expression - the symbol - were made in Germany by F. W. von Schelling and J. W. von Goethe even before the Romantic movement was officially inaugurated. It was in England, however, and already in the early nineteenth century, that the problem found its most vigorous formulation with S. T. Coleridge.

Contrary to what was habitual in the eighteenth century, Coleridge did not accept the view of the world as external to and independent from man, as something that was already there waiting to be discovered and conquered. He knew that the world was always a function of the mind that conceived it. It was therefore on the mind of his time that he focused his critical attention. In his writings, Coleridge vehemently attacks the limitation of eighteenth-century mind to the mode of thinking that he calls "understanding" and that corresponds to what I have referred above as "discursive thinking." He regards the understanding as essentially empty and false since it does not afford any direct contact with the living reality of man but only with images already abstracted, already generalized, from perception. "In no instance," he writes, "do we understand a thing in itself; but only the name to which it is referred."[1] He sees the whole society of his age as imprisoned in "the hollowness of abstractions."[2]

But in characterizing the abstract world of the understanding so negatively, Coleridge is not simply condemning the mere *use* of the understanding. He would not dare to do so since abstract, discursive thinking is an inescapable human feature. It is the *imprisonment* in the understanding, the attachment to the world of words as an end in itself, that he actually abhors. If such an attachment on the one hand fills one's whole life with clear and distinct knowledge - and this is comforting enough -, on the other it effaces what there is of most vivid and profound in the individual. When left to rule the

world, the understanding in fact destroys all individuality, since it leads each individual that is born to progressively forsake his deepest instinctual nature in exchange for superficial notions that are prior to him and are equally shared by all other members of his community. The understanding renders mankind uniform and dull.

When the understanding does *not* dominate an individual's whole mentality, however, such an individual can still preserve his vital nature and perceive the world without the mediation of discursive categories. He can preserve, in other words, his faculty of imagination. "Primary imagination" is how Coleridge terms "the living Power" that carries out "all human Perception" and is an "eternal act of creation."[3] Through the imagination at an initial stage, that is, the individual perceives a world that is vivid and dynamic and therefore completely free from the fixedness of the notions of discursive understanding.

But the understanding, as previously said, is an inescapable feature of mankind. Its fixed concepts are in fact so deeply rooted in us that even the privileged man of genius can have no more than a mere glimpse of the perfectly fluid world of pure perception. As soon as this liquid vision presents itself to him — an unconscious experience —, it immediately suffers the intrusion of the static categories of the understanding that constitute his ordinary conscious life. Because of the power of the imaginative vision, however, the attitude of the man of genius towards these categories differs from that of the common man. The latter, because hopelessly enslaved to the understanding, automatically freezes an originally fluid

impression into a static notion. To this single notion he firmly attaches himself, leaving behind a rich impression of whose existence he is not even aware. This effacement of the vividness of the original is exactly what assures him the clarity of knowledge which the tyranny of the understanding has caused him to prize so highly. The man of genius, on the other hand, does not yield to such a limited faculty. Although he is also inhabited by already frozen images that make abstraction inevitable, the unconscious energy of the imagination remains strong enough in him to prevent his choosing one of these static images as a substitute for the original impression. Far from clinging to a single notion, what he does is to waver between different and even contradictory notions in the very effort of reproducing the richness and fluidity of the original impression. He thus still deals with the fixed categories of the understanding but without accepting their fixity. He uses them, in other words, only as means of capturing the higher vision of the primary imagination and not as ends in themselves.

The stage of the imaginative process that involves dealing with words in a subversive way Coleridge calls "secondary imagination." At this stage the individual frees himself from the impulsion exerted by the understanding towards his thinking with words in a clear and logically consistent way and ventures to break the established order of language. When placed in a logical order, each word of a certain string gives its contribution for the meaning of the whole unity to point in *one* direction, so that the final result is a concentric meaning. This logical order

obviously leads to the formation of a unity of words that forbids internal contradiction. It yields a static and limited unity, from which incompatible elements are simply excluded. The secondary imagination could not possibly accept this logical way of thinking, for Coleridge considers it "as an echo of [the primary imagination], co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with [it] in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation."[4] If the secondary imagination is identical with the primary imagination, which perceives a perfectly fluid and dynamic unity, and yet operates differently from the latter - through static images of conscious life -, it must therefore modify its rigid categories so as to recover fluidity. The secondary imagination "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates" the clear-cut notions that it finds "in order to re-create" them.[5] That is to say, it places in the same string of thought words that point in different and irreconcilable directions so that it produces dispersion of meanings. By doing so it seeks to destroy all allegiance of these words to a logical understanding that sees them as clearly distinct and thus produces a fusion between them at a deeper level. It is with reference to this deeper level that Coleridge calls the imagination "esemplastic," by which he means that it starts with a multitude of disparate fixities and, by means of its own energy, presses them together so that they lose their surface boundaries and are "shape[d] into one."[6] The unity here produced is clearly far richer and fuller than a unity of the understanding, since it embraces the very multitudinousness of life which the other must violently reduce. The imagination

produces "unity in multeity";[7] the understanding, "unity by the exclusion of multeity."[8]

To an imagination that modifies the static world of the understanding by fusing its discrete elements into a living unity Coleridge opposes another human faculty - fancy - which adopts a more reactionary position. Fancy merely "plays" with the fixed elements that it finds in discursive reality without changing their fixedness. It ignores the fluid world displayed by primary imagination and concerns itself solely with associating clearly visible "things" of the outside world with abstract notions already found in the understanding. It obviously proceeds in relation to these "things" as though they constituted a plain and stark reality that the curious mind should then approach and capture, but we have already seen how observable and thus "reliable" objects are already a product of the discursive mind that projects them as static. The "things" that fancy associates with notions are therefore as clear-cut and abstract as the latter, and Coleridge in fact refers to both of them as "fixities and definites."[9] These "things," we may confidently affirm, are themselves already notions. In dealing with these elements fancy does not endanger their original status (i.e. their fixity and definiteness) because it only associates those that are compatible with each other and thus do not threaten the discreteness and good order of the understanding. It is not fancy's concern to cause dispersion and disorder of meanings that would disturb the ordinary life of the world with the infusion of new and synthetical wholes. Fancy is not a *"modifying* Power,"

like imagination, but merely an "*aggregating* power."[10]

It is on this opposition between fancy and imagination that Coleridge bases his distinction between allegory and symbol. He rejects allegory because it is wholly produced by fancy and so conforms to the traditional abstract reality which the Romantics found so unacceptable. "An allegory," Coleridge affirms,

> is but a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language, which is itself nothing but an abstraction from objects of the senses; the principal being more worthless even than its phantom proxy, both alike unsubstantial, and the former shapeless to boot.[11]

Allegory merely "translates" an abstract notion into an equally abstract image. In doing so it adopts an uncritical and subservient attitude in relation to the commonplace world of discursive language, for it starts with a pre-existing notion (which it obviously does not assume to be already bound to language) and adds (i.e. "aggregates") another image to it merely for the sake of illustration, or ornamentation; not to modify the original. The submissive attitude of allegory leads it inevitably to accept the arbitrary nature of ordinary language in relation to meaning, for allegory focuses on an empty and commonplace notion that (exactly because of its lack of substance) could very easily be "translated" into (or ornamented by) other images than the chosen one. The allegorical form, in other words, is not essential to its content - since it has not itself generated the latter - but is only a "phantom proxy" arbitrarily selected. Like linguistic forms in general, the allegorical one does no more than distantly point to - or represent - its object. It fails to

participate in what it says.

The symbol, on the other hand,

> always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that unity of which it is the representative.[12]

This passage places the symbol in sharp contrast to allegory. As a product of the imagination, the symbol cannot accept already existent abstractions as its goal but must rather transform these. The symbolic image is thus not just a harmless ornament to an abstract notion that remains essentially foreign to it; it actually fuses with that notion and with other contradictory notions so as to mould a new and living unity. The fact that it has shaped its own content makes the symbolic image natural - and not arbitrary, as in allegory - to such a content. Instead of merely pointing to its meaning, that is, the image is now a vital part of a meaning that can never be extricated from its specific form and "translated" into other words. For the symbol has destroyed the very fixity and abstractness of words and produced a vivid and concrete unity that repeats, as it were, the fluid vision of primary imagination.

For Coleridge thus the symbol functions as a most effective weapon against the empty and abstract reality of the Enlightened age. With its privileged power of transmuting originally static elements into living unities, it captures the elusive vision of the imagination that would otherwise be inexpressible, and imposes it on the world outside. By doing so the symbol can easily win universal predilection and supersede an allegory that,

being allied to fancy and the understanding, would only serve the purpose of perpetuating the falsity and shallowness of traditional, discursive reality.

Powerful as it was, the Romantic rebellion did not manage to demolish the established order and soon its fervor subsided. Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, interest again fell on the now irresistible conquests of science and technology and the result was the reattachment of human minds to the static world of discursive language. After Romanticism, however, nothing would be the same again. Though temporarily obscured, the Romantic struggle to infuse life and motion into reality would never be altogether abandoned. It would reappear with overwhelming strength, in fact, in our own century, when material progress is more appealing than ever.

The first half of the twentieth century is marked by the appearance of a good deal of theoretical writing that is concerned with the *forms* through which man knows his world rather than with what is known. Theorists having such an interest simply deny that anything exists independently of the medium that is used to represent it. It is the *medium*, they affirm, that actually shapes the world. Such a view clearly contradicts the naive faith of science in the "undeniable" facts of reality, for if science happens to see reality as divided into such definite and stable elements, this is an obvious mark of the linguistic medium through which it conceives the world. It is to language thus that theorists now turn their attention.

In spite of their awareness that the factual world is not an ultimate reality but an imposition of language, not all these theorists however rebel against discursive tyranny. Some of them adopt an attitude of thorough conformity and affirm language to be the only medium that man possesses to conceive things. Such theorists in fact restrict man's whole world to the range of things that can be thought and expressed through language, and it is exactly to determine the scope of the world so restricted that they study the nature of the medium. This theoretical trend would prove to be a passing phase in the development of ideas in our century. I shall leave these traditionalists behind and concentrate on the other trend - the rebellious one - which is far more in tune with the Romantic and modern spirit and should therefore be more relevant to the ideas we have been pursuing here.

Susanne K. Langer is a typical representative of the more modern trend. In her book *Philosophy in a New Key* she radically opposes the traditional view of man's reality as being confined to the poverty of discursive thinking. She believes that in its intuitive, imaginative states, the human mind can in fact transcend the narrow limits of ordinary language and conceive a far richer and more vivid reality than the discursive. Langer very carefully explains the nature of this non-discursive mode of thinking and of its expression through such various media as ritual, music, and poetry. Though her comments on literature are rather scanty and she does not concern herself with the allegory-symbol dichotomy, her description of the non-discursive forms of

the mind and of how these contrast to discursive forms is clearly relevant to our theory of symbol and allegory. Her exposition is especially useful because it contains a few important notions that are lacking, or at least not fully developed, in Coleridge's writings.

