2. Hawthorne and Politics (Again): Words and Deeds in the 1850s

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The consensus on Hawthorne and politics goes something like this: unlike Emerson and Thoreau, unlike Douglass and Stowe, activists all, he was an inactivist who fetishized deferral. His campaign biography of Franklin Pierce is said to provide a retroactive template for his fiction. Only a consummate trimmer could have championed that Doughface Democrat, a New Hampshire man so morally obtuse that as president he did the South’s bidding on the Fugitive Slave Law. (Pierce proved so unpopular in the North that his party refused to support him for a second term.) Hawthorne the artist contemplated subversion—most notably, in the person of Hester Prynne—only in order to break its spirit, and he regarded idealistic political action, whether against slavery or any other injustice, as a wrongful arrogation of God’s power to dispose of human affairs when and how He saw fit. *The Scarlet Letter, The House of the Seven Gables, The Blithedale Romance*—Hawthorne’s three “American” novels—gave fictional form to the age’s ethical and legislative impasse, the Compromise of 1850.1

In this essay, I do not so much want to overturn this consensus as to deepen and complicate our understanding of what was motivating Hawthorne, and, in so doing, to revise our picture of the American Renaissance. I have gone into some detail in my opening paragraph, highlighting the importance of the sectional crisis to Hawthorne’s politics, because it is precisely the worsening conflict over slavery that holds the key to my two objectives. A crucial point about that conflict—*the* crucial point for litera-
ture—is that it reanimated the agency of language. Verbal anti-slavery agitation was seen by Southerners, and by many Northerners, too, as an “incendiary” (the preferred adjective) intervention in the polity that had to be suppressed at any cost, even, if necessary, by destroying civil liberties. The security of the “peculiar institution,” and, so Southern fire-eaters threatened, the preservation of the Union itself, required nothing less. Utterance, unless checked, would plunge the Republic into chaos. Thus were discourse and the circulation of ideas, the very stuff of the literary sensibility, invested with a power that they had not enjoyed in American culture since the Revolution, when the oratory and pamphlets of the Founders had aroused an entire people to throw off the British yoke.

Repeated assaults on free speech spanned the decades of Romanticism’s flowering. In the 1830s, just as Emerson was forsaking the ministry for a career as a writer and lecturer, Southern postmasters began to seize and burn abolitionist documents sent through the mails. Andrew Jackson, the highest official in the land, reacted by denouncing the written materials and not their interdiction as unconstitutional. Eighteen thirty-six brought the petition controversy. Slaveholders in Congress, in a flagrant violation of the First Amendment, refused to receive appeals to outlaw involuntary servitude in the District of Columbia. They rammed through the so-called “gag rule” tabling all such petitions without a hearing. Former president John Quincy Adams, now a congressman from Massachusetts, fought for eight years to repeal this ban on the discussion of slavery in the nation’s capital, tirelessly insisting that the right to petition was a cornerstone of the whole edifice of liberty. Meanwhile, riots against anti-slavery advocates erupted across the country. One mob dragged William Lloyd Garrison through the streets of Boston at the end of a rope; a second shot dead Elijah Lovejoy in Alton, Illinois while he was defending his printing press. Lawless acts of violence against dissent subsided above the Mason-Dixon line, but continued unabated in the South right up to the firing on Fort Sumter. People could be tarred and feathered and, in some cases, hanged, for the “crime” of voicing opinions or reading books critical of slavery. The lynchted were typically white people, not blacks: slaves were illiterate and, as property, worth too much money to be disposed of so cavalierly.²

I emphasize the race of these victims because their fate underlined a grim reality about the antebellum United States: wherever slavery existed, and blacks were in chains, freedom was extinguished for whites as well. W. J. Cash, in his famous study of The Mind of the South, published in 1941, went so far as to compare the slave regime to the totalitarian states of Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany (Cash 1941, 88–89, 134–35). (With this difference, it should be noted: the force of public opinion took the place of the
And the decade of the 1840s left little doubt that the South intended to spread its system. The War with Mexico was not just a struggle over land: annexing Texas meant adding a slave state to the Union and, more than that, reestablishing bondage in an area where the more enlightened Mexicans had abolished it. The Compromise of 1850, cited earlier, provoked the widespread outrage that it did because the Fugitive Slave Act extended Southern contempt for basic rights into the North. The Act commanded all citizens, regardless of their views, to assist federal agents in detaining fugitives, and it overruled state personal liberty laws by explicitly denying suspected runaways the writ of habeas corpus and the right to trial by jury. No wonder that the emergent anti-slavery coalition took as its motto the slogan “Free Soil, Free Speech, Free Labor, and Free Men” (McPherson 62 [emphasis added]).

