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Reviewed work(s):
Source: ELH, Vol. 49, No. 4 (Winter, 1982), pp. 863-888
Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/2872902
Accessed: 08/12/2011 09:18

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FAMILY DISCOURSE AND FICTION IN
THE SCARLET LETTER

BY MICHAEL RAGUSSIS

"Speak; and give your child a father!"¹

Hawthorne and his characters imagine speech as an act of potency. But the ban of silence lies on everyone in The Scarlet Letter. The act of speech is baffled during the entire course of the tale, suppressed from without and repressed from within, until the confession at the end when the minister comes forth to speak and turns into the father. I must add immediately that the source of what I am calling the ban of silence lies not where we might suppose, with the Puritan censors: in fact, the Puritans issue the command to speak, calling Hester forward to utter the name of her fellow transgressor. The paralyzing silence in The Scarlet Letter originates with its four family members, in such acts as Hester’s refusal to name Pearl’s father, or Chillingworth’s command that Hester swear an oath of silence, or Hester’s refusal to explain to Pearl the meaning of the scarlet letter. With the acts of engendering and speech under lock and key, silence becomes a kind of action, potent to obscure, violate, and orphan. The tale’s center, then, lies less in the crime of sexual transgression than in the crime of silence: to recognize publicly one’s kindred is, after all, the moral concomitant to engendering, the way in which family is defined not merely biologically but morally. My examination of the silence that prevents those acts of speech that name and identify the family member leads logically, in the second half of this essay, to the question of how fiction is a mode of discourse based on the family. I do not mean simply that fiction is a language enlisted from the outside to tell what the family will not tell, but that fiction is a revision of those acts of speech and silence whereby the family makes and unmakes itself.

The way in which Hester’s refusal to speak Dimmesdale’s name in the marketplace frustrates her simple desire to protect him, and then threatens her child and herself, dramatizes most clearly the dangerous effects of silence. In Dimmesdale’s call to Hester to name her fellow criminal ("What can thy silence do for him, except it tempt him—yea, compel him, as it were—to add hypocrisy to
sin?” [iii, 53]) and in his description of the pain of hiding a guilty heart through life, we see how Hester’s silence becomes a curious punishment more than equal to what the Puritan authorities would require of her lover. In Pearl’s apparently tautological description of herself, “I am mother’s child” (viii, 81), we see a half-truth, actually a dangerous misunderstanding that means there is no father: the mother’s silence is an analogue of what we usually take to be the stern Puritan censor, misinforming the child by obscuring the act of engendering. Finally, when Hester later wonders where Pearl came from (even to the point of denying the child is her own), we see how her refusal to name the father grows into self-mystification, robbing her of her motherhood notwithstanding the fact that she has a child. Adultery is a crime against society, but Hester’s silence begins to look like a crime against nature. The child engendered by one parent alone and the virgin mother are not members of the human family as we know it.

The ban of silence appropriately begins when all four family members are brought together for the first time. The first act that the reader sees Chillingworth perform is an act that silences another: the physician raises his finger and lays it on his lips, gesturing Hester not to reveal his identity. This gesture of silence precedes, only by moments, Hester’s crucial act in the same chapter: “Madame Hester absolutely refuseth to speak” (iii, 49). Hester’s silence is, of course, meant to protect Dimmesdale, but Hawthorne begins at this point to show us a strange complicity between the two men. At first, of course, Dimmesdale seems Chillingworth’s opposite because the minister appears to be asking Hester to reveal his identity, to name him as her fellow criminal. But Dimmesdale’s speech is equal to Chillingworth’s silence. He calls on Hester to speak, but he delights in her silence: “Wondrous strength and generosity of a woman’s heart! She will not speak!” (iii, 54). Hester’s silence, then, hides the identities of both men, or what amounts to the same thing in this text, their familial relationship to her and her child. At the same time this silence begins a new bond: silence obfuscates the differences between husband and lover. The two are one in their single desire—to have the woman remain silent.

The events I have just described Hawthorne places side by side in the chapter shrewdly entitled “The Recognition.” Hawthorne has in mind here the Aristotelian idea of anagnorisis, or “the change from ignorance to knowledge of a bond of love or hate.”

864

The Scarlet Letter
The Scarlet Letter the obfuscated and persistently delayed recognition of enemy and kindred—another way, for both Hawthorne and Aristotle, of putting the dichotomy between “hatred and love” (xxiv, 193)—is the source of the prolonged suffering of each of the family members. In this light the entire narrative of The Scarlet Letter depends on whatever hinders or hastens the central issue from the start—“Speak out the name!” (iii, 54). In “The Recognition” no recognitions are made public, and even those that occur are unrealized in the deepest sense. When Dimmesdale requests that Hester speak the name of Pearl’s father, for example, the power of his voice almost gives him away to his child, “for it [the poor baby] directed its hitherto vacant gaze towards Mr. Dimmesdale, and held up its little arms” (iii, 53). But the blood-bond is not publicly recognized. It is instead painfully pictured in the child’s helpless gesture toward her hidden father. The child unable to speak is at the mercy of adult hypocrisy, false words and names. In fact the chapter closes with a silencing of the child that, with Hester’s silence over Dimmesdale and Chillingworth, brings all four family members under the same tragic cover of silence: “The infant . . . pierced the air with its wailings and screams; she [Hester] strove to hush it, mechanically, but seemed scarcely to sympathize with its trouble” (iii, 54).

“The Recognition” ends with mother and child once again disappearing behind the “iron-clamped portal” (iii, 54) of the Puritan jail, but now we understand the way in which the self is incarcerated within the walls of its own silence. The text deliberately connects silence and symbolic imprisonment, explaining how Chillingworth possesses “the lock and key of her [Hester’s] silence” (ix, 87-88). Hester is imprisoned in this way in “The Interview” (the chapter following “The Recognition”), where the power of speech is subverted, to be used in the service of silence. Chillingworth replaces the blood-bond with the “secret bond” not to speak—Hester’s slavish bondage, her “oath” (iv, 59) to silence. The prison of silence is equal to his repetition of the suffocating command “Breathe not” (iv, 59). The silence Hester keeps in order to protect her lover merges with the silence that prevents him from discovering the identity of his worst enemy. If speech is the medium for recognizing the difference between kindred and enemy, silence dissolves the difference between the real father and the evil father-surrogate or “enemy” (xiii, 116). The family drama of The Scarlet Letter is played out between the subverted recognitions I

Michael Ragussis 865
have just described and the recognition scene that occurs between child and father at the end. But, as I will show in the following pages, with a child consistently hushed, and educated in the family language by her mother and the Puritan authorities, and with a father who, even when he speaks the truth, transforms it into falsehood, the denouement of the tale is delayed.  

The crying infant hushed mechanically by its mother becomes the child learning to speak, but in this apparent progression we learn how the methods of silence are merely refined. When Mr. Wilson asks Pearl who she is, he seems to be rephrasing, without the sharp edge of command, the earlier declaration that Hester speaks. But we soon see that the apparently open question is a disguised command to answer by the book. The question of the child's identity is persistently reshaped by an inevitable corollary: Mr. Wilson first asks Pearl "who art thou?" and then "Canst thou tell me, my child, who made thee?" (viii, 81, 83). It is essentially the same question asked Hester, but now Mr. Wilson wants a different answer—not the earthly father, but the Heavenly Father. In this way Mr. Wilson inadvertently contributes to Hester's hiding of the father. The child is viewed as the product of a mysterious and contradictory process in which her maker is either spiritual or biological, or—worse—indiscriminately both. In Pearl's case, both answers are incomprehensible; both fathers are absent, invisible, bodiless.