Langer devotes a whole chapter to the description of discursive and non-discursive modes of thinking. A discursive form is made up of units of meaning that combine with each other in a temporal sequence in order to produce the meaning of the larger unit. An essential feature of the smaller units (words) is that they have fixed public meanings, so that although they do relate with other elements of the sequence, this relation cannot go far enough to mix the original meanings. The very time gap that exists between the occurrences of these words takes care of preserving their clearly separate identities. The fixity of the meanings of words is directly connected to another characteristic of discursive forms: their generality. If word meanings are pre-existent to and independent from specific situations in which the words are used, it is clear that discourse has a general reference, that it points to very broad categories already abstracted from particular objects of perception.[13]

The forms of sensations bear a sharp contrast to discursive forms as described above. The fundamental distinction, one that makes the former far richer and more complex than the latter, is that an image of intuitive perception is not gathered in a temporal succession but rather offers itself in its totality to the mind in a single instant of time. A non-discursive form does not contain internal units with fixed meanings, as does a

discursive proposition. The meanings of its elements are purely relational, purely dependent on the total context in which the elements are involved. Their meanings thus can only be grasped through the meaning of the whole. Exactly because its elements lack the stable, independent meanings of words and in fact only exist meaningfully within a particular context, a non-discursive form never has a general, abstract meaning. "It is first and foremost a direct *presentation* of an individual object." For this reason Langer calls the forms of sensations "presentational forms."[14]

In dealing with this presentational mode of thinking, Langer unfortunately shows little interest in the literary medium. Yet the little she says about poetry seems to confirm the Romantic ideal of the poem as symbol. She points out that "the material of poetry is discursive but the product - the artistic phenomenon - is not; its significance is purely implicit in the poem as a totality."[15] That is to say, the poet starts with the ordinarily discrete and successive units of language and manages to modify these by his special way of manipulating elements such as rhythm, the sounds of words, their aura of associations, rhyme, etc. By doing so he manages to destroy the separateness of the original words and produce a simultaneous whole with a new meaning that is forever bound to it and thus never to be translated into abstract words. Only the unified totality that the poet has created is a bearer of "artistic truth," which is "the truth of a symbol to the forms of feeling."[16]

As I said before, Langer's exposition complements

Coleridge's comments on allegory and symbol. Her distinction between discursive and presentational forms is in fact essential for his theory, and yet he never explicitly refers to the problem. The central fact that his imagination presents its constituents simultaneously and the understanding sequentially, for instance, has to be inferred from tangential statements that he makes, such as his requirement that a poetic image should reduce "succession to an instant."[17] Coleridge was definitely not given to very systematic theorizing, as Langer certainly is.

We now have enough elements for a more precise contrastive definition of symbol and allegory. We can depart from the simple consideration that both allegory and symbolism are *discourses*, their basic distinction lying in the different ways in which they behave towards the limitations of language as a means of representing reality. The former is perfectly content with the restrictions imposed by the medium; the latter tries somehow to circumvent them.

Allegory in fact belongs to a time when the representation of reality was something quite simple and straightforward. People's minds were then mostly filled with the discrete and clearly ordered concepts of practical life and to represent these the ordinary speech that everyone used was perfectly adequate. Before the Romantic revolution indeed there was no really powerful and widespread vision of a more complex reality that would make ordinary language insufficient. As a result, there was also no suspicion that the static world in which everyone lived

was itself a creation of word-bound thought rather than a reality to be regarded apart from language. People blindly fixed themselves upon general *notions* about the world presuming that they were in touch with *the world*. No one realized that the very discreteness and good order of these notions were produced by a medium that operated in a temporal succession and so kept its units of meaning at fixed and clearly separate points of time.

In allegory we can easily detect this naive presupposition that language is not the creator of the world but only an instrument for the description of what is already there. Allegorical language takes pre-existent concepts of ordinary language and limits itself to representing these through images *other* than the familiar ones (*allegorein*, "to speak in other terms"[18]). By uncritically accepting these common places of discourse and leaving them intact, it ends up adopting the same temporal separateness of elements that normally characterizes language. Allegorical images are added to ordinary speech as inoffensive ornaments, as artifices intended to present abstract notions in a more attractive way. The process is never carried to the point of defying the temporal scheme of language and thus synthesizing a more vivid meaning. Nor could we expect this from a strategy that is essentially didactic, one whose function is to spread and perpetuate traditional morals rather than to create something new.

An allegory is essentially a narrative in which characters, objects, events and setting systematically represent abstract concepts and the plot as a whole is designed to impart a message.

The whole meaning of an allegory thus is formed in the ordinary discursive way: it results from the temporal association of smaller meanings that remain clearly separate from each other. Also, as mentioned above, each of the images that are used to convey these meanings is clearly disjoined from its referent, as in the Biblical allegory in which fat cows represent years of plenty and lean ones years of famine. Although the images can be related by analogy to the notions that they convey, there is no doubt to anyone that the cow is one thing, and the year is quite another. The embodiment is merely a decorative effect that fancy imposes on the concept without affecting its original nature.

In sharp contrast to the naively submissive attitude of allegory, the symbol displays its own awareness of the inevitable intervention of language in the shaping of reality and hence its rebellion against the traditional reality of fixed and empty notions by subverting the very manner in which language traditionally operates. The symbol rejects the essentially temporal order of discourse which causes its elements to occur in isolation from the whole and thus to acquire permanent meanings. It is precisely this temporality, after all, which entails the separation between words and meanings, since the meaning of a word, being a fixed and stable locus of discourse, is not bound to that word or to any one of a number of words or combinations of words that can be used to represent it. What the symbol tries to do is to force language to overcome the distances of time that separate its words and meanings and to fuse disparate things into a simultaneous unity. In other words, it takes superficially discrete and static elements and strives to transmute them into

functions of one another and of the whole, as in a living form of the imagination. In doing so the symbol seeks to get rid of the fate of words to point to empty, worn-out generalities and thus to present its own new and particular meaning that is constantly generated by the ever-flowing, ever-shifting relations among its words. The symbolic image is said to be "organic" in relation to its meaning since it is a living part of the whole; it therefore opposes an allegorical image that is "mechanically" imposed on a meaning foreign to itself.

Symbolism is thus an attempt to suggest the possibility of non-discursive meaning in the very act of discourse. It tries to present a synthetic truth through a medium that is essentially characterized by discontinuity. The unifying effect of the symbol is thus always dependent on the reader's displaying an imaginative response to what he inevitably receives sequentially and separately. If the reader happens to reside exclusively in the down-to-earth reality of the understanding and to be therefore unaccustomed to the soaring flights of the imagination, he is not very likely to apprehend the literary work as an organic unity. Being incapable of participating actively in the moulding of symbolic meaning, such a reader will most probably discard the ambiguity of the symbol as meaningless and give preference to the more simplified allegorical meaning. Allegory, after all, would afford him the clarity that he has been trained to value so highly. With the symbol things would have a useless obscurity about them.

NOTES

[1] Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, ed. H. N. Coleridge (Pickering, 1839) 169, qtd. in Owen Barfield, *What Coleridge Thought* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1983) 100.

[2] Coleridge, *The Statesman's Manual* 503.

[3] Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* 167.

[4] Coleridge, *Biographia* 167. Italics his.

[5] Coleridge, *Biographia* 167.

[6] Coleridge, *Biographia* 91.

[7] Coleridge, *Theory of Life, Selected Poetry and Prose of S. T. Coleridge*, ed. Donald Stauffer (New York: Random House, The Modern Library, 1951) 575, qtd. in Barfield 79.

[8] Barfield 101.

[9] Coleridge, *Biographia* 167.

[10] Coleridge, *Collected Letters*, ed. E. L. Griggs (Clarendom, 1957-59) 1034, qtd. in Barfield 82. The first italics are Coleridge's; the second are mine.

[11] Coleridge, *Manual* 503.

[12] Coleridge, *Manual* 503.

[13] Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* 76-8.

[14] Langer 75-9. Italics hers.

[15] Langer 213.

[16] Langer 212-13.

[17] Coleridge, *Biographia* 177.

[18] "Allegory," *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 1970 ed.

CHAPTER III

AREAS OF CONCENTRATION OF TRUTH

Critics who see *The Scarlet Letter* as a whole as clearly signifying a Calvinistic attack on adulterous love are not much to blame for such a simplistic view. For the most part, the novel is obsessively allegorical. Hawthorne makes up the whole story of a fallen woman and her sufferings (or rather, he develops it from a supposedly true story) chiefly as a means of endorsing fixed and traditional notions into which Puritan society has converted the reality of love. He usually does not question these notions. Only occasionally does he venture to seek the newness and fluidity that the world of passion would involve.

Hawthorne's narrative, then, places predominant emphasis on the external, public perspective that sees the essence of the protagonist of the story as contained in the word "adulteress." Hester Prynne transgressed a sacred moral law of her community and should thus be viewed as no other than a criminal. She really is what the stamp placed on her bosom indicates: a damned creature forever excluded from and forever opposed to pure and virtuous society.

This rigid view of the heroine starts to be presented as early as the action proper starts, i.e. right after the brief first chapter that is the "threshold" of the narrative. The second chapter opens with a scene in which a large crowd of Bostonians is gathered at the market place in order to watch Hester Prynne come out of prison and stand in the open with her

badge of sin and her sin-born baby. In most of the chapter it is this external world of the community that is the center of attention, Hester silently and passively submitting to its dominion. Even before she comes out we already hear some of the spectators pour the hardest judgments of Puritan society upon her. A stern old woman thinks that her punishment was too mild and suggests instead that "they should have put the brand of a hot iron on Hester Prynne's forehead." Another one goes even further and affirms that "this woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die."[1] When Hester finally appears and ascends the scaffold, she is dominated by the severe gaze of the whole multitude.

One must admit, however, that the emphasis Hawthorne places on this harsh public view is still not very strong in this chapter. He shows scarcely any sympathy for the old women. If he lets them condemn Hester Prynne, he also has the narrator refer to them as coarse, ugly and pitiless, while Hester is described as having

> a figure of perfect elegance.... She had dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam, and a face which, besides being beautiful from regularity of feature and richness of complexion, had the impressiveness belonging to a marked brow and deep black eyes. She was lady-like, too, ... characterized by a certain state and dignity.... (81)

The narrator seems indeed reluctant to comply with what he terms the "dismal severity of the Puritanic code of law" (80). For the moment, of course, he must conclude that "the world was only the darker for this woman's beauty" (83), but the sympathy that he

displays in his description of her is already a sign that this beauty may still cause some trouble to the clarity and good order of the Puritan system.

Hester's ignominious exposure goes on through the whole of Chapter III. Here Hawthorne introduces the two other key elements in his allegorical drama of sin. Hester's husband, a great scholar and scientist, after a fatal absence of two years, makes his first apparition in town on precisely this crucial day of her life. No sooner does he recognize her on the scaffold than he shows his first sign of curiosity about who the partner of her sin is. The hidden partner, ironically, is the very minister Arthur Dimmesdale who is watching the whole scene with other important members of the community and is pressed by these to tell Hester to reveal his own name. From the eminent position occupied by such a partner we can easily deduce his suitability for a rigid allegorical role. Being at the top of the socio-religious structure, he will hardly be able to escape the influence of the external scheme of Puritan values in which he is so deeply entangled. This external influence will inevitably cause him to see himself, for what he has done with Hester, as no other than evil and sinful. The minister is thus very liable to fall prey to any agent of the Puritan system who happens to detect this feeling of guilt in him and who devotes his whole heart to exploring and reinforcing the poor man's hidden "truth." In the next chapter it becomes clear that Hester's husband (under the false name of Roger Chillingworth) will fill such a role. He meets Hester in the prison where she is confined for a brief term after her public exposure and where he too is introduced in order

to give medical assistance to both herself and the baby. This learned man assures Hester that although she may hide her lover's name from the whole world, he will exert all the power of his intellect and senses and will eventually find him. "I shall seek this man, as I have sought truth in books; as I have sought gold in alchemy" (100). Even now it is clear that Chillingworth will be a most superficial and flat character. He will have no existence apart from his function of securing the rigid meaning which the Puritan system wishes attached to Hester and her secret lover. His whole life, he himself promises, will depend on a fixed relationship with these two people in which he will appear solely as an evil-searcher. "Thou and thine, Hester Prynne, belong to me. My home is where thou art, and where he is" (101).