The campaign against intellectual freedom reached its apogee in the 1850s. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 revoked the Missouri Compromise and opened the unsettled continent to the depredations of the Slave Power. What this might portend for the free states was made clear by the slave code adopted by the Kansas legislature in 1855. That document provided for two years at hard labor for all individuals who should “print, publish, write, circulate, or cause to be introduced in this Territory” any opinion hostile to the “right of persons to hold slaves.” Bleeding Kansas spawned Bleeding Sumner: for the offense of speaking his mind on the Senate floor, the radical Republican Charles Sumner was beaten senseless by a South Carolinian named Preston Brooks. It would be hard to imagine a more symbolic encounter: Brooks attacked his victim with a cane while the unarmed Massachusetts senator was sitting at his desk writing, and the South rose as one to express its approbation of this “heroic” action. Expansionism accelerated as the war neared: the Dred Scott Decision, from a Supreme Court with a Southern majority, apparently setting the stage for the legalization of slavery nationwide; attempts to purchase Cuba as a slave territory; and demands to reopen the African slave trade. I have said that the South resembled a twentieth-century dictatorship, but only the most ruthless of modern states have been as efficient in proscribing unwelcome ideas. Consider that in 1860, the outer limit of the American Romantic period, Lincoln’s name was not allowed on the ballot in the Deep South, and even in the slaveholding border states, the Republican candidate for president received a bare 3 percent of the total votes.

The American Romantics were only too aware of these developments. Every one of them, from Emerson through Margaret Fuller to Walt Whitman, shared the recognition that in the crucible of the slavery crisis language had acquired the potency of deeds. They may have regarded the
verbal with suspicion, or simultaneously feared and celebrated it, or sought
to mobilize it for liberty, but they never doubted its influence. In the com-
pass of a brief essay, there is obviously not room to make this case in detail,
so I will confine myself to a handful of illustrations. Emerson's *Nature*,
issued in the year of the gag rule, deplores second-handedness and calls for
a revival of the linguistic immediacy interred in the “sepulchres of the
fathers.” Emerson's essay launched the American Renaissance, and its
opening sentences capture that term’s double significance: “Renaissance”
understood as art of stellar quality, and as a renewal of the word-act unity
of the Revolutionary generation. (The last surviving “Father,” James Mad-
son, died in 1836.) Thoreau, in “Civil Disobedience” (published by
Hawthorne’s sister-in-law, Elizabeth Peabody), imagines a speaker-legisla-
tor from outside the government whose eloquence would be “capable of
settling the much-vexed questions of the day.” It need hardly be added that
the charismatic wordsmith Thoreau had in mind, igniting reform from the
sanctuary of Walden Pond, was himself.

Or take a writer from far outside the Transcendentalist circle at Con-
cord: Frederick Douglass. His account of his life as a bondman first
appeared in 1845, a year after the congressional gag rule was rescinded and
as an aggressive South was pressing for the annexation of Texas. Slavery, of
course, was a permanent gag rule for the enslaved, and Douglass’s memoir
documents an array of restrictions on literacy and speech. The slave nar-
rative, established in this era as a distinctive American genre, broke the white
man’s monopoly on language and became an important weapon in the
struggle for emancipation. And then there is a nonactivist like Melville,
whose greatest creation, Captain Ahab, commandeers the ship of state
through a combination of demagogic oratory and “tricks of the stage.”
What “incendiary” abolitionist could equal the *Pequod*'s leader in harness-
ing words to apocalyptic devastation? Ahab’s spellbinding verbal skills have
a counterpoint in Melville’s work in those characters, such as Bartleby the
Scrivener and the ringleader Babo from “Benito Cereno,” who seem to exist
under a ban on articulation, whether self-imposed or enforced from with-
out. Babo’s refusal to testify before the Lima tribunal, a facsimile of the
actual legal speechlessness of American slaves, memorializes the futility of
utterance under a regime of censorship.

Hawthorne was out of the country during much of the 1850s, as Pierce’s
consul in Liverpool and then as a resident in Italy; but during his creative
heyday, from 1850 to 1852, he was acutely conscious of the mounting
pressures on free speech. Indeed, his book on Pierce placed him at the center of those pressures. He hoped the prohibitions would prevail and stifle the seditious ferment of anti-slavery oratory. His “little biography” (XXIII 273), as he disparagingly calls it, concludes with a frank endorsement of the end of partisan debate—almost, one might say, the end of politics. Hawthorne reports that the two national parties, Whigs and Democrats, have ceased to differ over principles. They have put aside their disagreements to unite “in one common purpose—that of preserving our sacred Union, as the immovable basis from which the destinies, not of America alone, but of mankind at large, may be carried upward and consummated.” The result, greeted by the text with relief, is “unwonted quiet and harmony,” a blanket of stillness happily descending on all regions of the country (XXIII 369–70).