Pearl's refusal to name "the Heavenly Father" as her maker is, stated baldly, a refusal to name Him, the unnameable source of her being, that "Creator of all Flesh" (viii, 85) who is fleshless himself. The Heavenly Father here seems at once an idealized and ironic double of the earthly father who neglects to name Pearl, and who, after engendering her, disappears from the flesh. She might as well invent her identity, since she seems an invention, a fanciful unreality: "the child finally announced that she had not been made at all, but had been plucked by her mother off the bush of wild roses, that grew by the prison-door" (viii, 83). The fatherless and lawless child appropriately provides her own genealogy according to no law we can understand, as if she were a freak of nature, either engendered by one parent alone or plucked from a rose bush.

Pearl's mother questions the child's origin by repeating the pattern of Mr. Wilson's questions: "Tell me, then, what thou art, and who sent thee hither" (vi, 74). The mother's puzzlement over who made the child—Pearl's own identity is consistently displaced in
the search for another's—reaches its farthest point when Hester questions even the immediate and visible bond that is the child's only certain knowledge: "Child, what art thou? . . . Art thou my child, in very truth?" (vi, 73). Hester actually disowns Pearl "half playfully" in what must be a bad joke: "Thou art not my child!" (vi, 73). Both father and mother, then, deny Pearl her source. For these reasons the name the mother bestows, the child's other source of certain identity, becomes the locus of abuse and displacement, and a way of disqualifying Pearl's human nature, for even Pearl's mother "could not help questioning whether Pearl was a human child" (vi, 69). Pearl is identified through a series of "ill name[s]" (xxii, 174) that place in quarantine the child who is so avoided she must be considered contagious: she is a "demon offspring" (xxiv, 184), an "imp of evil" (vi, 70), an "airy sprite" and a "little elf" (vi, 69). We will momentarily see that what Pearl suffers—not being allowed a human name because of her mysterious origin—Chillingworth wills for himself (without realizing the consequences) when he "chose to withdraw his name from the roll of mankind" (ix, 88). Finally, unnamed by her father and ill-named by the community, the child is renamed by Mr. Wilson. He objects to the child's answer to his question "who are thou?" by arguing with her name: judging by appearances she should be named "Ruby" or "Coral" or "Red Rose"—more names that deny her a human engendering. Such are the liberties taken with an unnamed bastard: Mr. Wilson knows better than the child who made her and knows the child's proper name. Pearl's life is specified far outside herself, and her name seems an ironic tease. Mr. Wilson calls her "my child" (has he made her?), but she appears to belong to no one. As a bastard, she is a counterfeit pearl, disowned by father and mother alike.

The questions that both Mr. Wilson and Hester direct at Pearl, and the ironic corrections of the child's name, are part of an educative system that confounds the issue of personal identity. The social authorities, as I have already implied, "analyze . . . the child's nature" to find the perpetrator of the crime she represents, and "put the child to due and stated examination" (viii, 86) solely to prove and insure their own beliefs. In such ways the child's life is posited outside itself, and questioned from the outside by a catechism whose questions are hypocritical at worst, rhetorical at best. The child-puppet must give another's answers: Pearl's "one baby-voice served a multitude of imaginary personages" (vi, 71). Pearl's at-

Michael Ragussis 867
tempt to ask her own questions is limited by a system that allows only two kinds of questions—those that have a priori answers (like "the Heavenly Father") and those that should not be asked at all: "There are many things in this world that a child must not ask about." Nevertheless Pearl appears in the text, time and again, as an almost disembodied string of questions that have been prohibited: "[S]he put these searching questions, once, and again, and still a third time . . . What does the letter mean?—and why dost thou wear it?—and why does the minister keep his hand over his heart?" (xv, 130). Such questions are part of the child's native understanding that it is her prerogative to ask, and that the mother (not the child) should explain the scarlet letter: "It is thou that must tell me!" "Tell me, mother! . . . Do thou tell me!" (vi, 74). When Hester answers that she wears the scarlet letter "for the sake of its gold thread," the narrator marks one of those turning points in the text where the ostensible crime (the sexual transgression) shrinks beside a more profound one: "In all the seven bygone years, Hester Prynne had never before been false to the symbol on her bosom. . . . [S]ome new evil had crept into her heart, or some old one had never been expelled" (xv, 130).

The lie about the letter is so serious because it breaks the sacred bond through which the mother teaches the child the alphabet that articulates her identity and her place in the human community. Hester is, in the educative system I am describing, the teacher of the mother tongue, as Pearl herself acknowledges—"It is the great letter A. Thou hast taught it me in the hornbook" (xv, 128). Hester's refusal to inform the child of the letter's greater, or at least special, significance makes the child fail her examination in the simplest of categories, the ABC's of who she is. Hester's final answer to Pearl's questions is a command to be silent, which equals shutting the child away—"Hold thy tongue . . . else I shall shut thee into the dark closet!" (xv, 131)—returning her to the dark unknown from which she came, denying her here and now, refusing her any existence at all. Not allowed her own questions, kept from the meaning of the letter A, Pearl is reduced either to a perverse silence (self-hushed with a vengeance) or to an incomprehensible language unable to bear or articulate the burden of her pain and rage: a "perversity . . . closed her lips, or impelled her to speak words amiss . . . putting her finger in her mouth" (viii, 83); "If spoken to, she would not speak again," or would rush forth "with shrill, incoherent exclamations that made her mother tremble, because they had so
much the sound of a witch's anathemas in some unknown tongue” (vi, 71).

The child’s relentless but unsatisfied questions, and the mother’s taunting questions and answers about the letter, tease Pearl to the quick because, as Hawthorne insists, the child is in fact “the scarlet letter endowed with life!” (vii, 76). Pearl is a baffling linguistic equation come alive: “She had been offered to the world, these seven years past, as the living hieroglyphic, in which was revealed the secret they so darkly sought to hide,—all written in this symbol,—all plainly manifest,—had there been a prophet or magician skilled to read the character of flame!” (xix, 148). The letter shows Pearl as a contradiction, a language whose meaning is at once self-apparent and mystifyingly in need of being read by another. With Pearl as the letter, Hawthorne chooses to show us the most painful way in which the self depends upon another—namely, through the child who carries her own meaning conceived as another’s. Pearl is divided from the meaning she is equal to—whether staring at the mirroring brook, experiencing herself as another (as if her identity resides in a mysteriously impalpable image outside herself), or trying to understand her life conceived as a linguistic equation whose first term—the letter A—she is unable to read, and worse still, not allowed to read. The child’s identity is conceived as another’s: that is, as a letter, she is a clue to the full reading of another’s identity—A is an abbreviation for Adultery, even for Arthur, while the first two letters of adultery are the initials of the father. Pearl, as the first initial of some hidden word or name, is an abbreviated form of her father, just as the face she sees in the mirroring brook (as Dimmesdale fears) traces her father’s features and is thereby capable of revealing him as Hester’s fellow transgressor. Finally, Pearl is a living hieroglyphic or abbreviation because she is made out of her parents’ linguistic half-truths and deceptions. To deny the facts of Pearl’s biological making, to deny that she is their own child, is to transform her into a disembodied linguistic conundrum, as Hester’s experience shows: “the mother felt like one who has evoked a spirit, but, by some irregularity in the process of conjuration, has failed to win the master-word that should control this new and incomprehensible intelligence” (vi, 70). Hester sees herself as a wizard-scientist who fails to understand the monster-spirit she has conjured, but she (like the father) has in her own keeping the master-word that will make Pearl human.