In Chapter V Hester finally gets out of prison and starts her new life as an outcast from society. From now on she will always wear the letter A which will keep unpolluted citizens from having any friendship with her, and she will even be forbidden to go on living in town: her home will now be on the outskirts of Boston. The narrator here makes a comment on Hester's new life which bears directly upon the allegorical role that she is now taking on. He points out that one should not marvel that,

> with the world before her, - kept by no restrictive clause of her condemnation within the limits of the Puritan settlement, so remote and so obscure, - free to return to her birthplace, or to any other European land, ... and having also the passes of the dark, inscrutable forest open to her, where the wildness of her nature might assimilate itself with a people whose customs and life were alien from the law that had condemned her, - ... that this woman should still call that place her home, where

> and where only, she must needs be the type of shame. (104)

It is natural that Hester should be compelled to stay because her mind is already much too involved with the net of concepts and values of the Puritan culture for her to try to escape its control. This culture has by now eliminated most of her original wildness and freedom and bound her to its own "fixities and definites." "Her sin, her ignominy, were the roots which she had struck into the soil," the narrator explains (104). It would hardly be easy for such a woman to start a new life in a European country pretending to be something different from what she "really" is, let alone in a wild, near-natural place where her condition - so familiar to herself - as adulterous would mean absolutely nothing to the more primitive people. No, Hester is too much a part of the surrounding world of Puritanism to do anything other than surrender to the commonplace meaning which others have stuck on her. She must indeed accept her allegorical status. A good point about Hawthorne's allegorization of her (and indeed, about his allegorical practice in *The Scarlet Letter* as a whole) is that he often saves it from the naivete that is usually associated with the strategy by showing his own awareness of the violent reduction of life that it entails. In commenting on Hester's status, the narrator even hints at some of the theoretical points discussed in our Chapter II above:

> ... giving up her individuality, she would become the general symbol at which the preacher and moralist might point, and in which they might vivify and embody their images of women's frailty and sinful passion. (104)

By "symbol" he obviously means what Coleridge calls "allegory." In the Puritan community as well as in the novel that endorses Puritan notions, Hester functions allegorically in that, having been emptied of her inmost life, she becomes merely an inoffensive ornament that the "preacher" may aggregate (as Hawthorne is doing) to his clear notion of women's sinful nature. Through such a "vivid" example as Hester's case, his audience will be able to grasp the abstract notion much more firmly and permanently.

The obsessive truth that Hester has hitherto been made to represent remains still unchanged in Chapter VI even though the focus here is turned to Pearl, her little daughter. The qualities with which Pearl is endowed clearly show the artificiality of the Puritan interpretation of Hester's love as evil. Born out of a "sinful" act, the child nevertheless displays no physical or mental defects that could be taken as a penalty for what her mother did. She is healthy, beautiful, and perfect in shape: "worthy to have been brought forth in Eden," says the narrator (113). But Pearl is in fact a normal rather than a heavenly child. As might be expected of one newly sprung from her natural source, she abounds in life and energy still uncontrolled by the Puritan moral code. She possesses "infinite variety": in her intense mutability she can behave fiercely, joyfully, tenderly, according to the disposition of the moment. Pearl is as wild and rich as nature itself, and therefore beyond the categories of good and evil under which Puritan society operates. Some critics even accuse Hawthorne of having exaggerated in her naturalness, as is the case of H. H. Waggoner, who sees a "drastic

simplification of life" in his "giving Pearl existence only on the natural plane."[2]

In spite of Pearl's naturalness, the Puritans must impose on her their old notions. Hester, as a good Puritan, looks at her growing child and fears "to detect some dark and wild peculiarity, that should correspond with the guiltiness to which she owed her being" (113). Later, when the girl's uncontrollable nature makes her act violently towards hostile Puritan children, her mother discerns there "a shadowy reflection of the evil that had existed in herself" (118). Finally, lost in a "labyrinth of doubt" as to the nature and origin of the child, she remembers the townspeople's talk that Pearl is "a demon offspring" (122).

Pearl is ultimately a rather contrived device that Hawthorne, also a Puritan, constantly turns to in order to point to his fixed idea of sin. He makes her red in appearance (both in complexion and in garb) so as to make her resemble the scarlet A on Hester's bosom. Pearl is "the scarlet letter in another form; the scarlet letter endowed with life," we are told in the next chapter (125). He gives her a strange, adult-like knowledge of the meaning that the Puritans have bestowed on Hester and on her badge, so that the girl is constantly calling attention to the A and demanding "truth" to its import. Also, in the course of the story he repeatedly draws our attention to Pearl's allegorical meaning: she is an "emblem and product of sin" (117), "the freedom of a broken law" (155), "the living hieroglyphic, in which was revealed the secret they so darkly sought to hide" (223). Matthiessen fiercely attacks Hawthorne for making Pearl no

more than an empty abstraction. He considers the child "worth murdering, ... since the tedious reiteration of what she stands for betrays Hawthorne at his most barren."[3]

In Chapters VII and VIII Hester is again shown as completely dominated by the rigid judgment of the external Puritan world. This time we find her in the mansion of the stern Governor Bellingham, where she is summoned in order to be informed of what has become a public issue concerning the removal of Pearl from her care. In the official debates, we are told, two possibilities have been considered that have equally recommended the separation of mother and child: Pearl may really be of "demon origin," as extreme Puritan views have it - and in this case her company would only lead Hester into deeper shades of wickedness -, or she may possess the divine spark that will make it possible for her to be worked into salvation, a state which she would hardly attain under the guidance of a wicked mother. But Hester is already aware of the local government's intention, and when she enters the Bellingham mansion she is prepared to play her familiar role. As she walks through the house with Pearl, the overwhelming authority that Puritan society has been exerting on her is suggested by a row of portraits of Bellingham's stern ancestors, all "gazing with harsh and intolerant criticism at the pursuits and enjoyments of living men" (128). As previously stated, Hester's individuality is almost completely effaced by Puritan authoritarianism. Hawthorne is careful to point to this loss of substance and enthrallment to discursive categories - that is, he calls attention to the very allegorization to which society and himself are submitting her - by letting Hester's

image be distortedly reflected in Bellingham's breastplate, in such a way that

> the scarlet letter was represented in exaggerated and gigantic proportions, so as to be greatly the most prominent feature of her appearance. In truth, she seemed absolutely hidden behind it. (128)

When Governor Bellingham finally appears, he threatens to take Pearl from Hester's guardianship, as expected, but ends up suspending his decision due to a fit of passion on her part and to the intervention of Dimmesdale, her secret lover, who vehemently defends her rights as a mother. It is to be noticed that Hester's ex-husband - Roger Chillingworth - also reappears here as both the physician and friend of the minister, who is beginning to show signs of infirmity. Hester perceives that the doctor already looks uglier and more misshapen than before - he is fast adjusting himself to the dark role that he is very soon going to play. The close of Chapter VIII indeed marks exactly a shift of focus from Hester to Chillingworth and Dimmesdale. It is also - as a critic has observed - the point where the action ceases to be directed by the community and starts to be entirely controlled by the physician.[4] That is to say, if the external and impersonal community has hitherto been responsible for Hester's fortune by forcing its fixed rules and values upon her world, it now nominates a secret agent to carefully work upon the other sinner and bring his hidden truth entirely to light. As we can see, the change that here takes place will not affect the constant clarity that has been imparted to us up to now except to make it stronger. We still continue in our first and long area

of concentration of truth.

From the moment that Chillingworth is introduced to us we can hardly expect him to be a man very interested in or troubled by the richness and complexities of passion. Even so early he seems already predisposed to attach himself to - and indeed, to be swallowed up by - the rigid and reductive view provided by the Puritan code. Chillingworth is presented to us as being a very cerebral person; he has developed his intellectual side so much, the narrator tells us, that it has even "mould[ed] the physical to itself" (87). We soon learn that he is an eminent physician - one of Hawthorne's typical scientists who, like Aylmer in "The Birthmark," is so fascinated by the clear knowledge of his science that he places the whole world within its sphere. When such a man has learned that his wife has committed adultery and that the identity of her partner is still unknown, it is not surprising that a desire for revenge should make his scientific passion for discovery even stronger than usual.

It is thus with a hungry analytical mind that in Chapter IX Chillingworth sets to work on Dimmesdale, to whom he had felt instinctively attracted from the moment that he had first seen him. At first he approaches the minister as a parishioner; then he clings to him as a full-time physician. Once living in the same house with him, he has a chance to investigate the minister's world from the surface to the innermost recesses: he follows every step that he takes, he engages him in conversations that reveal his principles and his recollections. Of course Chillingworth succeeds in isolating, amid the still varied

interior world of the minister, what he is looking for, namely the minister's consciousness of having committed adultery and his inevitable feeling of guilt at the "evil" he has done. But in his fascination for his analysis, he cannot resist the temptation of overemphasizing the object that he has found and enlarging it to the point that it dominates the minister's whole being. Chillingworth easily ceases to be a detached observer and becomes a passionate manipulator of Dimmesdale's mind. He becomes a torturer to the minister, inducing as much consciousness of sin as the minister's mind can possibly accommodate. Even the mere eyes that the doctor sets on him, with their craving to see evil, can induce such a consciousness, in much the same way that Aylmer's biased gaze is sufficient to add color to the birthmark and make it the most prominent feature on the face of his sensitive wife.

As a direct consequence of his plunging deeper and deeper into this obsessive quest, Chillingworth progressively loses all resemblance to a real person and becomes perhaps the most narrowly allegorical of the main characters in the novel. "At first," the narrator comments, "his expression had been calm, meditative, scholar-like." But as he goes on with his investigation, his face grows uglier and more evil, and his body more misshapen, until he is turned into a "diabolical agent" (149). Chillingworth in fact is not endowed with the minimum of complexity that one would expect to find in a human creature. In practically the whole story he is dominated by a single state of mind, by that unchanging urge to "win" the minister into the kingdom of evil. Ultimately, we can consider him as a mere

embodiment for the external, demonic force that comes from the surrounding city and must inevitably take over the individual and keep him imprisoned in fixed concepts that were not originally his. That the source of Dimmesdale's torture is not in Chillingworth but in the city in which both are imprisoned is made clear by the fact, noted by J. C. Stubbs, that "when Chillingworth is not present, we know from the bloody scourge that Dimmesdale himself plays Chillingworth's part."[5] The doctor is just an empty, arbitrary agent of the system. Hawthorne uses him merely to dramatize - though as yet he does not dare to defy - the formidable authority exerted by this system over the individual.