Hawthorne’s position, to put it mildly, is highly anomalous: he is himself a storyteller, a man of words, and yet the performative power of speech menaces the societal stasis he cherishes. One way to circumvent the anomaly, perhaps, would be to purge discourse of deceptive artifice. A reclusive type with no competence in politics, Hawthorne contends that his sole qualification for writing about Pierce is that he knows the general personally and will “tell the truth” about him (XXIII 274). The campaign biography bristles with antipathy toward verbal cleverness, a revulsion from the mastery of language possessed by so many characters in Hawthorne’s fiction. Pierce emerges from his portrait as a kind of anti-Dimmesdale. Unlike The Scarlet Letter’s adulterous pastor, whose intoxicating oratory catapults him ahead of his seniors as the foremost preacher of Puritan Boston, Pierce scrupulously avoids pushing himself forward in debate. He will not open his mouth to say anything if some “other and older man could perform the same duty as well as himself” (XXIII 289). Nor, when he does bring himself to address the people, does the Democratic candidate resort to manipulation and half-truths—again, the special province of Arthur Dimmesdale. Pierce “never yet was guilty of an effort to cajole his fellow citizens, to operate upon their credulity, or to trick them even into what was right” (XXIII 349–50). Hawthorne goes so far as to compare his old college friend to the representatives of the Continental Congress, paragons of moral probity whose earnestness supposedly trumped their linguistic polish. Today, he adds, eloquence has degenerated into something other than a medium of truth; it has become “a knack, a thing valued in itself” (XXIII 298).

But it would be a mistake to construe Hawthorne’s quarrel in The Life of Franklin Pierce as being directed exclusively against verbal glitter or the use of language to beguile and mislead. Language itself is the object of his
strictures, and he praises Pierce, not simply for eschewing rhetorical excess, but for having “no fluency of words” whatever (XXIII 289). As we have seen, the general is reputed to be a speaker of rare integrity. Yet the extraordinary fact about the biography is how infrequently it quotes from its subject’s public pronouncements—perhaps a score of paragraphs in all, most not from addresses but from two relatively minor sources, a letter declining President Polk’s offer of the attorney generalship and a brief communication accepting the Democratic nomination. Hawthorne offers no direct testimony of his own, in that age of oratory, to Pierce’s linguistic prowess. He confesses that he has none to offer:

It has never been the writer’s good fortune to listen to one of Franklin Pierce’s public speeches, whether at the bar or elsewhere; nor, by diligent inquiry, has he been able to gain a very definite idea of the mode in which he produces his effects. To me, therefore, his forensic displays are in the same category with those of Patrick Henry, or any other orator whose tongue, beyond the memory of man, has mouldered into dust. (XXIII 305–6)

Several individuals are summoned as eyewitnesses to Pierce’s exploits at the bar and in the forum. One, a Professor Edwin D. Sanborn of Dartmouth College, relates that during the revision of the New Hampshire state constitution, Pierce conducted himself with “eloquence” and “magnanimity” (XXIII 359). The reader has to take the declaration on trust, however, because nothing is quoted as corroborating evidence. As for his famous rallying behind the Compromise of 1850, Pierce’s support was consistent with his long-held convictions. From the time of his first election to Congress, Hawthorne tells us, again without illustration, his friend always “raised his voice against agitation” (XXIII 351).

Hawthorne’s reticence projects an image of Pierce as “a man of deeds, not words” (XXIII 290), a legislator so disgusted by contemporaneous “agitation” that he would rather wrap himself in silence than condescend to utterance. It is as though language has been so debased by anti-slavery militancy that it has no proper place in politics at all. A political biography rightly honors this separation by relegating glibness to the margins or, better yet, expunging it from the text almost completely. Indeed, Hawthorne’s preface suspends judgment on the accuracy of his rendition of Pierce’s sentiments. So few of the candidate’s actual words and ideas appear in the book that Hawthorne’s speculations “may, or may not, be in accordance” with his subject’s opinions. The reader can best glean Pierce’s views, not from the author’s sketch of them, but from his “straight-forward and consistent deeds,” which are superior to any public statement as a register of
what he thinks (XXIII 273–74). Thus does Hawthorne invert the word/deed dynamic of the antebellum years; he presents the Democratic nominee for president as a verbal lightweight whose acts do his talking for him, and who expressly refrains from deranging the culture’s equilibrium with flights of oratory.

It is true, though, that Hawthorne inserts a long selection from the private journal Pierce kept while he was serving with the Ninth Regiment in Mexico, “hasty jottings-down in camp” that allegedly reveal more about him than “any narrative which we could substitute” (XXIII 319). (Chapter IV of the biography is titled “The Mexican War.—His Journal of the March from Vera Cruz.”) But here, once again, the journal entries—more copious than any extracted speech—subordinate rhetoric to action. They consist of a tedious chronicle of events: we proceeded with eighty wagons, we encountered enemy fire, so-and-so’s horse was shot from under him, we bivouacked near the river, we broke camp at dawn, and so on. The compiler of Pierce’s war journal records no memorable ideas or insights, and he puts on display no talent for language. In this, as in so much else, the Doughface Democrat was the opposite of the Republican standard bearer who followed him eight years later into the White House. Abraham Lincoln wrote and spoke his way into the hearts of his countrymen; Pierce, Hawthorne implies, should be elevated to the presidency because he grasps the aversion of patriotism to empty phrase making.