The letter as an unreadable abbreviation of a human life is the
most appropriate sign of Pearl's half-life because a letter or a child
is, in isolation, a sign divorced from meaning, in need of definition
through others. A letter and a child are trapped in a past each is
ignorant of, a history of meanings that in turn delimit individual
meaning, my meaning. Each depends upon an authorizing context
which, in Pearl's case, is hidden. For this reason Pearl, like a sym-
monic letter, becomes a battleground of meaning—between parents,
society, and heaven. Pearl has only a representative meaning: she is
"meant, above all things else, to keep the mother's soul alive." In
fact Pearl is a prize to be won, a bargain between two beings out-
side herself, a middle term, even a test case. Her daughter is sup-
poused to remind Hester that "if she bring the child to heaven, the
child also will bring its parent thither!" (viii, 85). But for the
mother, Pearl is as well a constant reminder of her sin and shame,
just as for the father who fears he will be traced in his child's
features, Pearl is the only visible clue that links him to his crime.
Because the child—like the scarlet letter—is the public sign of their
most private acts, the parents try to obscure its meaning by hushing
it or simply refusing it, denying that it is their own. Such acts
become criminal when we realize the way in which meaning be-
comes human, the way in which the child is the letter endowed
with life.

When we are told, "in this one child there were many children"
(vi, 68), we see the statement means two things: first, that Pearl is
divided from herself, splintered; and second, that the child, the
character at the center of the text, is a multiple reflection of all the
characters in The Scarlet Letter. The child, reduced to a mere
fleshless symbol of itself (like the image of Pearl in the brook, or the
ghostly disembodiments that Dimmesdale and Hester undergo), is
a helpless creature in another's control—denied meaning by others
(mastered by another's master-words and silences), living in fear of
the incomprehensibility of another. At the same time, the process of
conjunction, like that of engendering, shows us that the creator's
magic backfires. The control we think we exert over another often
produces a new, incomprehensible, and uncontrollable intelli-
gence. Hence Pearl is a "deadly symbol" (xix, 151), the letter that
killeth. Pearl's mere gaze at the letter on her mother's breast, for
example, is "like the stroke of sudden death" (vi, 73). In the person
of the child the letter becomes a vengeful literalism that strikes
through guise and deceit. For the child, despite all the methods of
parental and societal control exerted on it, represents an alien other

870 The Scarlet Letter
to be feared, and one who—though we may deny it—we in fact produce ourselves.

To move from Pearl’s fate to Dimmesdale’s is to see how one depends on the other. But the child owns us as much as we own it: the father cannot be himself until he acknowledges his child. Dimmesdale’s identity, too, rests on a linguistic deadlock that makes for the durance, and duration, of the tale. On the one hand, neither Pearl’s nor Chillingworth’s guesses, nor Hester’s betrayal of his name, will solve the riddle of the father’s identity. The father must speak for himself. On the other hand, Dimmesdale’s life fluctuates between two linguistic poles—between asking another to speak for him and speaking for another; this makes solving the riddle impossible. I take this characteristic of Dimmesdale’s speech to be the central symptom of a “disorder in his utterance” (xx, 156) that Chillingworth, for all his probing of the minister’s illness, fails to recognize. By asking another to speak for him and thereby name him, Dimmesdale childishly places his identity outside himself, at the mercy of another. Hester of course protects him, and refuses his plea to name her fellow transgressor, but even she eventually tries renaming him (the way Mr. Wilson tries changing Pearl into “Ruby”). She does not realize that to “give up this name of Arthur Dimmesdale, and make thyself another . . . thou canst wear” (xvii, 142), would be to make the minister more lost to himself, and one step closer to another “wearer” (ix, 87) of false names, Roger Chillingworth. When not asking another to name him, Dimmesdale himself speaks for another: speaking for Hester (she later commands him, “Speak thou for me!” [viii, 84]) is like speaking for his flock generally, or for his God. In this way Dimmesdale becomes a selfless medium, his own voice in another’s body or someone else’s voice in his body. Such transgressions, meant to hide his crime, only repeat it. As “the mouth-piece of Heaven’s messages” (xi, 105), he is like the puppet-child, a linguistic tool given up to represent another’s meaning. In fact, just as Pearl is equal to the scarlet letter, Dimmesdale is equal to his voice, to his utterance. While Dimmesdale rightly wonders “that Heaven should see fit to transmit the grand and solemn music of its oracles through so foul an organ-pipe as he” (xx, 160), Hawthorne makes the equation clear. It is not simply mouth, throat, or tongue that Heaven takes over as its conduit, but the whole man, “he.” And yet the minister’s function as a medium is a useful hiding place that obviates his speaking for himself, being his own person. The father actually courts obfuscation

Michael Ragussis 871
and misrepresentation, and turns those acts that endanger the child—being unnamed or misread or silenced—to his own purposes. His utterances are part of a system of counterspeech where even the truth becomes a hiding place, a deception: “The minister well knew—subtle, but remorseful hypocrite that he was!—the light in which his vague confession would be viewed. . . . He had spoken the very truth, and transformed it into the veriest falsehood” (xi, 106). To speak double, to intend the opposite of what your words say, repeats the strategy behind his request that Hester reveal his identity.

Such speech acts, like his passion, “hurrieth him out of himself” (x, 101), and thereby show his complete confusion over self and other. The minister eventually moves to the opposite extreme, and by speaking only to himself he literalizes—and unwittingly parodies—the idea of speaking for himself. He imagines speeches (in “The Minister’s Vigil” and “The Minister in a Maze”) that are in fact never spoken. The self makes itself an audience and attempts recognition without the aid of another. These speeches, spoken only on the inside, completely dispense with other people and divide the self in two—that is, they make Dimmesdale “another” in yet another way. They are a narcissistic self-communication, a misconstrued lesson learned from Dimmesdale’s sexual transgression, a false antidote to intercourse with another. Speech, like the self it grounds, has become mere hallucination, mere fantasy. The father works himself like a puppet.

The equivocal status of Dimmesdale’s identity—the way in which he seems both to court obfuscation and yet to suffer from the very acts of speech that make him over into another—is most sharply expressed when he poses for the entire community the “riddle” (ii, 49) of Oedipal identity. In the marketplace Dimmesdale, like Oedipus, calls for the solution of the crime he himself has committed. Knowing that he is the man everyone (himself included) seeks, he is at once a criminal and a hypocrite, a knowing Oedipus. Nonetheless his knowledge of his own identity turns out to be, in substantial ways, incomplete: he, like the child, depends on another. Dimmesdale does not realize that the physician is cast, in this complicated family drama, in the role of the minister’s father, with the old man’s feigned “paternal and reverential love for the young pastor” (ix, 93) an ironic echo of the true father’s refusal to come forth and love Pearl. Dimmesdale’s accusation of Chillingworth, the father-substitute—“You speak in riddles” (x, 100)—
names the crime he himself commits. What Pearl suffers—the painful riddle of the father’s identity—is now turned on him. He has a “nameless horror” (xii, 114) of the father-substitute whose namelessness becomes the source of a deadly riddle; “he could not recognize his enemy” (x, 96) in a drama where he withholds recognition from his own flesh-and-blood kin.4