The agency of the physician is the object of Chapters IX and X. Chapter XI is chiefly concerned with the effects that this external influence produces on the minister. Here Dimmesdale is shown in a state of both physical and spiritual decay as a result of his having for years been possessed by a fixed view of himself as evil. It is not hard to imagine with what clarity such a view presents itself to his mind and how intensely it torments him. Like Chillingworth, Dimmesdale possesses a very analytical mind - we know that he has been a brilliant scholar at Oxford. As a "true priest" that he is, moreover, his mind is particularly involved in the rigid Puritan distinction between good and evil and is obviously committed to the constant pursuit and teaching of the good. In committing adultery, therefore, he did something that he had always firmly believed and preached to be no other than evil. The position that he still occupies in the community -

as a model of sanctity and advocate of *good behavior* - makes him seem all the more sinful to himself for behaving hypocritically, for not revealing what is the one *truth* about himself. As Chillingworth, Dimmesdale thus also becomes imprisoned in a single state of mind. His whole life is dominated by the immutable feeling of guilt that ruins his body and soul and leads him to resort to self-flagellation, fasts, and night vigils as means of penance. In Chapter XII we see the minister in one of his waking nights when he is particularly afflicted with guilt. His torment is so intense this time that it compels him to leave home and stand on the scaffold where he should have been with Hester seven years before. While he is standing there, amid the perfect darkness and quietude of the night, Hester coincidentally passes by with Pearl after watching at Governor Winthrop's deathbed, and Dimmesdale asks them to join him. So the three of them stand together, hand in hand, in an empty, mock display of the minister's sinfulness. Little Pearl, as we might expect, perfectly understands the deceptiveness of the situation and demands that he stand there in the clear light of midday so that everybody can see what he *truly* is.

However, at a moment of such density of truth as this - with Hester and Dimmesdale on their pedestal of shame and Pearl insistently reminding him of his adultery - Hawthorne seems to lose control of his allegorical narrative and, for the first time since the beginning of the action, confuses things for a moment. He suddenly interrupts the minister's conversation with Pearl by producing a mysterious light in the sky that illuminates the town in such a strange way as to disturb one's ordinary view of

things. Here we have one of the highest imaginative moments in the novel. Since it confuses our allegorical view so much, let us say no more about this scene and leave it all for the next chapter.

The confusion does not last very long, though. Things are soon restored to their proper order with the apparition of Roger Chillingworth by the side of the scaffold. The doctor gazes at the minister with such a malevolent expression that he looks like an "arch-fiend." Dimmesdale is filled with terror and asks Hester who the horrible man is. Little Pearl offers to answer his question but only mocks him when he bends down to hear. She will not be serious with him because

> "Thou wast not bold! - thou wast not true!" ... "Thou wouldst not promise to take my hand, and mother's hand, tomorrow noontide!" (176)

Shortly after this Chillingworth leads the minister back home and this is the end of his vigil.

Chapter XIII marks the beginning of a new phase in the novel. The focus of attention is now redirected to Hester. In the first few chapters of the book we looked at her from an entirely external perspective. She was then the community's passive and resigned image of sin. In this section Hawthorne explores her inner world and brings out whatever of her original energy is still alive and can momentarily shake the rigidity of the Puritan world. It is not surprising, therefore, that this section should be the one in which our allegorical view will be most seriously obstructed.

After the rather straining chapters on Chillingworth and Dimmesdale, in which our attention was unrelentingly drawn towards the minister's sinfulness, things become a little looser in Chapter XIII as we move on from the doctor and his patient to an account of Hester's life during the seven years since the first scaffold scene. In this account the fallen woman of the scarlet letter is described as leading a life of surprising purity, self-abnegation, and commitment to the help of those in need. As a result, people begin to develop a liking for her and soon other meanings besides the original one are attached to her scarlet letter. But when the narrator shifts from these external views to the interior of Hester's mind, her world clearly loses this richness of meanings and becomes much narrower. Hester has been dominated by the chiefly negative view that society has formed about her, and this has produced a violent effect on her mind: "all the light and graceful foliage of her character had been withered up ... and had long ago fallen away, leaving a bare and harsh outline...." Now "there seemed to be no longer anything in Hester's face for Love to dwell upon; nothing in Hester's form ... that Passion would ever dream of clasping in its embrace; nothing in Hester's bosom , to make it ever again the pillow of Affection." The narrator entertains only a faint hope that a "magic touch" may transfigure her and give her back all these lost things (181-82). Hester's life has mostly changed "from passion and feeling, to thought." Like Chillingworth and Dimmesdale, she also has at this moment a predominantly analytical mind. The only difference is that, while the two men have completely disappeared inside the fixed loci that their

minds have reserved for them, Hester is sometimes capable of detaching herself from her role and analyzing things a step above her friends. "In her lonesome cottage," we are told, "thoughts visited her as dared to enter no other dwelling in New England." Her speculations are so bold, indeed, as to lead her to criticize the entire social system that has excluded her and to envision its very transformation. As the narrator is careful to point out, however, these reflections cannot lead her to any safe and comfortable place, but only on and on through "the dark labyrinth of mind." For "a woman never overcomes these problems by any exercise of thought." Only passion can give a woman freedom, and this Hester has mostly lost (182-84). The narrator ends his own speculations with a statement set in complete isolation that brings us back to the realm of uncertainty: "The scarlet letter had not done its office" (184). Among other things, this statement refers back to the multiple meanings that people have attached to the scarlet letter. Because of its ambiguity, let us leave it - together with the meanings the A has acquired in this chapter - for later treatment.

In Chapter XIV we begin to see Hester in her new active role. In the midnight scaffold scene she had been shocked at the poor condition to which Chillingworth had reduced the minister. Now she decides to speak to the doctor in order to release Dimmesdale from his control. She meets him one day at the seashore. At this point the physician is already literally a devil: occasionally there even comes "a glare of red light out of his eyes" (187). Hester tries to persuade him to become human

again and forgive Dimmesdale. But of course this is not possible. As we have already seen, Chillingworth has been trapped by circumstances in a fixed allegorical role and all his life is now reduced to his demonic relationship with the minister. The answer that he gives to Hester's plea is in fact the only moment in the story in which he manages to detach himself from such a role:

> "Peace, Hester, peace!" ... "It is not granted me to pardon. I have no such power as thou tellest me of. My old faith, long forgotten, comes back to me, and explains all that we do, and suffer. By thy first step awry, thou didst plant the germ of evil; but since that moment, it has all been a dark necessity. Ye that have wronged me are not sinful, save in a kind of typical illusion; neither am I fiend-like, who have snatched a fiend's office from his hands. It is our fate. Let the black flower blossom as it may! ..." (191-92)

Chillingworth's self-consciousness here is a reflection of Hawthorne's own awareness of the artificiality of the allegorization that he cannot avoid applying to his characters. At this privileged moment the doctor knows that he is not objectively a devil, as the other two characters are not really sinful, but neither he nor they can escape these rigid categories into which they have all been dragged by forces both external to and uncontrollable by themselves. Each one is condemned to blindly act his own part by the narrow definition of evil allegorically defined once and for all.

After Chillingworth is gone (Chapter XV), Hester turns back to Pearl, who can now resume her ordinary function of pointing to her mother's sin. She takes some of the seaweed that she had been gathering by the water's edge and arranges it around her bosom in such a way as to imitate Hester's A. She then contemplates the

result "with strange interest; even as if the one only thing for which she had been sent into the world was to make out its hidden import" (196). For the rest of the chapter she insistently asks Hester about the meaning of the letter.

Chapter XVI is the first of a series of four chapters that are set in the forest, where Hester decides to meet Dimmesdale (on his way back from a visit to a religious man living among the Indians) in order to tell him about the true identity of Roger Chillingworth. The shift of setting brings us to an area in the novel where our clarity of vision will be most upset: surrounded by the wild forest, Hester's instinctive and passionate side (or what has remained of that) will be stimulated to come to surface again and thus to offer momentary resistance to the authority of the external Puritan world. But in Chapter XVI she is still not affected by the wildness of the scenery. As she walks to the meeting-place with Pearl, the forest that surrounds her footpath is presented to us through her eyes in the following manner:

> [It] stood so black and dense on either side, and disclosed such imperfect glimpses of the sky above, that to Hester's mind, it imaged not amiss the moral wilderness in which she had so long been wandering. (201)

This is an allegorical view that strictly follows Puritan notions. The Puritan mind draws a clear opposition between the city, which is a place of light and good moral order, and the forest, which is dark and immoral and is the very abode of Satan and his evil followers. It is this view that dominates the whole of Chapter XVI. Pearl is here once more the artificial device

that helps Hawthorne to convey his message. In one of her many improbable utterances, the child makes a point of emphasizing that her mother is kept in the darkness of the forest because of her sinfulness, whereas Pearl herself is illuminated by the little sunshine available because she is still innocent: "I am but a child. It will not flee from me; for I wear nothing on my bosom yet!" (201) She then suggests the association of nature and passion with evil by asking her mother to tell her a story about the "Black Man" who haunts the forest at night and puts his mark on the bosoms of his initiates. According to a story that Pearl heard, the scarlet letter is the mark of the devil, whom Hester often meets in the dark forest. Hester resignedly confirms that she has once met him, and that the scarlet letter is his mark. When Dimmesdale finally appears, Pearl points out, as she had done several times before, that "he has his hand over his heart." She suspects that this is the exact place where the Black Man set his mark on the minister (205).

In Chapters XVII and XVIII we are finally in hostile territory. These two chapters, however, do not deprive us altogether of our static allegorical view. They both constantly oscillate between the clarity of the Puritan perspective to which Dimmesdale is firmly attached, and the confusion produced by Hester's division between her newly-revived passionate side and her old Puritan background. The first area that we can identify in Chapter XVII is clearly allegorical: it is marked by Dimmesdale's submissively acting his ordinary fixed role of a sinner. When asked by Hester whether he has found peace these seven years, he answers that he has only found "spiritual

torment," which has been caused by the sharp contrast between the purity that he outwardly displays, and the "black reality" that is inside him. He considers Hester to be much happier than him because her scarlet letter is visible to everyone, whereas his "burns in secret" (208-9). After he finishes speaking, Hester gains courage and tells him the whole truth about Chillingworth, which shocks the minister and makes him very angry. He will not forgive her for her long concealment of his torturer's identity. But at this point Hester's submerged passion has already reached surface level and she cannot bear his unforgiveness. With sudden tenderness, she throws her arms around the minister and here we enter the first symbolic area in the chapter. Even Dimmesdale here is shaken out of his rigidity. But this is soon interrupted by Dimmesdale himself, who suddenly thinks of Chillingworth and shivers at the idea of going on living with his worst enemy. He can envision no way out of the narrow world in which he is imprisoned. "The judgment of God is on me," he says. "It is too mighty for me to struggle with!" (214) He asks Hester for advice. It is at this point that Hester confuses things again by showing him that the world is not limited to the static reality of Puritanism. She tries to make him see the whole complexity of their situation by pointing to the two opposite directions in which the forest track can lead them: back to the prison of the city, and deeper into the freedom of the forest. But of course Dimmesdale can only see the freedom of the forest from the perspective of the city, i.e. as a sin. So he brings us back to his rigid view again by saying:

> I am powerless to go. Wretched and sinful as I am, I have had no other thought than to drag on my earthly existence in the sphere where Providence hath placed me. (215)

But Hester is so swayed by passion that she deems it really possible to get rid of the Puritan past altogether and begin life anew. The chapter ends with her tempting the minister to run away with her.

Chapter XVIII is the one in which Hester's interior energy most threatens the Puritan order. It begins with the narrator commenting on her strength and individuality, on how her hard experience as a social outcast has enabled her to win independence of both thought and feeling in relation to Puritan society. The focus then shifts to Dimmesdale, who, by contrast, has never had a chance to transcend the principles, laws and prejudices of the social system at the head of which he stands. It is clear that the free and new life of which Hester speaks is impossible in his case, since he is forever to carry the memory of his having transgressed a Puritan law that is so deeply rooted in his mind. As the narrator affirms with reference to him: "the breach which guilt has once made into the human soul is never, in this mortal state, repaired" (218). So that when the minister decides to flee, it is clear enough to his own mind that it will be as a criminal. In this chapter, of course, he cannot sustain this clarity all the time due to the influence of Hester Prynne. Hester's energy starts to disturb the Puritan order as soon as the minister's decision is made. This area in particular is forbidden to us at the moment, since it is precisely the

climactic symbolic moment in the novel.