Let us, following critical fashion, take the campaign book as our template. The imperative that Hawthorne’s text urges most forcefully is the quarantining of discursive agility from the practical realm of politics. Ostensibly, the two domains, the verbal/aesthetic and the worldly/civic, share little and fare best in isolation from each other. Hawthorne, as a well-known novelist and “the Author of this Memoir,” disavows any connection to politics and makes much of his unfitness to represent a “public man” to the electorate, that being a “species of writing too remote from his occupations—and, he may add, from his tastes”—for him to carry out satisfactorily (XXIII 273). He acknowledges, moreover, that there have been large gaps in his intercourse with Pierce. Their “modes of life” have simply been too different, their “culture and labor” too unlike. “[T]here was hardly a single object or aspiration in common between us” (XXIII 302).

Yet this seemingly natural division between the man of words and the man of action masks a fearful recognition that on some deeper level they are not only entangled with each other—after all, Hawthorne, for all his protests of unsuitability, compiled The Life of Franklin Pierce—but that the literary possesses an anarchic energy dangerous to civic peace. The pose of linguistic/artistic innocence or impotence is just that, a pose, one
founded on the mid-nineteenth-century reality that abolitionist agitation, and Southern efforts to crush it, were hurtling the nation toward internecine warfare.

To turn to Hawthorne’s longer fiction at this point—to approach it, as he invites us, through the entryway of “The Custom House”—is to reencounter the segregation of the aesthetic from the functional, and from the arena of politics in particular. The man who would become Pierce’s biographer began his career as a novelist, at the very moment the 1850 Compromise was being cobbled together in Congress, by positing an absolute breach between literature and public life. In the introduction to *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), he comes before the reader as a representative of “Uncle Sam’s government” (I 5), a political appointee to the Salem customhouse. (President Polk, the annexationist Southerner who fomented the War with Mexico, named him to the post.) But as a romancer turned Surveyor of the Revenue, Hawthorne is a fish out of water, gasping for survival in an element thoroughly inhospitable to the creative imagination. His fellowship once included intellects of the caliber of Emerson, Thoreau, Alcott, Ellery Channing, and Longfellow; it now consists of aging public functionaries, former military officers, and an unnamed “man of business,” few of whom have read or even heard of his literary accomplishments. The effect on his productivity is disastrous. Even after he discovers the packet belonging to Surveyor Pue, with its dozen or so yellowed pages on Hester Prynne and its moth-eaten scarlet letter, Hawthorne cannot reanimate his powers of invention. His imagination is “a tarnished mirror” (I 34). Employment by the United States government has extinguished his ability to write.

It must be among the oddest introductions on record to a major work of art, a narrative of the author’s failure to compose the very text we are holding in our hands. The paradox of American literary culture in the age of slavery’s expansion is that it almost expires in a writer’s block. Hawthorne details the paralysis that gripped his mind while he was pocketing Uncle Sam’s wages, and he recounts the miraculous dissolving of that obstruction as soon as he escaped from his position with the state. Verbal fluency and politics, we are instructed, do not mix. “So little adapted is the atmosphere of a Custom-House,” Hawthorne says, “to the delicate harvest of fancy and sensibility, that, had I remained there through ten Presidencies yet to come, I doubt whether the tale of ‘The Scarlet Letter’ would ever have been brought before the public eye” (I 34). Only expulsion from office—a
figurative beheading, as he conceives it—liberates him from his protracted silence. Restored to his customary occupation of man of letters, Hawthorne regains his voice and dashes off the novel in a blaze of creativity.

The ensuing tale reconstitutes the introduction’s polarities with a significant variation. The wrinkle, which recurs in *The House of the Seven Gables* and *The Blithedale Romance*, is the presence of a tertium quid, a wielder of words whose morally problematic or dissident speech hovers on the margins of the language/politics rupture, and whose eventual acquiescence leaves a residue of discontent. For the moment, I want to defer discussion of these figures who disconcertingly evoke their creator, Nathaniel Hawthorne, in order to concentrate on the pattern familiar from the Pierce book. The speaker in *The Scarlet Letter* is the narrator or author of the introduction, finally rid of his customhouse duties and able to set his words down on paper. We are constantly aware of him addressing us. He offers reflections on the contrast between Puritan New England and the nineteenth century, muses about the motivations of his characters, and calls attention to his verbal mannerisms. These last include an addiction to asking questions (“Could it be true?” [I 59]; “What imagination would have been irreverent enough to surmise that the same scorching stigma was on them both?” [I 247]), and a habit of announcing when he is about to tell us something (“We have as yet hardly spoken of the infant . . . ” [I 89]; “we have a matter of business to communicate to the reader” [I 261]).

At the opposite extreme from this voluble and highly articulate figure are the ruling elders of Boston, leaders who orate or preach before the multitude but fail to do so with distinction. Like Pierce, they have “no fluency of words.” Hawthorne reiterates that while the community’s eminent men possess dignity and respectability, they lack the gift of imagination. “They would have vainly sought—had they ever dreamed of seeking—to express the highest truths through the humblest medium of familiar words and images” (I 143). When their senior member, the Reverend John Wilson, delivers his sermon on Hester’s sin, we are provided only a summary and not permitted to eavesdrop on his actual disquisition.