Neither Dimmesdale nor Chillingworth realizes that the self disguised, the self that prevents another from recognizing it, is the self lost through the very process of self-defense. Dimmesdale’s double failure—to recognize Pearl and to recognize Chillingworth—is part of a single confusion: the deliberate failure to recognize one’s kindred merges with the involuntary failure to discover the enemy. When Chillingworth catches in the mirror a grotesquely evil image of himself “which he could not recognize” (xiv, 124), he doubly represents Dimmesdale—neither man can recognize the leech, neither man can recognize himself (as the enemy). The attack against the simple and easily identifiable enemy becomes the attack against the family member, and ultimately self-attack. The question about the enemy (Dimmesdale asks about Chillingworth, “Who is he? Who is he?” [xii, 114]) merges with the question about oneself (Chillingworth asks about Dimmesdale, “Who is he?” [iv, 58]). It is the same question asked about the child, the same question I ask about myself—and for this reason it is first asked in the autobiographical sketch as the question Hawthorne’s forefathers ask about him (“What is he?” [12]), and therefore as the motivating force of Hawthorne’s entire fiction.

The father’s refusal to recognize his real child leads to his production of a mock child—to his engendering the enemy in and by himself. In this light Pearl (the child) and Chillingworth (the enemy) play a similar role. Both seek to expose Dimmesdale’s secret: both ask him leading questions, both frighten him, both riddle him (see, for example, Pearl’s teasing mock exposure of Chillingworth’s identity in an unknown tongue that puzzles her father [xii, 114]). But who is Chillingworth anyway, and why do his questions often coincide with Pearl’s? The man “Chillingworth” comes into being only because of Dimmesdale’s and Hester’s passion: he is as much their child as the unclaimed Pearl. In fact, as the leech, he is the man completely and grotesquely “dependent for the food of his affections and spiritual life upon another” (xxiv, 183), a child dependent on Dimmesdale for the pound of flesh he exacts. Or to put it another way: the “devil” (xiv, 122) Chillingworth is an exam-

Michael Ragussis
ple of the guilty offspring produced by men who “propagate a hellish breed within them[elves]” (x, 98). The question asked Pearl “who made thee?” Chillingworth asks about himself, mystified by the new demonic identity he sees in the mirror: “Who made me so?” (xiv, 125). But while the text persuasively shows how the self is dependent on another, Chillingworth functions as a limit to this idea: he is responsible for himself (even as he allows himself to become completely dependent on Dimmesdale). One could argue that the two men reciprocally produce each other: like Dimmesdale’s guilt, Chillingworth’s revenge produces the enemy. The real child Pearl is lost among the shadow-children produced in these mock engenderings. But then Pearl learns to play the same game: she engenders her own dummy “offspring,” “puppets” who are nameless and passive victims held in the child-parent’s power. The child repeats the way in which she is displaced—through mock engendering and the view of the offspring as the “enem[y]” (vi, 71-72).

The family member frames and limits my life, but in what sense he assumes the publicly recognized, or even literal, relationship of kindred is another matter; he is a sign, like A, with too many significations. Family titles, one could argue, are linguistic shifters, like the pronoun “he” that alternately represents Dimmesdale, Chillingworth, and Hawthorne himself: they relativize the single substantial name (which, in this text, is already a ghostly sign, if not a downright lie). The titles “parent” and “child,” for example, shift both literally (the text carefully shows us both Hester and Dimmesdale as children by showing us their parents) and symbolically (with Chillingworth as the product of Hester’s and Dimmesdale’s passion, or of Dimmesdale’s guilt; with Hester as Dimmesdale’s mother, when he walks with “the wavering effort of an infant, with its mother’s arms in view” [xxiii, 177]; with Pearl as the parent of her play-offspring, or an “authority” over Hester and Dimmesdale [xix, 149]). The family’s acts of silence unwittingly bring such meanings to the surface, and reveal that the deepest family discourse—not the one the world finds acceptable—casts the family member in every role, including that of enemy. The letter of the law tries to control such meanings, to fix such titles as “father” and “husband” and “child,” but the scarlet letter, as it exhausts the single meaning the law attaches to it, exhausts such controls generally. It is the badge every family member wears.

The sexual act lies outside the narrative not because of some
peculiar Puritanical censor at work in Hawthorne, but because the family itself redefines engenderment. Hawthorne shows the family as the creator of its own system of suppression, torture, and violation. This is the deepest meaning of engenderment in The Scarlet Letter—the violation and death the family makes for itself. In The Scarlet Letter, the family sees fall before its own eyes the mythology that divides enemy from kindred, other from self—a mythology that every family makes itself. In this light the search after the identity of Pearl’s father, after his proper name and the child’s, is foiled not simply because of the particular acts of secrecy and deception performed by particular family members, but because it is in the nature of families, and the self they define, not to allow such literal, fixed, or single names. For such reasons the text postpones through its entirety answering the literal questions the community asks. Who is the father, or for that matter, who the child? What is the crime, and who the criminal? Who is he?

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The foregoing discussion of silence and speech, and of parent and child, is open to the charge of being incomplete. I have neglected Dimmesdale’s confession, the speech that gives the child her father. Moreover, I have neglected to say that the acts of silence (and counterspeech) that make up the action of the tale are anticipated and framed by the author’s own analogous acts. In the first sentence of the text Hawthorne is “taken possession of,” against his natural instincts and perhaps better judgment, by an autobiographical urge to speak. At the beginning of “The Custom-House” he hesitates and cautions himself in a stop-and-start-again style almost paralyzed by interrupting dashes (six occur in the first two sentences alone) and limiting conjunctions (“but” and “though” and “however”) that reroute the direction of his desire: to speak or not to speak. What finally allows him to write this autobiographical preface is the carefully rehearsed set of checks and balances that becomes its subtext—namely, cautions about speaking, while speaking. The strictures are clear: a “decorous” (7) and “modest” (37) style of a man who does not want to become “the intrusive author” (6); a writer who is ever ready to “plead guilty” (14) to his mistakes, to avoid “violating either the reader’s rights or his own” (7)—Hawthorne lays down “the law of literary propriety” (24) that makes speaking “pardonable” (7). To be silent, to hide your name and history from the text of your writing, is to repeat the
father's criminal acts of silence, concealment, and abandonment. To speak, to probe and expose another, to unveil oneself in public, is to repeat the speech act that violates—that is, to be at once another's and your own enemy. My excuse for postponing both the father's confession and the author's halting autobiographical start stems from my effort to underscore a significant structural device of the text—namely, how the confession at the end (postponed by the narrative itself) turns us back to the prefatory essay, where we find Hawthorne's desire "[t]o confess the truth" (34) and the complex desires and laws that possess the author himself in the contest between speech and silence. Dimmesdale is given another double, Hawthorne himself, and the author seems to know already from the start the lesson the reader will learn: namely, that both silence and speech can be criminal acts. But this knowledge hardly saves him from their dangers.

When we take a careful look at Dimmesdale's confession and Hawthorne's autobiographical sketch, we begin to see how both, apparently the most sincere acts in the text, might better be termed fictions. The minister's confession holds the key here. Dimmesdale is so much at the center of this text because he exaggerates, to the point of madness, a universal ambivalence: he at once dreads discovery and longs for it. Confession, rather than solving this painful contradiction, underscores it. But Dimmesdale's fictionalized confession protects him at the same time that it lets him speak the truth and reveal who he is.