After the confusion and turbulence of the last two chapters, the next one brings us back to clarity and repose. It is Pearl herself who undertakes to restore the old order. At the end of Chapter XVIII the child had momentarily forgotten her usual interests and had added force to the world of nature by playing in perfect harmony with the wild animals and things of the forest. Now Hester interrupts her play and demands that she join the minister and herself. After great reluctance, Pearl slowly advances in their direction but then stops just before the margin of a brook and refuses to cross it. She keeps pointing her forefinger at Hester's bosom as a sign that she must resume the badge of sin that she had discarded in a moment of intense passion. As soon as Hester does this, Pearl comes happily back to her and kisses both her cheek and the scarlet letter. But of course she does not yet recognize the minister. First he needs to go back to town and walk hand in hand with Hester and Pearl. When he tries to make friends with the child by kissing her brow, she runs to the brook and quickly washes the kiss off. So this is how the two lovers are brought from their momentary illusions back to harsh reality.

We have seen how the peculiar constitution of Dimmesdale's mind has led him to capture the complex experience of the forest reductively as evil. Chapter XX shows him back in town under the effect of this experience. As the minister walks through the streets, he overflows with the wild energy newly released from his inner self. But, as we might expect, this wildness manifests itself solely in the form of wicked impulses. He comes across

several townspeople on his way home and in each case he feels strongly impelled to do something bad: to say a blasphemy to a deacon, to destroy an old lady's religious conviction, to teach bad words to Puritan children. He has to exert a lot of self-control in order to resist these temptations. After some time he is led to believe that he is really given over to a fiend, with whom he made a contract in the forest. When he gets back home it is still with this demonic energy (in sublimated form) that he sets to write the sermon that he will preach on Election Day and completes it on a single night.

The next three chapters are all concerned with the Puritan festival where this sermon will be preached. After the depths of inner life that we reached in the forest, we are here brought back to that exterior, midday-light world of the community with which we started our analysis. Since these are really the last chapters before the Conclusion, we are no longer to meet with any abstruseness as has impaired our allegorical vision on a few occasions before. Chapter XXI basically describes the human picture that gradually forms itself in the market place before the official ceremonies are initiated. Here we find Hester in a sharply contrasting position to that which she occupied in the forest. Whereas she was an essential element there in that she was able to threaten the stability of the outside world through her own inner strength, she is here once again reduced to her empty allegorical role. The very appearance that Hawthorne gives her today calls attention to this: she is dressed "in a garment of coarse gray cloth" that makes her "fade personally out of

sight and outline," while the scarlet letter stands in greatest prominence (241). Wherever she stands in the crowded market place a vacant area forms itself around her so as to leave her in a "magic circle of ignominy." As in the beginning of the story, she is again subjected to the cool analytical gaze of the public upon the token of her shame. By now she knows that this is her one inescapable reality, for even her plan to flee with Dimmesdale (no longer to the forest but to Europe) has been thwarted by Chillingworth, who has made arrangements to be in the very ship in which they were going to travel.

And so it is in strict observance of the clear meanings of the Puritan system that the novel reaches its climax in Chapter XXIII, which is aptly titled "The Revelation of the Scarlet Letter." We slowly advance in this direction as we move with the procession of magistrates, clergymen, soldiers, and common citizens that starts in Chapter XXII. The procession makes its first stop at the meeting-house, where Dimmesdale delivers such an inspired sermon that the spellbound audience takes him to be no less than an angel. After the sermon, the parade starts again in the direction of the town-hall, where further ceremonies are to take place. When the minister appears in the market place, the multitude shouts in unison in honor of his holiness. But the minister can no longer go on with his hypocritical behavior. Now that his strength is fast withdrawing from him, he must make a final bold effort and assume the place where he rightfully belongs. Accordingly, he pauses in front of the scaffold and calls Hester and Pearl, who are standing nearby, to go up with him. Chillingworth desperately tries to dissuade the minister

from the one action that will free him from the doctor's grasp. Unsuccessful in this attempt, he goes up with them "as one intimately connected with the drama of guilt and sorrow in which they had all been actors" (266). Once on top of the scaffold, Dimmesdale delivers a last discourse in which he unburdens himself of all his terrible truth. Here is his final and inevitable surrender to his allegorical role. From the very beginning we could suspect that this revelation would sooner or later occur because Dimmesdale had no other life apart from his fixed concern with the adultery he had committed. From the very beginning it was clear that Hawthorne had meant him to be no more than an embodiment for sin. Without this final public confession, of course, his allegorical destiny would never be fully realized. But it is in the minister's next move that he actually completes his revelation and his allegorical nature reaches its highest degree of artificiality in the novel: he tears the ministerial band that covers his breast and there the truth is revealed in the form of a scarlet letter imprinted in his own skin. Now that his allegorical mission has been fulfilled, he is ready to die in peace. Chillingworth, too, whose only function was to keep Dimmesdale always bound to the Puritan allegory, has lost his raison d'etre and practically disappears. Pearl is also released from her allegorical function of pointing to the truth of the scarlet letter and the narrator promises us that she will from now on be human. Only Hester, of course, cannot be affected by this climactic event.

After the clarity with which Dimmesdale's confession was

presented to us above, the Conclusion throws some confusion into the scene. The confusion is rather slight, though. In this final chapter Hawthorne lets different spectators of the scene give conflicting explanations for the appearance of a scarlet letter on Dimmesdale's breast. The narrator refrains from choosing the one true version among these. He also reports that some "highly respectable witnesses" have denied that there was any mark on the minister's breast or that he had admitted a share in Hester's guilt. This last version he rejects, however, attributing it to the loyalty of Dimmesdale's friends which led them to defend his character. He thus maintains the central fact that the minister did reveal his sin and that this was embodied in his own chest.

As regards Hester, the Conclusion brings no more obscurity to our vision. On the contrary, at this final moment things become clearer than ever. We are told that some time after Dimmesdale's death, Hester disappears with Pearl. Years later, however, she comes back and resumes the scarlet letter even though no longer obliged to wear it. The narrator is quick to indicate the reason for this return: "Here had been her sin; here, her sorrow; and here was yet to be her penitence" (274). So Hawthorne finally decides to confine Hester to the narrow allegorical truth. After her earlier, delusive hopes of freedom and even of subversion of the Puritan code, he now brings her mind completely under its control. The scarlet letter has done its office. And his own previous unassured attacks on the severity of the system are at last converted into a full endorsement of an oppressive power that he simply cannot see any escape from.

Our long journey through *The Scarlet Letter* must have made it clear that we are dealing with a largely reactionary novel. Hawthorne starts with a traditional Puritan notion about which he is particularly concerned - "adulterous love is evil" - and then looks for appropriate material to illustrate and reinforce (rather than to modify) this notion. All the main images of his story thus most of the time have little or no importance apart from the fixed truth which it is their function to point to: they are poor, flat images that Hawthorne's fancy mechanically imposes on a meaning essentially unaffected by and disjoined from them. Dimmesdale is such an image, with his persistent guilt for his evil act and (at the end) with this guilt being visible in his own physical body. So is Hester (or relatively so), with the defining letter stuck to her bosom from the beginning to the very end of the story. Much more so are Pearl, with the scarlet color of sin in her whole appearance and her rather contrived interest in the truth of the letter, and Chillingworth, whose eyes emit a red light in token that he is a fiend who is dragging one more sinner into hell.

When we say that the novel is mostly allegorical, however, we still need to set a further boundary within this broad category. As previously suggested, allegory in *The Scarlet Letter* is not always of the most naive sort. It indeed reaches a high level of naivete whenever Hawthorne compulsively, unself-consciously reduces his images to rigid notions. This happens,

for instance, when he endows Pearl with a red complexion and constantly calls our attention to her allegorical meaning, or when he literally brands Dimmesdale's chest with the stigma of adultery. Here we are not far from the situation in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, one of the young Hawthorne's favorite books, where characters like Christian, Hopeful, and Mr Worldy-Wiseman are just one-word notions disguised as people. Hawthorne's allegory does come to a more problematic level, however, when he is troubled by the awareness that the clear-cut truth that a person represents is not an absolute truth but a brutal reduction of a much richer and more complex reality. Specifically, he realizes that an adulterous person is not ultimately evil but only imprisoned in this category by his involvement in an external scheme of static meanings. When Hawthorne is disturbed by this awareness, he has to be more tentative in an allegorical reduction which he must by necessity carry out since he is also involved in such a scheme. And so he is forced to practice an allegory that calls attention to its own process. This mostly happens when he deals with Hester, of course. Early in the story he lets the community place a defining letter on her breast but he is always, as we have seen, pointing at its artificiality and the sacrifice of her rich individuality that it entails. In Chapter XIII he even makes Hester herself aware of the static role in which she has been confined. A certain degree of self-consciousness is also present in his treatment of Dimmesdale in Chapters X and XI, where he shows us all the violence with which the consciousness of evil is forced into the minister's mind.

The next step after Hawthorne's progress from a naive to a self-reflective allegory is of course his bolder effort to modify the rigid notions whose artificiality he is now aware of. This attempt at newness and change is exactly what occurs in the few obscure areas of the novel that we have quickly passed over in our allegorical journey. It is to the rich disorder of these areas that our focus of attention will be shifted now.

NOTES

[1] Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter *and Selected Tales*, ed. Thomas Connnolly (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986) 79. Further quotations refer to this edition and are identified by page number in the text.

[2] Hyatt Howe Waggoner, "Three Orders: Natural, Moral, and Symbolic," The Scarlet Letter: *A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Sculley Bradley et al. (New York: Norton, 1978) 339.

[3] Matthiessen, *American Renaissance* 278.

[4] John C. Gerber, "Form and Content in *The Scarlet Letter*," The Scarlet Letter: *A Norton Critical Edition* 300.

[5] John Caldwell Stubbs, "A Tale of Human Frailty and Sorrow," The Scarlet Letter: *A Norton Critical Edition* 416.

CHAPTER IV

AREAS OF DISPERSION OF TRUTH

Even before we move into *The Scarlet Letter* proper, we are given a hint in "The Custom-House" that the obsession for clear and static notions is not all that Hawthorne's mind is about. It is thus that the author describes his first contact with the piece of red cloth that inspired his novel:

> My eyes fastened themselves upon the old scarlet letter, and would not be turned aside. Certainly, there was some deep meaning in it, most worthy of interpretation, and which, as it were, streamed forth from the mystic symbol, subtly communicating itself to my sensibilities, but evading the analysis of my mind. (62)

The scarlet letter is too rich to be grasped by analysis. This complete obstruction of discursive understanding by imagination is of course the effect of Hawthorne's first and intense experience with the material of his novel. From the previous chapter we know that when it comes to the novel itself it is rather the analytical faculty that blocks the imagination and replaces its richness with fixed notions that it displays as if really *grasping* the original reality. But we have also seen that the imagination does manage to appear at times. In an investigation that strives to avoid reduction, we could not neglect the few precious occasions when this faculty springs up and infuses tension and meaning into the novel.