Also on the side of taciturnity is Hester Prynne. The heroine is a subverter of societal norms, an apostate from the Puritan state, but, unlike the abolitionist protesters of the antebellum era, she lives under a sentence of virtual silence. Practically her first words in the text are “I will not speak!” (I 68), and although we have access to her thoughts, she seldom gets to enunciate them aloud. Except for one or two scenes—the meeting with Dimmesdale in the forest, for instance—Hester says about as little as any protagonist in American fiction. And when she does attain utterance, the setting is invariably a confidential location distant from the public sphere,
such as a prison cell or the primeval woods. She relies on Dimmesdale, her former pastor, to argue her case for retaining Pearl to the Puritan magistrates. Her credo, as she cautions her daughter, is, “We must not always talk in the market-place of what happens to us in the forest” (I 240).

One could reasonably suggest that the invention of the American psychological novel was the corollary to an historical epoch when aroused Southerners and conservatives anathematized provocative speech. The author of *The Scarlet Letter* shared the suspicion of the discursive, and in his book he deals with the taboo by denying impolitic public statement to his characters, especially Hester Prynne; he then accesses the characters’ proscribed thoughts and feelings by digging deeply into their interiors. For antebellum reviewers, the novelty of Hawthorne’s story of the Puritan past was its relentless (some felt morbid) dissection of guilt, vengeance, and forbidden passion. The critics sensed that they were witnesses to a seismic change in the technique and matter of fiction. Chapters like “The Interior of a Heart” and “Another View of Hester” investigate consciousness, not assertion or action. The heroine wandering “in the dark labyrinth of mind” (I 166), neither speaking her thoughts nor putting her ideas into practice, is the signature activity of these soundings. Creative resurrection and the culture’s campaign to trammel speech combined to produce Hawthorne the novelist of inward exploration, precursor of Henry James.

The split between politics and the aesthetic continues in *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851). The two positions are embodied in Clifford Pyncheon and Judge Jaffrey Pyncheon, the first a lover of the beautiful, the second a prominent jurist and prospective candidate for governor of Massachusetts. (The consanguinity between these adversaries hints at unacknowledged affinities.) Clifford has returned to Salem after serving a thirty-year jail term for a murder he did not commit. He is a shattered spirit who nevertheless possesses a hyperactive imagination and “an exquisite taste” (II 108). When he and Hepzibah flee their ancestral home, he delivers a tirade against convention to a “gimlet-eyed old gentleman” on the train, who dismisses his “wild talk” of social upheaval as “All a humbug!” (II 259, 262–63). As in his previous romance, Hawthorne would banish such indecent speech from the public concourse. Unflattering “stories,” “fables,” “traditions,” and “gossip” about the community’s eminent citizens circulate in chimney corners and byways, but this “hidden stream of private talk” never makes its way into print (II 122–24, 310). Like Clifford’s questioning of the status quo, it is quite without consequence, a muffled whispering that leaves those in power unaffected.

Clifford’s nemesis, the Judge, is a figure of solidity whose smiling exterior conceals a “hot fellness of purpose, which annihilated everything but
itself” (II 129). Two objectives drive Jaffrey: he wants to be the chief magistrate of the commonwealth, and he wants to coax or bully his cousin into revealing the secret of the Pyncheons’ missing wealth. When he tries to force an entrance into the house to confront Clifford, the latter cries out for mercy in an “enfeebled voice,” his “murmur of entreaty” no more capable of dissuading the hard-hearted Judge than the wail of a “frightened infant” (II 129). Jaffrey’s political ambitions were to be realized on the evening he dies from the family’s inherited liability. He had planned to dine with the “little knot” of influential schemers who regularly “steal from the people” the right of selecting their rulers (II 274). Hawthorne sums up the disproportionate strength of his two characters, and, by implication, of the literary sensibility and the world of politics, by observing that Clifford could never have survived a face-to-face encounter with the Judge: “It would be like flinging a porcelain vase, with already a crack in it, against a granite column” (II 242).

*The Blithedale Romance* (1852), Hawthorne’s third and last novel occurring in America, takes as its inspiration the socialist experiment at Brook Farm. Literature and politics are once again sharply differentiated. Hawthorne’s preface finds “the author” (as he repeatedly calls himself) disavowing any intention, “favorable or otherwise, in respect to Socialism.” The setting is nothing more than a “theatre ... where the creatures of his brain may play their phantasmagorical antics” (III 1). Hawthorne erects a barrier between his own voice—the voice of the apolitical artist—and those of the activists at Blithedale. The minor poet Miles Coverdale relates the adventures of the community and thus, for the first time in the fiction we have been examining, displaces Hawthorne himself as the narrator. So, too, the various proposals for political change can be traced back, not to the name on the title page, but to the zealots who assemble at the would-be utopia. Besides Coverdale, two other major characters dream of reform and traffic in language. They are the feminist and writer Zenobia, who declaims against woman’s oppression with the eloquence of “a stump-ornatrix,” and the former blacksmith Hollingsworth (III 44). Zenobia frames female victimization as an act of physical silencing: “Thus far, no woman in the world has ever once spoken out her whole heart and her whole mind. The mistrust and disapproval of the vast bulk of society throttles us, as with two gigantic hands at our throats” (III 120). Hollingsworth has come to Blithedale to recruit disciples for his project of prison reform. He is constantly exhorting his fellow philanthropists at the boulder-pulpit where John Eliot preached to the Indians. “No other speech of man,” comments Coverdale of his friend’s performances, “has ever moved me like some of those discourses” (III 119).
All three characters end up dead or defeated, and it is hard not to read their unfortunate outcomes as Hawthorne’s vengeance on his utopians for daring to advocate societal renovation. For all her feminist rhetoric, Zeno-bia proves to be another dependent woman; she kills herself when Hollingsworth rejects her. The prison reformer is overwhelmed by guilt and abandons his ambitious plans to focus on a single criminal, himself. And Coverdale, soured by his experience at Blithedale, renounces political ideals altogether. He would be ready to join the struggle for Hungarian rights, he confides to the reader, only if Kossuth pitched the battlefield “within an easy ride of my abode” and arranged the conflict for “a mild, sunny morning, after breakfast... Further than that, I should be loth to pledge myself” (III 247). If Coverdale does eventually write the romance we have just finished reading, the preface’s tone of authorial fastidiousness should not surprise us. The erstwhile radical has, in his disaffection from activism, become one with his creator.

