Hawthorne and the Problem of “American” Fiction: The Example of *The Scarlet Letter*

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This essay is intended as a kind of contemporary equivalent to Lionel Trilling’s (1964) landmark centennial assessment of changing conceptions of the tenor of Hawthorne’s work. Trilling’s “Our Hawthorne” concentrated on a particular shift in critical perception from the delicate ironist imaged by Henry James to the troubled Kafka-esque Hawthorne described by Herman Melville but not prevalent until the twentieth century. Hawthorne emerges from this analysis both as a moving target fascinating in and of itself and as a barometer of changing dispensations of critical inquiry (Trilling). Since Trilling wrote, the variability and contestedness of the “essential” Hawthorne and his legacy, or legacies, have been further underscored by such excellent influence/reception studies as Richard Brodhead’s *The School of Hawthorne* (1986) and by a plethora of fictive reworkings of his plots, particularly *The Scarlet Letter*. Not only is the issue of what ought to count as “our” Hawthorne far more problematic now than it seemed in 1964. To reflect seriously about the issue through a turn-of-the-twenty-first-century lens also requires engaging the much vaster question of what ought to count as “American” literary history. The case of Hawthorne’s masterpiece demonstrates this especially.
The Scarlet Letter holds a unique place in Anglo-American literary history. It was the book that made Hawthorne famous, his most incontestably “perfect” book, the book most crucial in establishing him as the most consummate artist in American fiction before James. James was not alone in looking back upon it as a landmark event in U.S. literary emergence: “Something might at last be sent to Europe as exquisite in quality as anything that had been received” (James [1878] 1984, 403).

The Scarlet Letter’s exquisite self-circumscription has been held against it as well. James thought it lacked passion. New historicists have seen it as evading the slavery issue, or giving aid and comfort to a conservative consensualism through some of the very strategies of ambiguation that make it so aesthetically resplendent (Arac 1986). Fault has been found with the practice of making this text and/or “Hawthorne” generally so central to the narrative U.S. literary history, as in Jane Tompkins’s argument that Hawthorne’s high critical reputation relative to the “scribbling woman” he denounced is an artifact of a “dynastic cultural elite” (Tompkins 1985, 30). Yet The Scarlet Letter will surely continue to be a key reference point for U.S. literary history. It remains the single most taught long work of premodern American literature. Although far from being the earliest U.S. novel of consequence, it is widely looked upon as “the inaugural text of the indigenous canon” (Gilmore 2003, 84). Were a vote taken among Americanist critics as to the first indisputable Anglo-American classic in the genre, The Scarlet Letter would almost surely win.

This status derives not just from its qualities as a freestanding text but from its historical representation and historical impact. Among major premodern U.S. fictions, The Scarlet Letter comes closest to rendering a myth of national origins. It has also become a masterplot for American writers, from Harold Frederic (The Damnation of Theron Ware) and Henry James to Toni Morrison (Beloved) and Bharati Mukherjee (The Holder of the World). In this sense James was prophetic in his explanation of why, in addition to its craftsmanship, The Scarlet Letter seemed “in the United States a literary event of the first importance.” For “the best of it was that the thing was absolutely American; it belonged to the soil, to the air; it came out of the very heart of New England” (James [1878] 1984, 402, 403).

Some have not found the connection between Americanness and Hawthornian romance so self-evident. In a contentious essay as significant in its own way as James’s assessment a decade later, novelist J. W. DeForest looked in vain for “The Great American Novel” he wished to call into
being. Hawthorne, “the greatest of American imaginations,” was part of the problem. His “personages” seemed to “belong to the wide realm of art rather than to our nationality,” to be “as probably natives of the furthest mountains of Cathay or of the moon as of the United States of America” (DeForest 1868, 28). This was actually quite close to the view Hawthorne himself expressed in his Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (3):

The personages of the tale—though they give themselves out to be of ancient stability and considerable prominence—are really of the author’s own making, or, at all events, of his own mixing. . . . He would be glad, therefore, if . . . the book may be read strictly as a Romance, having a great deal more to do with the clouds overhead than with any portion of the actual soil of the County of Essex.

Of course, in *this* instance Hawthorne had a special interest in distancing himself from actual personages and locale (to ward off charges of libel), whereas “The Custom-House” makes the opposite appeal—to lococentricity and provincial antiquarianism—under the guise of observing the law of literary “propriety” that justifies an account of how the “authentic” manuscript came into the author’s possession (4). Hawthorne scholarship has demonstrated the accuracy of *The Scarlet Letter*’s historical geography (Ryskamp 1959), and the uncanny correspondence of its plot and two main protagonists with those of the Antinomian Controversy (Colacurcio 1972). But these meticulous historical readings also presuppose a detached cosmopolitan intelligence. It wasn’t just a dodge for Hawthorne to claim that *Seven Gables* came from cloudland, nor was he concealing his dependence on documentary sources in affirming of *The Scarlet Letter* that, save for “the authenticity of the outline,” he had allowed himself “nearly or altogether as much license as if the facts had been entirely of my own invention” (33).

Americanists, who constitute the overwhelming majority of Hawthorne scholars, have generally read such disclaimers in the spirit of James rather than of DeForest: as attempts to claim elbow room for romantic stylization without taking his protestations of detachment from native place and history too seriously. Even if Hawthorne invokes New England and/or national ideology only to dismantle it, surely the cultural reference point remains U.S.-ness, New England-ness, post-Puritanness, antebellum ideological ferment.