The slight deviation in Hawthorne's text from its obsessive Puritan notions is already announced in the brief first chapter

that introduces the narrative. The chapter is practically restricted to a description of the scene where the protagonist will soon be presented to us in her ignominious role. What we see is a large crowd of Bostonians in austere clothes standing before an ugly and gloomy prison-house. In front of this building there is a grass-plot with equally ugly and poisonous plants, which were evidently led to grow there, the narrator explains, by the influence of "the soil that had so early borne the black flower of civilized society, a prison" (75-76). It would even seem that from the very beginning Hester Prynne would be entirely surrounded by the hostile world created by the Puritans, a world whose evil and falsity the narrator momentarily recognizes but from which he is unable to escape. Yet another element is added to the scene. Right beside the old and stern prison-door, there is a wild rose-bush which, offering its beauty and fragrance to the criminal, might be taken as a sign that "the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind to him" (76). The narrator concludes the chapter by picking one of the roses and offering it to the reader, in the hope that it may represent "some sweet moral blossom, that may be found along the track, or relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow" (76).

Once our journey is started, we have to walk a long way, indeed, before we can find any relief to the prevailing darkness of the novel. The first blossom of the imagination is appropriately revealed after the gloomiest and most rigid part of the story, the part concerning Chillingworth's analysis of Dimmesdale. This analysis, as we have seen, makes the minister progressively more imprisoned in the static concept through which

Puritan society must see his past act of love, so that by Chapter XII his burden of evil has become much too heavy to be borne and he is forced to go out and stand on the scaffold one late night in a simulated expiation of his sin. So we begin the scaffold scene with the focus still heavily directed to the minister's sinfulness: at first he feels "as if the *universe* were gazing at a scarlet token on his naked breast," and later he fears the effect of the cold on his legs will make him *unable* to descend the steps and so he will be put to the shame of being discovered by the whole town the next morning (168, 170-71; italics mine). Shortly afterwards, however, the approaching change is announced by the unexpected reappearance of Hester Prynne, who had been absent since the closing of Chapter VIII. At Dimmesdale's request Hester goes up the steps with Pearl. Once on the platform she holds one of the child's hands and the minister immediately takes the other. The moment that he does this,

> there [comes] what seems a tumultuous rush of new life, other life than his own, pouring like a torrent into his heart, and hurrying through all his veins, as if the mother and child were communicating their vital warmth to his half-torpid system. (172)

Pearl still tries to stick to the allegorical order by insisting that the minister should return to the scaffold the following midday before the whole waking town. It is too late, however, for the passage that follows is the one that Henry James cites in its full extent in his essay on Hawthorne as one of the "imaginative, impressive, poetic" moments of the novel.[1] Here Pearl's demands for a clear and final version of reality are suddenly interrupted

by the appearance of a light in the sky that illuminates the world in a rather different way than would have pleased her. The meteoric light shows things "with the distinctness of midday" indeed, "but also with the awfulness that is always imparted to familiar objects by an unaccustomed light." Due to the effect of this light, we see all the scene around the scaffold - the houses, the garden-plots, the wheel-track - "with a singularity of aspect that seem[s] to give another moral interpretation to the things of this world than they [have] ever borne before" (173). And indeed for the first time in the story we are given a rest from the narrow, obsessive Puritan interpretation of Hester and Dimmesdale and are allowed to have a richer view of them. The last sentence of the paragraph quoted by James displays exactly that dissipation of notions which we have seen to be an essential feature of Coleridge's "secondary imagination":

> They stood in the noon of that strange and solemn splendor, as if it were the light that is to reveal all secrets, and the daybreak that shall unite all who belong to one another. (174)

This passage contains both the Puritan interpretation and another, opposite view. As the light reveals Hester and Dimmesdale on the platform of the pillory, it obviously endorses the Puritan view of their union as evil, as shameful. But the narrator compares this light not only to a noon light - to "the light that is to reveal all secrets," but surprisingly also to the final dawn that will somehow sanction the union of all true lovers. That is to say, the passage does not present the two characters' union as being clearly and decidedly evil, but rather

as being both good and evil. By juxtaposing these contrary notions in such a breathtaking fashion, it has the effect of almost destroying their abstract motionlessness and providing us with a fluid, a concrete view of the two lovers' reality. For a moment we can entertain the illusion that Hester and Dimmesdale (and Pearl between them) have ceased to be empty, arbitrary images of sin and are instead fused with contradictory meanings so as to form a new and simultaneous whole. We might momentarily see them, in other words, as *symbols* in the organic sense originally intended by the Romantics.

All this in spite of Dimmesdale. It seems that not even Hester's presence and her physical contact through Pearl are *sufficient* to relieve the *minister of his burden of guilt*, for during the whole spectacle of the meteor he stands "with his hand over his heart" (173), and when he looks upward to the sky, he sees the same sign of Adultery that is on his chest: "an immense letter, - the letter A, - marked out in lines of dull red light." But the narrator's vision now is much too disturbed by the unusual light for him to sympathize with Dimmesdale. This time he cannot help subverting the minister's clarity. First he denies the appearance of the A altogether, discarding it as a mere figment of the minister's "guilty imagination" (175). Later, at the end of the chapter, he contradictorily allows the sexton to tell the minister about the "portent" that was seen the previous night:

> A great red letter in the sky, - the letter A, - which we interpret to stand for *Angel*. For, as our good Governor Winthrop was made an angel this past

> night, it was doubtless held fit that there should be some notice thereof! (177; italics mine)

Here is a classic example of multiple choice, the symbolic device which Matthiessen regards as one of Hawthorne's "most fertile resources."[2] Through this device Hawthorne extends his symbolic approach to the three characters to the very image that was intended by the Puritans as an aid in their allegorization of Hester: the letter A. Dimmesdale, being entirely enslaved by the Puritan ideology, must see an A in the sky which has the same old meaning that he is so obsessed with. But the narrator immediately rejects the allegorical apparition, and when the sexton retakes it later, he reads an opposite meaning into the image in such a way as to make it richer and more complex and thus *no* longer allegorical but symbolic. It is true that the clash of concepts that takes place now is not so impressive as before and may accordingly not give us so strong an illusion of *synthesis*. (James even condemns Hawthorne's recourse to the celestial A as superficial.[3]) But what really matters in the end is that this last device reinforces the new view of reality which the scaffold scene has afforded us. Now we can no longer see things so clearly and concentrically as the Puritans would wish them to be. The A is *both* Adulterer(ess) *and* Angel. We are beginning, in other words, to be presented with a view of reality as characterized not by concentration but by dispersion of meaning.

The scaffold scene may be viewed as a prelude to the new phase that the novel enters in Chapter XIII: the phase in which the focus is heavily directed to Hester's world and in which most of the symbolism of *The Scarlet Letter* is to be found. Before the

scene of the scaffold Hester had either been altogether absent (as during the whole section concerning Chillingworth's analysis of Dimmesdale) or had been reduced to the condition of an empty and passive image of an external Puritan notion. In the scaffold scene we could already notice a certain improvement in her position: there it was certainly her presence that, together with the unusual light, invited a momentary departure from the static Puritan notion cherished by Dimmesdale and Chillingworth towards a richer interpretation of the two lovers' reality. In this new phase of the novel Hester moves even more to the foreground as she becomes an active force that seriously threatens the clarity and good order of the Puritan world.

The first chapter after the scaffold scene already embodies the new spirit and is significantly called "Another View of Hester." Here, in an account of her life since her public exposure in the market place, Hester is described as bravely resisting the allegorical reduction to which the Puritans have been trying to subject her. By fixing a big and shining letter A on her bosom, the Puritan authorities have obviously intended to make adultery the essential quality about Hester and thus to reduce her whole being to the category of evil. But in their long if distant association with her, the people of Boston end up perceiving the complexity of her character and the insufficiency of the Puritan category to contain her essence. It soon turns out that the woman whom the scarlet letter defines as so wicked in fact leads the purest and most virtuous life in town. Besides submitting patiently and uncomplainingly to the severe penalty

that was imposed on her - her almost total exclusion from society -, Hester even helps this society whenever it needs her: she gives food and clothes to the poor, she offers valuable assistance to the sick, she gives comfort to those who are suffering. As we might expect, people are affected by her good deeds and they soon begin to attribute to the scarlet letter meanings that diverge from the one intended by the authorities. They continue, in other words, that enrichment of the image which began in Chapter XII. To some people the A means "Able," since Hester has "so much power to do, and power to sympathize" (180). In other people we can detect the very conflict of perspectives that constitutes the essence of the symbolic approach to reality: "in the eyes of the very men who spoke [evil of her], the scarlet letter had the effect of the cross on a nun's bosom. It imparted to the wearer a kind of sacredness ..." (181).

We have already seen that as the narrator moves from these external opinions about Hester to the interior of her own mind, she no longer possesses the symbolic richness displayed above since she has been much affected by the predominantly harsh view of society and has inevitably given in to the static locus that society has reserved for her. As a result, all her beauty and grace has departed from her, leaving behind "a bare and harsh outline," and she has also turned "from passion and feeling, to thought," so that now there is "nothing in [her] bosom, to make it ever again the pillow of Affection." Yet the narrator does not rule out her symbolic possibilities altogether. In his theorizing about the "feminine character," he is at first pessimistic about the capacity of women's passionate nature to survive hardship.

When a woman has faced a particularly severe experience, he says, "the tenderness will either be crushed out of her, or ... crushed so deeply into her heart that it can never show itself more." But he immediately adds, in a more optimistic mood:

> She who has once been woman, and ceased to be so, might at any moment become a woman again, if there were only the magic touch to effect the transfiguration. We shall see whether Hester Prynne were ever afterwards so touched, and so transfigured. (182)

He is obviously referring here to the transfiguration that Hester will soon experience in the forest. That is to say, in spite of everything, the A is still open to Affection.

The sentence that comes at the end of the narrator's account provides a focus where the two aspects of his sketch of Hester converge: "The scarlet letter had not done its office" (184). The "office" of the A, as assigned by the Puritan authorities, was to fix Hester's reality by manipulating the minds of both Hester herself and her observers. The letter has not yet done its office because neither have people limited themselves to the prescribed interpretation - Adulteress - nor has Hester's mind completely lost the imaginative energy that can still allow her some freedom from her confining category. It is especially Hester's passionate side that will still delay the fulfillment of this office for several chapters to come.

In the following chapter this passionate side of Hester's does not yet emerge into view but it does begin to give signs of its existence through the actions to which it prompts her. It is certainly Hester's still surviving love for Dimmesdale that makes

her try to rescue him from Chillingworth's grasp after she has witnessed the state of almost complete ruin to which the minister has been reduced. First she tries to persuade the doctor to forgive Dimmesdale and stop torturing him. As the doctor obviously refuses to give up an activity that has become his only means of intercourse with the world, Hester decides to withdraw her former promise not to reveal his identity to Dimmesdale. By making such a promise, after all, she acted falsely to and was thus responsible for the suffering of one to whom, because of her love, she was forbidden to do any evil. Once free from her vow, she is now ready to look for the minister and repair her past misdeed.