The problem with these readings of Hawthorne’s fiction should be evident. In every case, a charismatic speaker or linguistic rebellion has been omitted. This is the complicating factor persistently slighted by the current consensus: Hawthorne’s politics of pacification always contain an unpacified dimension. Even though the potent wordsmith is discredited or subdued, and the dissident rhetoric muted, “the power of words” (to filch the title of one of Poe’s stories) haunts Hawthorne’s narratives as a resilient and unruly force. Furthermore, the watertight compartmentalization between the imagination and politics keeps springing leaks. The aesthetic exercises authority over practical areas that seem to be immune from its effects.

Perhaps the most obvious example of this intersecting is the introduction to The Scarlet Letter. Hawthorne may be speechless in the custom-house, but he discovers there, preserved by his “official ancestor,” Surveyor Pue (I 33), the ancient documents that fertilize his fancy after his expulsion. The brick building flying “the banner of the republic” (I 5) originates the story that follows; structurally, the political sphere serves as the anteroom to the opening of the verbal floodgates, much as, in mid-nineteenth-century culture at large, the polity’s attempted suppression of “agitation” gives rise to the American Renaissance. An embargo on discourse, either external or internally generated (and for Hawthorne, the distinction is blurred), is in both cases the necessary precondition for artistic prodigality.

As for the oppositions of the romance, they are eroded by the very existence of the Reverend Dimmesdale. His singular standing as at once a
brilliant orator and a leader of the settlement folds into one individual the seemingly antithetical principles of linguistic ingenuity and worldly influence. The young divine has the gift “of addressing the whole human brotherhood in the heart’s native language,” the “Tongue of Flame” denied his elders (I 142); and his skill in the pulpit deconstructs the speaker/ruler divide. Hawthorne has emphasized all along that the Puritan magistrates lack literary or intellectual distinction. None of those officials can preach effectively. Dimmesdale, on the other hand, is a man of eloquence who could also be a man of action:

His was the profession, at that era, in which intellectual ability displayed itself far more than in political life; for—leaving a higher motive out of the question—it offered inducements powerful enough, in the almost worshipping respect of the community, to win the most aspiring ambition into its service. Even political power—as in the case of Increase Mather—was within the grasp of a successful priest. (I 238)

Of course, Dimmesdale is a morally compromised character whose boundary transgressions might be taken to vindicate the lesson: words and deeds overlap at their peril. His parishioners receive the minister’s oratory with rapture, but his speeches are exercises in equivocation. Cunning delivery turns his vague confessions in church into falsehoods; his “revelation of the scarlet letter” in the final scaffold scene is similarly evasive and ambiguous, and the Puritans disagree about its meaning. Are we to conclude, then, that when verbal fluency crosses into public space, it automatically mutates into verbal treachery? Is the Pierce biography, Hawthorne’s own venture into political speech, another example of linguistic turpitude, or is it the exception that proves the rule? Certainly Dimmesdale’s inspired tongue refutes the idea that the literary sensibility is dysfunctional when it colludes with power. And what of the minister’s election sermon? That discourse, which owes its “deep, sad undertone of pathos” to Dimmesdale’s guilt, culminates in a prophecy that has to count as truthful because it is realized in history. Though we are not permitted to hear the sermon—an indication of Hawthorne’s continuing uneasiness with language as power—we learn that the preacher’s mission was “to foretell a high and glorious destiny for the newly gathered people of the Lord” (I 249). Hawthorne, speaking of the United States two centuries after Dimmesdale’s death, declares in the Pierce book that on the welfare of the Union rest the destinies of all mankind.