In The Scarlet Letter, confession occurs paradoxically through a process of apparent self-alienation and fiction. During his public confession, Dimmesdale (like a novelist) speaks of himself in the third person: "But there stood one in the midst of you, at whose brand of sin and infamy ye have not shuddered!... It was on him!... But he hid it cunningly from men, and walked among you. ... Now, at the death-hour, he stands up before you! He bids you look at Hester's scarlet letter! He tells you, that, with all its mysterious horror, it is but the shadow of what he bears on his own breast, and that even this, his own red stigma, is no more than the type of what has seared his inmost heart" (xxiii, 180). Who is the secret man the minister speaks of? The minister's truest moment, when he is most himself, is a moment of self-alienation, of ghostly autobiography and confession: it shows the self in a mirror, as "he." Appropriately, the man the minister names (or does not name) as "he" answers the question that has echoed through the text: "What is
he?” (12) (the forefathers ask about Hawthorne); “Who is he?” (iv, 58) (Chillingworth asks about Dimmesdale); “Then, what was he?” (xi, 105) (the narrator asks about Dimmesdale); “Who is he? Who is he?” (xii, 114) (Dimmesdale asks about Chillingworth). “He” is the man who walks always beside you, unrecognized. Dimmesdale finally becomes the “exemplary man” (xx, 153) in an unexpected way—not through his virtue but through his power of representation. A man dramatizes himself, to himself and others, as another; he makes himself visible, to himself and others, in a reflection, or a representation that is fictional; he/“he” tells the truth.

The fiction of Dimmesdale’s confession, as I understand it, is defined in opposition to The Scarlet Letter’s view of writing in general. Writing is a form of literalization that puts the blame simply and mercilessly on another: the text’s powerful example here is the way in which the Puritans use writing to label Hester. Fiction, on the other hand, is a more generous and complicated form of what Hawthorne in another context sees as “the propensity of human nature to tell the very worst of itself, when embodied in the person of another” (xiii, 118)—in other words, to confess as “he,” like Dimmesdale or like a novelist. There is a discrimination here that will become clearer as my argument proceeds, but let me immediately try to clarify my terms, admitting that while writing and fiction are close doubles, the slightest discrimination makes all the difference—between branding and casting out a single victim, and accusing an unspecified person who walks among you; between depersonalization as attack (writing’s criminal is the Adulteress, the dehumanized Hester) and impersonalization as merciful defense (fiction’s criminal is an unnamed “he”). Writing violates, with a sharp-edged instrument; fiction deflects and defends, with a language that shows that pain and guilt are common to all. These are the two ways the two criminals of adultery are named in the text: one is named by another at the beginning of the text, while one is named as another by himself at the end of the text. The first is an object of scorn set apart from all others; the second is “he” conceived as the invisible self that we all share but fail to recognize.

In writing (as in the simplified discourse families use) you accuse another in place of yourself; the confusion over self and other is too easily solved by labelling the other a criminal. But Hawthorne shows that this kind of writing is itself a crime. Reduced to a “text” (v, 65), “giving up her individuality, she [Hester] would become the general symbol at which the preacher and moralist might point,
and in which they might vivify and embody their images of woman’s frailty and sinful passion” (v, 60). Text and symbol vivify and embody, but at great cost—they mortify and feed off Hester in a further example of the text’s view of the parasite or leech. Writing as embodiment takes over the body to make it a symbolic representation, “the body . . . of sin” (v, 61). As writers, the Puritans are “iron men” (xvii, 142) who use the equipment of their apparent antitype, the Black Man. The “iron pen” (xvi, 133) violates and thereby engenders the body of sin (repeating the crime it punishes): Hester’s cry is that she has been “too deeply branded” (iii, 54), just as Hawthorne himself complains of the “deep print” (xxiv, 182) in his brain which he cannot erase, the product of the self-mortification that lies behind the tale of his ancestors’ crime. In the same movement the iron pen imprisons the body of sin it has made, and labels it for all to see. It makes violation and shame public, and this is the most scandalous side of writing. Puritan society, in its search after visible truths in signs, types, and tokens, consistently errs on the side of literalism. The Puritans, in a theological confusion of the Pauline distinction between letter and spirit, transfer the letter of the law from the tables of stone to the fleshy tables of the heart. In this way their writing makes Hester’s heart into a dead stone, a “tomb-like heart” (xv, 130). The letter is her epitaph, and Hester as a living text or sermon is a dead woman awaiting burial: “Thus she will be a living sermon against sin, until the ignominious letter be engraved upon her tombstone” (iii, 50). The letter on her heart is a proleptic sign that from the beginning seeks fulfillment in the story’s final writing, the letter written on the gravestone. The letter is the sign of the “ministration of death, written and engraved in stone” (2 Cor. 3:7). Fiction becomes defined against this system of writing—in fact, in order to elude the kind of writing that is part of that “penal machine” in which the gripe “forbid[s] the culprit to hide his face for shame” (ii, 45). Fiction discovers that “neutral territory” (Hawthorne’s term for the border “where the Actual and Imaginary may meet” [31]) where it is safe to confess, where you neither label yourself nor are labelled by another: in fiction you speak the truth in the third person.

The scarlet letter itself helps clarify the difference between writing and fiction precisely in so far as it resists the (literal) function the Puritans assign it. In this way it becomes the key to writing’s failure when writing tries to fix meaning. The letter’s meaning is knotted, intertwined, a complete mesh not to be unravelled. This
is why Hawthorne tells us that its art cannot be reproduced or analyzed, “even by the process of picking out the threads” (27). The scarlet letter turns against its Puritan authors by revealing the judges’ failure at “disentangling . . . [the] mesh of good and evil” (iii, 51); it understands the complexity of human action by showing characters who “continually did one thing or another, which intertwined, in the same inextricable knot” (xi, 108). The “margin” or “edge” or “verge” where Dimmesdale and Chillingworth (xiii, 120; xx, 158) and even Hawthorne the writer (31) live, and where Pearl plays (xiv, 121), is a knotted or entangled world, an adulterated world where all things are alloyed. The alchemical search to “distil” (v, 65), to separate out the “residuum” (32), to have the soul “dissolved, and flow forth in a . . . transparent stream” (ix, 92), is foiled in a world in which things are “intermingled” (ii, 46), “thoroughly interfused” (ii, 41), in an “admixture of . . . ingredients” (17). For this reason Pearl (or the letter she is) reminds us of a “necessity that always impelled this child to alloy whatever comfort she might chance to give with a throb of anguish” (xix, 151). A stands for such Adultery—for the knot, the margin, the alloy. It suggests a complex moral world that resists a Manichean unravelling of good and evil, a simple alchemical distillation of value. Adultery, in this light, is at once an act that lies outside the law of Puritan society, and a meaning that explodes the limits of writing.