The two lovers' meeting takes us straight to Chapter XVII, the first of our two crucial chapters that are set in the forest. After the long period in which they have been separated by the agency of the Puritan system, it is with great difficulty that their connection now starts to be re-established. At first they stand "coldly shuddering, in mutual dread" (207). Then Dimmesdale extends his hand, "chill as death, and touch[es] the chill hand of Hester Prynne" (208). It is only after they have sat together for a while on a heap of moss that some timid conversation starts. The conversation gradually moves to the central concerns of their lives. Dimmesdale tells Hester about the great "agony of heart" that he has gone through during these seven years as a result of the violent contrast between his external appearance of holiness and his inner reality of sinfulness. He says that it would greatly relieve his soul if he had a friend, or even the

worst enemy, with whom he could share his black truth. This last statement, of course, gives Hester the very occasion to make her confession: that the enemy he is looking for lives in the same house with him and is her ex-husband. As she observes the effect that this revelation produces on the minister, for the first time she becomes fully aware of the serious injury that her concealment has caused him. The minister is seized with sudden anger and fierceness and says that he will not forgive her. But Hester cannot bear to have such bitterness come from the man "once, - nay, why should we not speak it? - still so passionately loved!" (211) In her next move indeed we begin to see all that passion which had remained dormant in her Puritan imprisonment coming to life again in the forest. "With sudden and desperate tenderness, she threw her arms around him, and pressed his head against her bosom; little caring though his cheek rested on the scarlet letter." This passion immediately releases Hester's mind from the narrow limits of Puritan ideology and enables it to encompass, if only for a short period, a plurality of meanings. Now the meaning attributed by the Puritans to Dimmesdale and herself suddenly ceases to dominate her whole consciousness and becomes merely a passing element within a wider and richer totality. As she holds Dimmesdale's head against her bosom, the minister vainly strives to get free. She will not release him for fear that he will once again look at her with an angry frown. During all these years, says the narrator, she had bravely survived the frown of all the world and even of Heaven. "But" - and the reader must note the modest position that the Puritans' favorite adjective now occupies among many others - "the frown of

this pale, weak, sinful, and sorrow-stricken man was what Hester could not bear, and live!" Most importantly, Hester cannot bear his frown because to her own mind he is, of course, in addition to all these things, sacred. "What we did," she says, "had a consecration of its own. We felt it so. We said so to each other. Hast thou forgotten it?" Here we find her mind in full imaginative operation, diffusing and dissipating static notions of the understanding in a desperate attempt to grasp the flow and the endless creation of reality. This imaginative energy is so intense that even Dimmesdale, with all the pressure of his rigid moral precepts, is swayed by her vision. To her question he answers, "Hush, Hester! ... No; I have not forgotten" (212).

But his empathy with Hester only lasts a brief moment, of course. He soon puts an end to this first symbolic area in Chapter XVII by fixing the focus again on the familiar things of his Puritan reality. He draws attention first to Chillingworth and the awful course that his revenge will take from now on, and then to the severe judgment of his Puritan God upon him, which is "too mighty for [him] to struggle with" (214). Yet Hester will not accept this reduction. Using all her rhetorical power, she tries somehow to impart to him the whole width and complexity that she sees in reality:

> "Is the world then so narrow?" ... "Doth the universe lie within the compass of yonder town, which only a little time ago was but a leaf-strewn desert, as lonely as this around us? Whither leads yonder forest-track? Backward to the settlement, thou sayest! Yes; but onward, too! Deeper it goes, and deeper, into the wilderness, less plainly to be seen at every step; until, some few miles hence,

> the yellow leaves will show no vestige of the white man's tread ...." (214)

In this passage we have a very faithful depiction of the kind of reality that Hester now inhabits. Hester attains freedom from the Puritan world not by completely erasing this world from her mind and plunging into the forest. Her position in the forest is one from which she can discern both the possibility of going back to the Puritan city and that of venturing deep into the wilderness. Here lies the freedom that her passion momentarily gives her and here lies her symbolic nature: in the movement between the different possibilities of life that she envisions and not in the complete exclusion of the Puritan possibility. So when the intensity of her passion leads her, at the end of the chapter, to urge the minister to run away with her, this should be viewed as just a stage in her symbolic movement and not as a final solution to her complex situation.

The next chapter begins with another of the narrator's incursions into Hester's mind. In Chapter XIII, as we saw above, he described her as one whose mental life had turned away from passion and feeling since she had been strongly influenced by the hard judgment of society upon her, so that there remained only a remote chance that she would ever again be capable of affection. Now, however, the narrator finds it necessary to make adjustments to his theory about a mind that has surprisingly become all passion and that is turning out to be the main source of symbolism in the novel. This time he is forced to conclude that Hester was not totally dominated by society's rigid view

after all. Living for so many years in almost complete isolation from society, he now believes, she not only was capable of looking at Puritan institutions with a detached and critical eye but, more importantly, she was able to preserve much of the original wildness of her nature from the rigidifying influence of the Puritan system. Had she occupied a more central position in society, she would certainly have been purged of all this rich and chaotic individuality and bound to the clear, public notions of the Puritans. In her peripheral position, however, she could wander,

> without rule or guidance, in a moral wilderness; as vast, as intricate and shadowy, as the untamed forest.... Her intellect and heart had their home, as it were, in desert places, where she roamed as freely as the wild Indian in his woods. (217)

Hester's world becomes particularly rich and intricate when contrasted to that of Dimmesdale, who "[has] never gone through an experience calculated to lead him beyond the scope of generally received laws" (217). The minister, having reached a leading position in Puritan society, is by now almost completely enslaved to the fixed notions and values generally shared by the Puritans. In his mind there has certainly remained very little of that untamed passion found in Hester which would lead him to transform the Puritans' rigid view of their union into a lively and ebullient confusion. In this chapter, of course, being under the irresistible influence of Hester's energy and being also far from his doctor's allegorizing eyes, he is not entirely incapable of imaginative operations. At the instant when he yields to Hester's pressure and decides to flee, he suddenly forgets the

obvious sinfulness that his escape would bear in the eyes of society, and the immediate result is that "a glow of strange enjoyment [throws] its flickering brightness over the trouble of his breast." Here we see him at a rare moment when he actually departs from the oppressive perspective that must always reduce wild passion to evil, and recovers this passion in its original wild and untamed form: as pure joy. This passion inevitably draws his attention to the equally wild forest around him, and for the first time his clear religious view of the forest as a place of sin gets confused. His joy, the narrator says, is the effect "of breathing the wild, free atmosphere of an unredeemed, unchristianized, lawless region." The forest is "unredeemed" and it is here, paradoxically enough, that "his spirit [rises] ... and attain[s] a nearer prospect of the sky, than throughout all the misery which had kept him grovelling on the earth" (219).

If the mere prospect of freedom can extract imagination from such a rigid and analytical creature as Dimmesdale, it is not hard to imagine what it can do to Hester, his very source of inspiration. Hester soon becomes so excited, indeed, that she tells the minister that all their Puritan past is gone and should not even be thought about anymore, for now they are already enjoying a new and free life. As if to prove the reality of what she says, she immediately takes the scarlet letter from her bosom and throws it away. Once free from her stigma, she heaves "a long, deep sigh, in which the burden of shame and anguish [depart] from her spirit." And here finally begins the "transfiguration" which the narrator had vaguely promised in Chapter XIII and which marks the culmination of Hester's symbolic

role in the novel. As she also removes the cap that confines her hair,

> down it fell upon her shoulders, dark and rich, with at once a shadow and a light in its abundance, and imparting the charm of softness to her features.... Her sex, her youth, and the whole richness of her beauty, came back from what men call the irrevocable past, and clustered themselves, with her maiden hope, and a happiness before unknown, within the magic circle of this hour. (220)

This passage depicts Hester at the moment when she most seriously threatens the clarity of the Puritan system. After years in which society strove to crush her individuality and to reduce her whole being to the word Adulteress, this unexpected resurgence of all her wild beauty represents an obvious defeat of the reductive effort and places Hester irresistibly in the realm of ambiguity. Faced with so much beauty, her observer now, even before thinking of Adulteress, is very likely to read her as Angel. He may also see her as Able, since she had so much power of resistance. If the reader is imaginative enough, he may in fact bring all her previous meanings together and pour them at once into this single appearance of Hester, since her richness and complexity here opens her to all of these and others.

The sudden rebirth of so much passion and beauty in Hester makes it inevitable that the forest should also be relieved of its Puritan gloom in order to join her mood. With its own transfiguration, the forest finally consolidates the symbolic status that it began to acquire through the vestigial imagination displayed by the minister, and thus completely breaks with its previous allegorical position. In Chapter XVI, as we saw in our

last chapter, the forest was presented in strict accordance with Puritan ideology, which saw it as a place of darkness and evil, in clear opposition to the city, which was all light and virtue. When Dimmesdale cast enraptured eyes about the still dark forest, the Puritan scheme was already beginning to be shaken because it was exactly in this unredeemed place that he had a holier sensation than in the whole of his previous city life. Now, however, the intensity of Hester's passion upsets the Puritan order altogether:

> All at once, as with a sudden smile of heaven, forth burst the sunshine, pouring a very flood into the obscure forest, gladdening each green leaf, transmuting the yellow fallen ones to gold, and gleaming adown the gray trunks of the solemn trees. (220)

As we can see, the heavenly sunshine that should be a privilege of the city is now also permitted to illuminate the forest. But what really happens here is that, in an oscillation that is typically symbolic, the forest embraces both this newly-acquired light and its old familiar obscurity. The narrator immediately adds,

> Such was the sympathy of Nature - that wild, heathen Nature of the forest, never subjugated by human law, *nor illumined by higher truth* - with the bliss of these two spirits! (220; italics mine)

It is apparent that we do not have here a decided rebellion against the perspective of the Puritan city which sees nature as dark and evil, but we are rather between the transgression and the submission to the original view. A decided transgression, in fact, would not even be desirable here, since the reduction of

the forest to the categories of light and good would forever remove us from the fluid reality of nature and passion and place us in a world as static as the Puritan city. Rather than this decidedly bright forest which in the end would be nothing but allegorical, what we and Hester now inhabit is a more complex forest which includes both the Puritan view and its opposite, an oscillating forest situated between light and dark, good and bad, which is all the more threatening to the authority of the city because it questions the very static categories upon which the city so essentially depends. This ambiguous forest is not very different from the one that surrounds the protagonist of that other story by Hawthorne which is also praised for its symbolism - "Young Goodman Brown." The story begins with the same clear-cut distinction between city and forest that we found in the novel: as the end of the day approaches, Goodman Brown must leave the village of light and purity in which he lives and venture into the dark and gloomy forest where he is momentarily tempted to do something evil. But once he is in the forest things soon become confused. At the witches' Sabbath in which he takes part or imagines to do so, it is not darkness that reigns throughout but rather a befuddling alternation between light and gloom that successively reveals the participants and hides them in shadow. As he looks at these participants, he recognizes the holiest and most reputable people of the village - the minister, the deacon, high dames and pure virgins - and finds them all mixed with men and women of tainted life and with Indian priests of the forest. It is in this uncertain world that Goodman Brown resides for a

while: a confusing world where "the good [shrink] not from the wicked, nor [are] the sinners abashed by the saints."[4] Like Hester's, his complex nature also leads him to encompass, in a dangerous movement, categories that the Puritan system would rather keep clearly separate from each other.

After Hester has generated so much tension and turmoil in the forest, it is not surprising that her energy should be diminished now and that we should soon be back at the static Puritan order. What really happens, however, is that the forest scene turns out to be the last symbolic moment in the novel and Hester never again recovers her former strength. The shift back to the Puritan world is announced right after the description of the transfiguration of the forest, when Hester suddenly decides to call Pearl to the place where she is sitting with Dimmesdale. For the rest of Chapter XVIII Pearl still remains playing with the animals and plants of the forest, but when she does come to Hester in the next chapter, she finally puts an end to the forest scene by demanding that Hester resume the scarlet letter. As soon as Hester does this, "her beauty, the warmth and richness of her womanhood, [depart], like fading sunshine; and a gray shadow seem[s] to fall across her" (228). From this point on Hester will be no more than an inoffensive, an ornamental image of sin.