Prophecy is performative utterance at its most dramatic. The “old prophets of Israel” (I 249) cited by Hawthorne did not deal in feckless sentences; their judgments, backed by the omnipotence of the Deity, summoned
events into being. Dimmesdale's announcement of the future is the first of a number of such predictions in Hawthorne's work, some positive, others much more ominous, all marked by a deed-like impact on the actual. The minister's flair for prophetic speech passes on to Hester. The two characters have ventriloquized each other before: Dimmesdale at Governor Bellingham's mansion, where he pleaded with the colony's leaders to let Hester keep Pearl; and Hester in the forest scene, where the emotionally and physically drained pastor implored her to "Think for me....Thou art strong. Resolve for me!" (I 196). (Hester's counsel to her lover, "Preach! Write! Act!" [I 198], suggests her stake in articulation as intervention.)

In the novel's "Conclusion," the heroine picks up the mantle of seer that Dimmesdale has left behind—or half picks it up. The final pages are a study in ambiguity. Hawthorne explicitly states that Hester will not be the prophetess of a new truth about gender roles. But he also says that the wearer of the scarlet letter firmly assures her listeners of a "coming revelation" in which "the whole relation of man and woman" will be placed "on a surer ground of mutual happiness" (I 263). He has her publicize that belief in precisely the kind of marginalized but quasi-open forum favored by emergent political movements, such as the antebellum struggle for emancipation. Hester, until this moment, has done all her speaking in clandestine or solitary spaces; now she addresses a gathering or, perhaps, a succession of women in her cottage near the settlement, at meetings that could not possibly escape the notice of the governing elders. As with Dimmesdale's election sermon, Hawthorne does not provide us access to Hester's conversations (which recall his contemporary Margaret Fuller as much or more than Anne Hutchinson). He gives us only a digest. Is his restraint another attempt to muzzle the voice of dissent—whose intuition of the future has arguably come true, in our day if not in his? Or does Hawthorne's second-hand account paradoxically betray an awareness of his own lack of distance from the age's polemical tumult, his inevitable implication as a writer in the transformative power of speech?

What is undeniable is that the motif of prophecy moves to center stage in Hawthorne's fiction, and that it acquires ever greater ascendancy over the real. In The House of the Seven Gables, the young boarder in the Pyncheon house, Holgrave, is a writer, lecturer, daguerreotypist, and reformer whose "lawless" (II 85) words bend others to his will. More generally, the members of the Maule family, from whom the pseudonymous Holgrave is descended, have always known how to use language as a weapon. The tradition dates back to Matthew Maule, the progenitor of the line. Maule was wrongly convicted of witchcraft and pronounced a "prophecy" against his persecutor, Colonel Pyncheon. "God will give him blood to drink!" (II 8),
the condemned man cried on the scaffold; his prediction was fulfilled in
the manner of the Colonel’s sudden death, with his beard and ruff
drenched in blood. The Maule family medium, in short, is the curse, the
dark twin of oracular utterance.

The inheritance has taken a slightly less lethal turn in Holgrave. The
“artist” or “author,” as Hawthorne calls him, rails in Emersonian fashion
against the past’s hold on the present. After haranguing Phoebe Pyncheon
about “Dead Men’s houses” such as that of the seven gables (II 183), he pro-
ceeds to read aloud to her one of his magazine contributions entitled “Alice
Pyncheon.” The story revisits the “chimney-corner legend” (II 197) of the
curse and has the grandson of the original wizard, also named Matthew
Maule, assert hypnotic sovereignty over the haughty Alice. This venture
into subterranean discourse, into the sort of scandalous “superstition” the
novel as a whole relegates to the domestic sphere, casts a spell over Phoebe
similar to the one that subjugated Alice. While Holgrave toys with the
thought of “empire over the human spirit,” Hawthorne adverts to his real
target in this scene, the specter of political speech. In an otherwise myster-
ious aside, he mentions the moon melting into the dusk, “like an ambi-
tious demagogue, who hides his aspiring purpose by assuming the
prevalent hue of popular sentiment” (II 212–13). The “artist” catches him-
self in time to waken the half-conscious girl and refuse the mastery con-
ferred by his narrative.

Hawthorne, another artist averse to verbal power, brings Holgrave to
heel in the remainder of the novel, just as he returned the wearer of the scar-
let letter to Puritan Boston and a life of penitence. Holgrave’s renunciation
can no more cleanse the text of disruptive discourse than Hester’s could,
however. The descendant of the Maules recants his radicalism and proposes
marriage to the utterly conventional Phoebe, promising her that he “will
conform [himself] to laws, and the peaceful practice of society” (II 307). Yet
this apostasy, which presumably means that Holgrave will also abandon
authorship, could not have happened without the reassertion of linguistic
dominion. The two young people bond with each other, and declare their
love, over the corpse of Judge Pyncheon; and that grasping hypocrite, like
his forebear the Colonel, was felled by Maule’s curse. (According to Hol-
grave, the Judge’s “mode of death has been an idiosyncrasy with his family,
for generations past” [II 304]). Not even departure from the family mansion
can quell the “legendary.” After the lovers drive off into the sunset, the Pyn-
cheon elm is heard to whisper “unintelligible prophecies” (II 319). As in The
Scarlet Letter, the oracular voice hovers unconciliated over the novel’s final
pages, and conservatism triumphs without getting the better of verbal
agency.
The Blithedale Romance transfers the imperialism of the curse to Zenobia; and Hawthorne, as I have suggested, retaliates against his “dark lady” by sentencing her to a histrionic death. Not only that, the entire novel exposes clairvoyance as a humbug. The subplot of the Veiled Lady, the “Sibylline” (III 6) medium concealed behind a strip of white cloth, brings out the close link between mesmeric soothsaying and the “cold and dead materialism” of Professor Westervelt (III 200). Zenobia is tainted by her collusion with this mountebank, and Priscilla’s supposed second sight draws a blank outside the contrived setting of the public stage: she is quite stumped by Coverdale’s inquiry, “what is about to happen” at Blithedale? (III 143). Hawthorne would have us believe that prophetic intimations, conveyed through speech, are fraudulent when they are not positively evil.