With this definition before us, the adulterous self is the self I share with another—not necessarily through sexual trespass, but through a marginality that stems from the beginning: A stands for Adultery at the beginning, for the impossibility of finding an unadulterated origin. The text’s adulterations are interpolations between epochs, made most patent in the formal movement between the contemporary events of the Custom-House and Puritan New England. The self is an adulterated compound because it exists “across the gulf of time” (12), “across the verge of time” (xiii, 117): “The victim was for ever on the rack” (xi, 103), stretched between times. This is another way of saying that the self is familial, that it contains the genealogical trace or blood-guilt of its ancestry. The man Chillingworth is “[m]isshapen from birth” and seeks the “veil” that will disguise his “physical deformity” (iv, 57): the physician’s disguise here becomes the object of our mercy. Even Dimmesdale’s crime of passion can be referred, at least in part, to someone or something before him: he “inherited a strong animal nature from his father or his mother” (x, 95). The family member,
then, is not only the person found on the border of another in his present family relations; he is also the person who is a "residuum" (32) or "diluted repetition" (xxi, 164) or "vestige" (xvii, 141) of the ancestors that went before him. This is what it means to be a daughter or son, all one's life. The mark on Dimmesdale's breast is the scarlet letter with a particular or literal meaning: Dimmesdale is the man who committed adultery, even as the law defines it. But the mark on his breast is also the universal mark of all men born of woman—"the natal spot" (12).

The idea of the adulterous self—the self that is mixed with another, from the beginning—explains Hawthorne's skepticism about autobiographical speech. Then why preface the tale with an autobiographical sketch? Because, as the analogue to the minister's confession in the third person, the autobiographical sketch fictionalizes the first person. "The Custom-House" exists, at the head of the text, to warn us from the beginning that it does not want to speak the entire truth about the self, nor could it even if it wanted to. It exists to subvert itself, to fictionalize itself deliberately before its own eyes and the reader's. In this light we begin to realize that both sections of this text are alloys: can we distinguish between the truth of autobiography and the fiction of the tale by saying which event—Hawthorne's discovery of Pue's papers or the death of Governor Winthrop—belongs to which half of the text? The autobiographical sketch is a series of clues and red herrings left at the scene of the crime. Its most blatant lie, Hawthorne's explanation that he is not the author but an editor who has accidentally found the story of the scarlet letter, is a repetition of Dimmesdale's criminal concealment, a casting off of the child, a withholding of the father's name. But such a lie reveals a truth that we discover is the heart of the tale as well. Above all, the lie understands the self's need to be defended against writing's tendency to literalize; against its own urge to label itself and to assert itself as a subject, against the egotism of thinking itself a first cause. The lie shows that what we call the subject, or in this case the author, is a fiction, as Hawthorne suggests elsewhere: "A person to be writing a tale, and to find that it shapes itself against his intentions; that the characters act otherwise than he thought; that unforeseen events occur, and a catastrophe which he strives in vain to avert. It might shadow forth his own fate—he having made himself one of the personages."7 The autobiographical sketch makes the author a character (just as the tale does): the man who finds and edits Pue's papers is a fictitious character who nevertheless reveals the truth
about "the author" Hawthorne. The autobiographical preface rests on this paradox, then—that it tells the truth through an oblique and fictionalized attack on the idea of the subject, through an understanding that the self (even when a father or an author)\textsuperscript{8} is at least in part the product of another's making. Hawthorne's reminder that "both truth and error" (xix, 149) can coexist in a single impression becomes a warning that the opposites the text contemplates—kindred and enemy, love and hatred, good and evil—and their literary coordinates, autobiography and fiction, author and character—are so many different ways of repeating the same mythical search for purity, the same naive unravelling of self and other. Read in this way, "The Custom-House" bestows upon "I" and "he" the function of doubles, where no one is prior or original: we can use either to hide ourselves, either to confess the truth about ourselves.

The fiction in Dimmesdale's confession and in Hawthorne's autobiography is not solely a practical psychological defense. It is as well a moral critique of the categorical opposites I have just listed. Fiction understands that the most radical name we bestow upon the self, the name that in fact logically follows from "author" and "subject," is "the criminal." The idea of the criminal stems from the false differences the self ascribes to another, the way the self writes him off: we mark him clearly so that we can safely stay away from him. But he is, as my string of associations suggests (the author, the autobiographical subject), the other side of myself. Based on a darker and more threatening view of the self as a first cause, the term "criminal" shows us how the idea of the subject backfires: it can be used against me. By showing the family as a tangle of crimes where kindred and enemy often change places, Hawthorne shows how criminal and victim are one, with each member of the family on both sides of the border of crime. In this light the way in which we typically define the self merges with the discourse of the family: the reified self is the subject-author-criminal-father. The deepest refutation of the idea of the father as first cause shows that what the family (not just the father) makes is "mutual victims" (xxiv, 183). Fictionalized autobiography is a formal structure based on the same truth: it shows "the author" as "the editor," and even as "a character" in his own work, just as it shows that the man Hawthorne has behind him a stern "progenitor" (11) and other ancestors. The father is always a child first—this is another way of putting the more philosophical view of the self as an adulterated compound from the beginning, as the object of someone else's making.

The single crime is invisible and unknown, then, not because it is

\textit{Michael Ragussis}
hidden by the criminal (what the Puritans think), but because it is a lie, a false hypothesis. Elsewhere Hawthorne contemplated a kind of fiction that would forgo characters (as the separate entities, or subjects, we usually take them to be) to people the text with conjunctions—"To personify If—But—And—Though & etc." But The Scarlet Letter's description of the self as a conjunction of selves already enacts this idea, without capitulating to a moral relativism that relieves us of all responsibility, and all humanity. I recognize I am subject to what had gone before me, to my history, as a means not of excusing myself and escaping my acts, but of participating in the larger world of shame and guilt that I share with another: "I, the present writer, as their representative, hereby take shame upon myself for their sakes" (11). I exist in so far as I am a representative of another at another time: I exist in the place of mercy, between times, on the border of myself and another, in fiction. Mercy, the indwelling form of fiction, rewrites the subject as universal representability, as the exemplary man. And I am he.10

That mercy is in fact the form of fiction (and not simply its subject or its effect) is especially well dramatized at certain moments when the narrative comes to a brief halt, in a significant meeting of "author" and "character" (terms that are now as loaded as "self" and "other"). In each case Hawthorne's reticence is a sign of the author's hesitation to judge, to publish another's guilt or shame.11 There is Hawthorne's hesitation to report that the first object of Pearl's consciousness is the scarlet letter ("shall we say it?" [vi, 72]); and his blush at recording (in a recognition of the power of words and their potential criminality) Dimmesdale's scandalous impulse to teach the children wicked words; and his refusal to describe the central revelation of the scarlet letter ("But it were irreverent to describe that revelation" [xiii, 180]); and his modesty about speaking what Hester cannot reveal to herself—namely, an undiminished love for Dimmesdale ("It might be, too,—doubtless it was so, although she hid the secret from herself, . . .—it might be," where he shifts back and forth between certainty and doubt, for Hester's sake [v, 61]); and even his eschewing to spell out "adultery" anywhere in the text, to fix and publish its meaning; and generally his hesitation to reveal feelings and events "which we have faintly hinted at, but forborne to picture forth" (xi, 107)—in this instance, the minister's midnight vigil, where Hawthorne seems almost to have the vision of the minister's pain forced out of himself: "nay, why should we
not speak it?" (xvii, 139). Hawthorne seems under a double obligation (to defend his characters and to inform his reader) that is difficult to reconcile: "[to] hesitate to reveal" and "to hold nothing back from the reader" (xx, 153). Silence again and again seems the proper mode of response, even while the story dramatizes a criminal silence—the refusal to name oneself, to recognize one’s family, to confess. "It is scarcely decorous, however, to speak all, even when we speak impersonally" (7). It is a crime to speak and not to speak—a riddle that only fiction can begin to solve because, like no other writing, it has as its goal to reveal and to conceal. The foregoing moments of narrative self-consciousness suggest the conjunction of selves that characterizes fiction: where the author hesitates or refuses to write about his characters, I feel I know him best, and see his sympathies most clearly—he gives himself away. In his mercy for his characters he is most himself. It makes mercy no less generous to admit that its teacher can be self-consciousness, and perhaps even narcissism. The pain of speaking autobiographically in "The Custom-House" leads to moral delicacy in the tale. Both author and reader see themselves in the mirror of character, of another, and at the point of painful exposure shrink, and proceed only in the knowledge that in fiction they are defended by seeing themselves in another, by sharing themselves with another, and that in fiction public exposure occurs during the private act of reading. Fiction converts hypocrisy into mercy: what I called, in the first part of this essay, the minister’s speaking for and as another, is what the author does in fiction, and what the reader does in reading, as an expression of mercy for himself and another. In this way fiction erases the Puritan interdict, "transgress not beyond the limits of Heaven’s mercy!" (iii, 54), by taking the terrifying border on which characters live in fear of displacement, in desperate confusion over self and other, and refashioning it into a neutral territory: trespass is converted into sufferance and mercy, the conjunction of selves where we meet.