And so, five chapters before the end of the novel, we are already forced to end our analysis, which - it must be remembered - only began as late as Chapter XII. Even if so small a part of the novel has been covered in this second analysis,

what we have gathered in the foregoing pages should be sufficient to show that there is much more to *The Scarlet Letter* than the naive reinforcement of abstract, static Puritan notions. In the previous chapter we had already seen Hawthorne occasionally go beyond this naivete by recognizing the artificiality of these notions and calling attention to the very allegorization to which he could not avoid subjecting his images. In this chapter we see him take a further step. Now it is his imagination that comes to the surface, to the detriment of his fancy, and disperses and confuses the clear notions of the Puritans in an attempt to recover the very wildness and fluidity from which the Puritan fixities were abstracted.

Most of this imaginative effort is centered upon Hester, the only character in the story that achieves a really dangerous level of complexity. It is from Hester that the other symbolic images in the story (chiefly the A and the forest) derive their symbolism. Hester represents a problem to the Puritan system because she is always threatening to bring back to the city that wild and chaotic nature which the Puritans violently remove from its sphere. She simply refuses to be fixed to the category that was reserved for her and keeps rather moving between disparate categories, this movement dangerously communicating itself to the surrounding city and to the novel. We find this confusing movement, for instance, in Chapter XIII, where people, at the very heart of the city, are disturbed by Hester's complexity and begin to read a chaotic multiplicity of meanings into the letter that was intended to be a clear sign of sin. We find it also in

Chapter XII, where it is Hester's presence, coupled with a light that is not daylight but a strange midnight light, which makes possible our view of her union with Dimmesdale as both good and evil and of the A as both Adulteress and Angel. We find it mostly, of course, in the forest chapters, where Hester's chaotic nature manifests itself most intensely.

In each case above, what we see is the intense activity of an imagination which tries to fuse disparate notions into a unity that can be grasped in a single instant of time. Since notions, however, are always bound to a discursive medium whose constituents are sequentially ordered, their synthesis can never be objectively achieved in the text but can only be forged by the reader who is imaginative enough to fuse the discrete words that he receives. Only by such an act of imagination is it possible to grasp the timeless unity beyond good and evil which Hester's movements seek to engender. In the absence of an imaginative response, no unity at all will result in the end but the reader will be left merely with the fragments of meaning which were used to produce it.

NOTES

[1] Henry James, *Hawthorne, Literary Criticism*, ed. Leon Edel (New York: The Library of America, 1984) 408. This is an exceptional moment in James's book in which he deals with the symbolic aspect of *The Scarlet Letter*. For the most part he is concerned rather with censuring Hawthorne for the mechanical and allegorical quality in his works. Most critics now believe that James was in fact *using* Hawthorne to affirm himself as a writer closer to the "realistic" tradition that uses the symbol as a means of expression than to the more abstract one that uses allegory.

[2] Matthiessen, *American Renaissance* 276.

[3] James 408.

[4] Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Young Goodman Brown," The Scarlet Letter *and Selected Tales*, ed. Thomas Connolly (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986) 325.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In this study I have tried to describe two contradictory discursive trends which are present in *The Scarlet Letter* and which account for much of the complexity of this novel's meaning. One of these discourses, as we have seen, is much more visible than the other and tends to reflect the traditional, eighteenth-century way of thinking that naively reduces all reality to the static and clearly ordered notions of language. The allegorical discourse tries to make the whole novel into a logical and simplified unity of meaning; it manipulates the novel's various images - the characters, the setting, the letter A - so that they will point to *one* clear statement: the old Puritan doctrine that adultery is bad. The other, less widespread discourse, on the other hand, tends to bring the novel towards the more modern approach that sees static notions not as ultimate realities but merely as rigidified fragments of a living and total reality which needs desperately to be reconstituted. The symbolic discourse tries to bring many heterogeneous notions together in such a way as to make these notions lose their rigidity and merge into a rich and complex unity of meaning. It is basically on Hester that the efforts to achieve such a unity are centered. Hester is obviously a special case among the characters in the story. Whereas the others are very superficial images that represent a single, clear-cut notion, as they must necessarily do in order to suit the didactic purpose of the allegory, Hester

displays the variety, ambivalence, and internal contradiction which makes her the richest character in the novel. Hester is not so clearly an adulteress as Dimmesdale is an adulterer or Chillingworth a demonic scientist. She is somehow *both* adulteress *and* angel *and* affection *and* more. Through her the symbolic discourse tries to modify disparate notions about love into a new and complex whole which, despite the temporal discontinuity that characterizes language, can be simultaneously perceived. It tries to produce "unity in multeity," and not the more reductive sort of unity rendered by allegory which violently excludes multeity.

I have thus included in this analysis two discourses that move in diametrically opposed directions and whose tension definitively complicates the meaning of Hawthorne's text. An alternative procedure, a more tempting one since it would have made the novel easier to handle, would have been to consider only the predominant side - the allegorical one - and discard the other, minor aspect as mere "noise." Against this more comfortable alternative, however, several objections could be raised. Lest my own choice should give the impression of having been too hastily made, let us now consider a few of these objections in some detail.

The first and most obvious argument that could be made against the allegorical choice is that if we looked solely at allegory we would be neglecting the rich totality of the novel and taking only a part of it into account. We would be committing the same old crime of *reduction* so often referred to in previous chapters - in this case the violent reduction of the novel to one of its trends. Such an argument would probably be endorsed by

most contemporary authorities on critical theory. Roland Barthes, for example, has made repeated attacks on the sort of criticism that insists on discovering a single trend in a particular text and transforming it into a final interpretation. This procedure should be avoided, he believes, because it limits the possibilities of meaning in the text, which are endless. What the critic should do instead is to try to locate different trends in the text, or rather - to use Barthes's own terminology - different *codes* of reading which will enable interpretation to move in different directions - and not to exclude any of them. He should leave these codes undecided so as to enter into and "live the plurality of the text."[1]

Another reason for not siding with allegory is that in doing so we would be *reifying* the sort of meaning rendered by allegory, a meaning whose artificiality is indicated not only by the symbolic discourse but sometimes by the allegorical as well. The symbol, as I said before, arousing our interest in the rich and ambiguous reality of the imagination, leads us to see the clear, one-sided notions of allegory no longer as real objects but merely as empty shadows artificially abstracted from reality. The allegorical discourse, as we saw in Chapter III, also acknowledges the illusive nature of its notions in a few scattered but important passages such as the one in which the highly allegorical Chillingworth admits that the category to which he belongs - that of a devil - is ultimately an illusion and is made to seem real only by a dark necessity. It would be extremely unwise of us, then, to reinforce a simplified meaning

that we know to be basically false. If we were to take any sides at all in this conflict, it is rather the symbol that would deserve our preference, since its complex meaning transcends and encompasses that of allegory, the symbol thus functioning as a criticism of allegorical limitations.

But perhaps the strongest argument against the allegorical choice is this: that we cannot be absolutely certain that if we chose allegory we would really be choosing the *predominant* trend in the novel. When we say that allegory is predominant, we are in fact using the most obvious criterion for our decision - the criterion of *quantity*. We are considering that the allegorical areas are by far more numerous and larger than the symbolic ones and on this basis we are assigning allegory a central position in the novel. But such a basis is by no means necessarily privileged. We might, for instance, by an equally plausible criterion of *intensity*, conclude that it is rather the symbolic trend that predominates. We might argue that the forest scene alone is more powerful and intense than all the allegorical scenes put together and more than compensates for their numerical superiority, thus bringing the symbol to the center of interest. Since neither of these criteria can be conclusively assigned a privileged status, it is better not to make any choices at all but merely accept the two contradictory trends displayed by the novel. In this case, reference to Roland Barthes will again confirm us in this direction. When Barthes says that the critic cannot choose one code against the other, he is not just paying tribute to the infinite plurality of the text. He regards the codes as "undecidable" also (and above all) because of the very

relativity of any criterion that will establish this or that code as the most important and thus as the "true" one. As he himself states,

> Undecidability is ... a structural condition of narration: there is no unequivocal determination of the enunciation: in an utterance, several codes and several voices are there, without priority.[2]

If neither symbol nor allegory are to be discarded, then, how will the co-presence of these two forces in tension affect our apprehension of the novel as a whole? In previous chapters it was pointed out that the attempt made by the symbolic discourse to bring disparate notions together leads ultimately not to the organic unity originally intended but, owing to the inescapable linearity of language which keeps different elements at separate points of time, solely to a collection of unreconciled fragments. When the novel is taken in its totality, this fragmentation is only reinforced: if the text displays two opposite discourses that could never be reconciled, it becomes definitively impossible to read it as a unified, cohesive whole. What we have in the end is neither the simplified unity of allegory nor the more complex unity of the symbol but rather a multitude of scattered meanings that is an inevitable consequence of the collision between these two contradictory discourses. We can finally see the text as an allegory whose reductive view of reality is repeatedly questioned by a symbolism that discerns, beyond the *one* established meaning of allegory, the possibility of different and even opposite meanings. What the symbol tries to do, of course, is to bring all its meanings together into a

single whole; what it actually manages to do is to deconstruct the allegorical discourse by questioning the predominance of the allegorical meaning and by introducing pluralism into the novel. It succeeds in doing this in spite of the narrator's attempt to privilege allegory at the end of the novel. We have seen that after several oscillations between allegory and symbolism, the narrator's final decision is in favor of the reductive unity proposed by allegory and against the symbolic possibilities: in Chapter XXIII he lets the minister reveal his awful "truth" to the community and in the Conclusion he makes Hester resume the A in final resignation to the Puritan interpretation. Yet once they have been suggested by the symbol, the other meanings are always already incorporated into the reality of the novel and become everywhere present in it. In this wider reality the allegorical meaning inevitably loses its position of dominance and becomes merely one among the multiple meanings that the novel now possesses.

What this conflict of discourses finally yields, then, is *radical* ambiguity. The reader is confronted with a text that articulates itself basically around the passion that has united two people and yet will not give him a clear meaning in which the essence of this passion would somehow be contained. It suggests instead many different meanings for this passion so that in the end the reader is no longer interested in a final meaning but in the very richness of possibilities that presents itself to him. *The Scarlet Letter* in fact displays that ceaseless production of meanings which Roland Barthes associates with all good literature

and especially with the modern text.[3] The novel refuses to impose a finished message that the reader would passively consume and encourages him instead to actually produce the text by freely exploring its semantic possibilities. The result of this activity uniting text and reader is that the novel acquires not just several or even many fixed meanings but an unlimited plurality of meanings. It becomes open, in other words, to the potential infinity of associations which can be established among the elements of discourse and which renders the number of possible meanings also infinite. This radical ambiguity is ultimately what accounts for the fact that *The Scarlet Letter* continues to have such a power to hold people's interest more than a century after its publication; it is no doubt what underlies the "mysterious" quality which readers constantly experience in the novel and which makes them return to it again and again. It also explains why many of these readers, each one paradoxically betraying the very spirit of the novel, have produced such a large amount of one-sided, reductive interpretations.

NOTES

[1] Roland Barthes, "Textual Analysis of Poe's 'Valdemar'," trans. Geoff Bennington, *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young (Boston: Routledge & Kegan, 1981) 135-41.

[2] Barthes 158.

[3] Barthes, "Theory of the Text," trans. Ian McLeod, *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader* 41-42.

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