But it is a nice question as to who gets the last word in the narrative, the author or the female character he tries so hard to confound. Hawthorne’s final statement is Miles Coverdale’s weariness with political activism, as well as his equivocal confession of his love for Priscilla—equivocal (and Dimmesdale-like) because Coverdale has seemed completely obsessed with Zenobia. The storytelling and fiery speeches of the anti-heroine, who, though not an accomplished writer, possesses a voice both “living” (III 120) and “inimitable” (III 107), prove much more efficacious. Chapter XIII, significantly called “Zenobia’s Legend,” takes up The House of the Seven Gables’ theme of disreputable but potent speech. Zenobia relates a “wild, spectral” tale (III 107) about “Theodore” and the Veiled Lady that in one possible interpretation predicts Coverdale’s pining for Priscilla and so “certainly accorded with the event” (III 6). (The quoted phrase is the poet’s own formulation, from the first time he watched Priscilla perform.)

Zenobia’s presentiments, scattered throughout the text, escalate in the final pages and assume an unerring authority. She foretells her death—a bit cryptically, perhaps, but such is the nature of oracles—when she announces to Coverdale that he will next see her face “behind the black-veil” (III 228). The river in which she drowns during the night is a “broad, black, inscrutable depth” (III 232); and Zenobia, one might say, has donned the prophetic veil that formerly covered her sister’s countenance, in the process altering its color from silver to the darkness of the curse. (Interestingly, Zenobia’s gift for forecasting seems to be contagious; following the confrontation at Eliot’s Pulpit, no less a character than Coverdale has a dream-premonition in which he correctly divines her suicide.) The clairvoyant-oratress herself waxes bolder and more imperious. After Hollingsworth jilts her for Priscilla (and Priscilla’s money), she exclaims to Coverdale, “Tell him he has murdered me! Tell him that I’ll
haunt him!" According to our narrator, Zenobia “spoke these words with the wildest energy” (III 226); it is not long before they achieve their purpose. We next encounter Hollingsworth several years later near the retired cottage where he dwells with Priscilla. Suffering has reduced him to childlike dependency on his wife, and when he tells Coverdale that he has been busy with but “a single murderer,” the poet instantly recalls Zenobia’s imprecation: “I knew what murderer he meant, and whose vindictive shadow dogged the side where Priscilla was not” (III 243). In the Hawthorne universe, otherwise so dismissive of human action, “mere” words outlive their speaker and prostrate the object of their spite.

A much-quoted passage from The House of the Seven Gables—quoted, rightly, as evidence of Hawthorne’s conservative recoil from human schemes of improvement—urges resignation to the principle that “God is the sole worker of realities” (II 180). But all three of Hawthorne’s American novels qualify that Pierce-like hostility to reform. The not-so-hidden message of the novels, culminating in Zenobia’s curse, is that language rivals God as an engine of transformation. The Deity, Hawthorne would no doubt prefer us to forget, is the model for this conception of speech. The first chapter of the Book of Genesis is the touchstone: “And God said, Let there be light: and there was light...And God said...And God said . . . and it was so.”

Toward the end of The Blithedale Romance, Hawthorne has Zenobia liken herself to “an hereditary bond-slave” (III 217). The comparison reverberates. Is it nothing more than coincidence, a topical reference with no subtext? Or does the analogy amount to an equivocal confession on Hawthorne’s part that the prophetic voice he most feared, heralding the Civil War within a decade, was that raised on behalf of the enslaved?

Notes


(which originally meant any act of extralegal “justice,” not just hanging) is Cutler (1905).


4. The laws banning anti-slavery discourse can be found in *The Border Ruffian Code in Kansas* (1855), 1–2. For the 1860 election, see Ollinger Crenshaw (1945).

5. Some important treatments of the American romantics and the struggle over slavery are Len Gougeon (1990), Gregg D. Crane (2002), and Martin Klammer (1995).

6. Although the topic of feminism is beyond the scope of this essay, one cannot ignore the fact that Hawthorne’s “anti-slavery” prophet is a woman. Margaret Fuller, the probable inspiration for Zenobia, repeatedly analogized between the plight of women and that of African slaves. Fuller writes of abolitionists in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845): “And this band it is, which, partly from a natural following out of principles, partly because many women have been prominent in that cause, makes, just now, the warmest appeal in behalf of woman” (15).