The minister’s voice reaches the same merciful pitch as the author’s, when it merges with another’s voice because its source is the same—"the same cry of pain" (xxii, 173). When all else deserts me, pain remains, the surest sign that I have a self: "The only truth, that continued to give Mr. Dimmesdale a real existence on this earth, was the anguish in his inmost soul" (xi, 107). Pain substantiates the self not by differentiating it from another’s, but by allowing it to see

Michael Ragussis

883
itself in others. In this way Dimmesdale discovers the genuine power of speech and identity: "The burden... of crime or anguish... kept him down, on a level with the lowest... But this very burden it was, that gave him sympathies so intimate with the sinful brotherhood of mankind; so that his heart vibrated in unison with theirs, and received their pain into itself, and sent its own throb of pain through a thousand other hearts, in gushes of sad, persuasive eloquence" (xi, 104). Pain gives Dimmesdale a real existence on earth because it makes him human, part of the brotherhood of mankind; without this human pain, a man "becomes a shadow, or, indeed, ceases to exist" (xi, 107). Pain rewrites one's genealogy. By insistently pressing how Hester bears her almost unbearable pain ("It was almost intolerable to be borne" [ii, 46]; "She had borne..." [iii, 54]), Hawthorne describes her pain as a new birth: "Her sin, her ignominy, were the roots which she had struck into the soil. It was as if a new birth, with stronger assimilations than the first, had converted the forest-land... into Hester Prynne's wild and dreary, but life-long home" (v, 61). The new self, like the "new man" (xxi, 163) Dimmesdale becomes, is born through a crisis in pain that discovers the common heart: "The complaint of a human heart, sorrow-laden, perchance guilty, telling its secret, whether of guilt or sorrow, to the great heart of mankind" (xxii, 173). What will unlock the secret heart is the call to "be once more human" (xiv, 125), spoken in a "human language" (xii, 114)—the language that the tale has sought from the beginning.

The humanizing power of pain, its ability to replace one's immediate family with "the human family" (15), is the end towards which the tale travels. The discovery of the literal father's identity flows into a larger current of revelation. But to see how the tale's last scene humanizes both father and child, we must first acknowledge that the broken heart can be used as a false sign of humanity, and made an empty symbol. "Not seldom, she [Pearl] would laugh anew, and louder than before, like a thing incapable and unintelligent of human sorrow. Or—but this more rarely happened—she would be convulsed with a rage of grief, and sob out her love for her mother, in broken words, and seem intent on proving that she had a heart, by breaking it" (vi, 70). Pearl instinctively knows that sorrow has the capacity to transform her from "a thing," to make her "human." But Hawthorne knows that to be in love with sorrow—a morbid danger both he and his characters court—is merely to find the darker side of narcissism. Pearl requires "a grief that should

884 The Scarlet Letter
deeply touch her, and thus humanize . . . her” (xvi, 133). Her lack of
grief shuts her out even from the brook’s melancholy sorrow: “‘If
thou hadst a sorrow of thine own, the brook might tell thee of it,’
answered her mother, ‘even as it is telling me of mine!’” (xvi, 135).
Of course Hester’s chiding is unfair: Hester and Dimmesdale rob
Pearl of her humanity by not allowing her the grief that is her
greatest inheritance. Pearl is cut off from all mankind, then, not
simply because she is an unlawful child, but because she has
neither sorrow nor sympathy. Pearl becomes human only when she
understands her father’s words at the end, and sees him “in the
crisis of acutest pain” (xxiii, 180). The wild infant is prophesied a
woman not simply when she learns who her father is, but when she
shares his pain. “The great scene of grief, in which the wild infant
bore a part, had developed all her sympathies; and as her tears fell
upon her father’s cheek, they were the pledge that she would grow
up amid human joy and sorrow, nor for ever do battle with the
world, but be a woman in it” (xxiii, 181). Neither discovering she
has a father nor having the father’s name is sufficient to make the
child human. Pearl becomes herself when her heart is broken for
another. The part she bears in the scene of grief bears her anew.
What the child learns from her father is how to realize her own pain
through another’s. Father and child meet on that common ground
where each can say: I now can put myself aside for another, instead
of living in terror of being put aside by another.

The kiss Pearl bestows upon Dimmesdale in this last scene un-
locks a double mystery. Earlier in the forest Pearl refused the
minister a kiss as “talisman” (xix, 152) because it was a repetition of
the secret passion that begot her. But at the end, in the public
marketplace, “Pearl kissed his lips. A spell was broken” (xxiii, 181).
Father and child bring each other alive and make readable the
ghostly and unintelligible text the other has been. Hawthorne
imagines this breaking of a linguistic spell, in another context, for
the writer himself: “Here I have made a great blot . . . , a portrait
of myself in the mirror of that inkspot. When it reaches thee, it will be
nothing but a dull black spot; but now, when I bend over it, there I
see myself, as at the bottom of a pool. Thou must not kiss the blot,
for the sake of the image it now reflects; though if thou shouldst, it
will be a talisman to call me hither again.”12 The pool in which
Pearl sees herself reflected becomes, for Hawthorne’s own self-
reflection, a pool of ink. But the spot of ink, the inviolable circle of
self, is transgressed when the reader, in a fictional trespass, offers

Michael Ragussis
885
the talismanic kiss to the text, and reawakens it. The talismanic kiss is offered to the shame we seek to hide (Pearl kisses the scarlet letter in the forest when she refuses to kiss the minister) as the sign of a reader who sympathetically can read the heart almost hidden by *The Scarlet Letter*.

Fiction’s most significant accomplishment is not, we see, the thoroughness with which it defends the self, but its ability to keep the self alive and human while defended. This means keeping pain sharp but bounded. The secret power of fiction is pain, publicly expressed and shared, but deflected and bounded in the ways I have shown. Hawthorne describes Hester’s decision to bear her pain in order to purify herself as “half a truth, and half a self-delusion” (v, 62); he hesitantly records (in what I have called his reticent style) her love for Dimmesdale as another source of her decision to remain in the spot of her public ignominy. We think of fiction as such a half truth, half delusion, but the sustained cry of pain in this text leaves almost no room for its farthest fantasy, one that the reader along with the writer hides close beside the secret place of pain—namely, to be “wise . . . not through dusky grief, but the ethereal medium of joy” (xxiv, 185-186).

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**FOOTNOTES**


2 See On *Poetry and Style*, trans. G. M. A. Grube (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1958), p. 21. The editor points out that “bond of love” means specifically “‘dear ones,’ by virtue of blood ties,” and thereby that recognition involves the discovery that the other is kindred or that someone thought to be kindred is an enemy. The definition is significant for we will see that Hawthorne collapses the antithesis between kindred and enemy.

3 The kind of linguistic identity that I will argue for both Pearl and Dimmesdale, Larzer Ziff claims generally for the Puritan, who “must always be as good as his word . . . because he had only his word as his identity” (*Puritanism in America*, [New York: Viking, 1973], p. 16). My emphasis on the linguistic acts of Hawthorne’s characters can be established in correspondence with the picture given by cultural historians of Puritan New England. Ziff explains Puritanism as a language-revolution that elevates the pulpit over the altar (p. 6) and Perry Miller describes the central position of the spoken word in the Puritan world (*The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*, [New York: Macmillan Co., 1939], p. 295). My suggestion that speech is depicted as an act of potency sees its corollary in the Puritan view of obscene speeches (of the kind Dimmesdale contemplates making to the Puritan children on his return from the forest): “the frequent use of obscene speeches

886 The Scarlet Letter
seemeth to be more hurtful to piety, than the simple act of fornication” (William Ames, quoted by Ziff, p. 15).

My own emphasis will be on language as the crucial moral and psychological element within the domain of the family—or on what I call family discourse. Frederick Crews’s The Sins of the Fathers: Hawthorne’s Psychological Themes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966) turned the tide of Hawthorne criticism, making us see how the family (and especially its unconscious urges toward incest and patricide) is the central subject of Hawthorne’s fiction. But Crews’s convincing and revolutionary approach to the tales stops short at The Scarlet Letter, as he seems to admit, with his strange reticence on the question of familial relations in Hawthorne’s masterpiece (see pp. 268-69).

While critics have not spoken of Dimmesdale as his own child’s double—a pattern I take to be as significant as it is specific—they have underscored Hawthorne’s descriptions of Dimmesdale as childlike. See, for example, Leslie Fiedler’s Love and Death in the American Novel (New York: Stein and Day, 1966), p. 237, for a fine discussion of Dimmesdale as “the eternal son.”


While the Pauline description of writing on the “fleshy tables of the heart” (2 Cor. 3:3) stands most clearly behind the letter printed on Hester’s and Dimmesdale’s hearts, I suspect Hawthorne’s image is as well an ironic rendering of Socrates’s claim that “the true way of writing” is “graven in the soul,” “the word which he finds in his own bosom” (Phaedrus, 278, a-b).


My emphasis on the third person pronoun as a way of naming stems from my wish to situate Hawthorne’s text, and fiction generally, somewhere between Puritan spiritual autobiography and Freudian psychoanalysis—two modes of discourse that seem especially relevant both to Hawthorne’s psychological tale set in Puritan New England, and to our understanding of the novel as a genre that grows out of the inwardness of Puritan self-consciousness while successively treating psychological experience more and more insistently. Fiction avoids two extremes—on the one hand, Puritan autobiography, where a form of self-disclosure has as its goal the cancellation of the self, and on the other hand, Freudian psychoanalysis, where the positing of an “I” occurs through the discourse of another.

On the first issue, see Sacvan Bercovitch’s discussion of “the dilemma of Puritan identity” in The Puritan Origins of the American Self (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), p. 18, where he cites numerous examples of the mirror as the Puritan tool used to reject individuality by reflecting not the self, but the image of the Lord (p. 14). My point is that in Hawthorne’s text the mirror (of fiction) that shows the self in terrifying self-division finally shows it lost in neither simple narcissistic solipsism nor complete otherness. On the second issue, one could argue that the Puritan war against “I, or ihood, or iness” (p. 18) is precisely the illness that psychoanalysis tries to cure by reestablishing the “I”—stated most succinctly in Freud’s famous formula, “Wo es war soll Ich werden.” But as a form of self-disclosure, the case history (like

Michael Ragussis
the Puritan autobiography) has its own internal contradictions. As a specialized scientific discourse, for example, it discloses the subject’s most intimate and private life in those words of another (“projection,” “primal scene,” “anal phase”) that are themselves alienated from the subject. See Freud’s acknowledgment of the problem of “the betrayal” (p. 8) of his patients’ secrets, in Prefatory Remarks to “Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria,” Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works, 7, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), where he insists that “the organs and functions of sexual life will be called by their proper names” (p. 9), but that the subject herself will be called by a pseudonym; where the subject’s loss of voice is a symptom of the case history itself, in which Freud speaks for the subject; and where the subject may meet herself in what must be a disturbing chance encounter with someone who seems at once herself and another—for if she accidentally comes across her case history she will learn nothing from it that she does not already know; and she may ask herself who besides her could discover from it that she is the subject of this paper” (p. 9). The case history hides her while exposing her. Her first anxiety, as she talks to herself about herself in Freud’s paper, is whether anyone will know her. In this light one could argue that what one learns from all three kinds of discourse—Puritan autobiography, the psychoanalytic case history, and fiction—is that there is no such thing as the pure language of the self or the pure language of the other, but that discourse by its nature is mixed, and that fiction capitalizes on this fact, deliberately representing the self as “he,” under which sign self-defense and self-disclosure occur simultaneously.

Of course certain uses of “I” reveal an understanding of how the first-person pronoun can be empowered with another’s meaning—as in Hawthorne’s use of “I” in “The Custom-House;” or in fiction narrated in the first-person; or in those moments when a reader wants to express the reemergence of his own identity through that of a character or author. See Georges Poulet’s remark, “An identical I had to operate within the author and the critic,” “The Self and the Other in Critical Consciousness,” Diacritics, 2, (1972), 49. Such examples make me recall Otto Jespersen’s examples of the child speaking of himself in the first person, the second person, and the third person, and speaking of another in the first person, in Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1949), p. 124. While the child is eventually taught to fix pronominal terms, his confusion dramatizes the genuine nature of selfhood. Hence Jespersen pokes fun at “the great psychologists” who insist that “The child uses no pronouns; it speaks of itself in the third person, because it has no idea of its ‘I’ (Ego) nor of its ‘Not-I’” (p. 123); and Hawthorne shows us why the figure of child is the soul of fiction.

11 My explanation of Hawthorne’s reticence here is a reaction against what I take to be a general misunderstanding by critics who speak of Hawthorne’s text as if it had been censored by Hawthorne’s own brand of Puritanism. Fiedler’s brilliant reading is marred time and again by his jibes at Hawthorne—“little children of the seventeenth century . . . are franker than the adults of the nineteenth” (p. 228). The intermittently jeering tone of twentieth-century critics (characterizing Hawthorne, for example, as “improbable in the marriage bed,” p. 239) convinces me all the more of the value of a certain kind of reticence, and of Hawthorne’s wise defense of himself and his characters. For Fiedler, Hawthorne’s text is “sterilized” (p. 228), “dispassionate” (p. 229), “abstract” (p. 228), and “pussyfooting” (p. 236); for me, its irony is balanced by its mercy, its quietude by its sympathy, its aesthetic distance by its sharp autobiographical nature and painful psychic revelations.