Lately, however, a more quizzical conception of *The Scarlet Letter*’s investment in the national has begun to emerge. “Underlying the primary attention given to New England history in the novel,” has been descried “a
subsurface of English history that Hawthorne has carefully structured in order to examine American Puritans within a framework larger than the provincial boundaries of New England” (Newberry 1987, 168). Again and again “residual attachments to Old World culture and theology” seem to “permeate the consciousness of these emigrant characters” (Giles 1962, 178), making *The Scarlet Letter* as much a text about cultural migration and diaspora as a text about settlement, founding, and the Puritan origins of national culture. Hester and Pearl seem more like creatures of the author’s fascination with the “Orient” than figures who belong in a Puritan colonial setting (Luedtke 1989, 181–87). And what are we to make of the oddity that a text so influential for national letters as *The Scarlet Letter* should be so tenuously affiliated, so tenuously committed in its own cultural allegiances? We need to rethink once more that penultimate flourish in “The Custom-House,” “I am a citizen of somewhere else” (44).

The old, now widely discredited way of thinking about such a remark only takes us back to Americanness again: Hawthorne was declaring allegiance to the romance mode because the cultural “thinness” of the comparatively young, open country made impossible the thick social representations of the novel. From such fictions as his (and Cooper’s and Melville’s and others), the distinctive shape of the “American novel” took form. So it was once thought. We can do better than that, better too than anti-romance revisionist theory has done. To do so, at the risk of seeming perverse I should like to start at the very end of *The Scarlet Letter* and work back from there.

*The Scarlet Letter* confirms its residual skepticism about the possibility of radical breaks and new departures by ending with a glimpse of the spot where Hester Prynne is buried, next to the “old and sunken grave” of Arthur Dimmesdale, with a space between but a single tombstone marking both, those markings worn by the weathering of two hundred years. “On this simple slab of slate,

— as the curious investigator may still discern, and perplex himself with the purport—there appeared the semblance of an engraved escutcheon. It bore a device, a herald’s wording of which might serve for a motto and brief description of our now concluded legend; so sombre is it, and relieved only by one ever-glowing point of light gloomier than the shadow:—

“ON A FIELD SABLE, THE LETTER A, GULES”

Well indeed might “the curious investigator” be perplexed, so encrypted is this passage. To be sure, there is an obvious return-to-starting-point fitness to the book’s ending: Chapter 1 mentions the cemetery, in the same breath
as the prison, as being among a colonial government’s first allotments of space for public use; and “The Custom-House” is suffused with elegiac images of burial, exhumation, and mystified musing à propos the musty packet containing the “original narrative” of Surveyor Pue. But so strange a return! What seems as if it ought to be a distinct visual image cannot be visualized. The basic idea is plain enough: a red letter against a black background. But the rhetoric is teasingly oblique. The carving on the gravestone is rendered neither quite as language nor quite as picture, but via the arcane semiotics of heraldry.

To be sure, it is typical of Hawthorne’s colonial tales to proliferate emblematic schemata and instill a sense of remoteness of past from present. They squint back at quaint old tombstones, houses, furniture, and other colonial artifacts from an immense aesthetic distance, like Henry Thoreau prompted by an old painting of seventeenth-century Concord to wonder whether real people could truly have existed then. In this Hawthorne and Thoreau were both engaging in a familiar ritual of romanticized gothicization of the Puritan primordium and revealing themselves—more than they let on—as children of the early industrial age, the first generation to undergo what we now call future shock. Yet The Scarlet Letter’s closing scene feels alien even by that standard. Though identified as a particular burying-ground, the colony’s first, it feels more like an English graveyard than a New England one, whose old slabs generally sported no such adornments. Is the reader to assume the design is the work of the grown-up Pearl, the new world’s richest heiress long since resocialized into old-world elegance? Might it also, or alternatively, be a potshot at the rising interest in pedigree among northeastern elite families as the nineteenth century unfolded? (The New England Historic Genealogical Society, the nation’s first such organization, had been founded just five years before the novel’s publication.) In any case, the inscription is atypical of standard colonial and antebellum funerary design.

But I want to concentrate especially on a still more occluded element: the intertextual palimpsest the heraldic reference creates. The text here recalls two passages by classic English writers that turn on the symbolic contrast of sable and gules. One is the concluding stanza of the English Puritan poet Andrew Marvell’s “The Unfortunate Lover,” a weirdly contorted metaphysical lyric that dates from the approximate time of Hawthorne’s plot. The other is a passage from Walter Scott’s “Introduction” to Waverley, the first in the series of fictionalized renderings of Scottish history from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century that secured his reputation as the father of the historical romance, Hawthorne’s own genre. Neither of these texts is unknown to Hawthorne criticism, but neither have they been much discussed (cf. Gale 315, Stubbs 175–76).
This is the only Banneret
That ever Love created yet:
Who though, by the Malignant Starrs,
Forced to live in Storms and Warrs;
Yet dying leave a Perfume here,
And Musick within every Ear:
And he in Story only rules
In a Field Sable a Lover Gules. (Marvell 1: 29)

[My story will emphasize] those passions common to men in all stages of society, and which have alike agitated the human heart, whether it throbbed under the steel corslet of the fifteenth century, the brocaded coat of the eighteenth, or the blue rock and white dimity waistcoat of the present day. Upon these passions it is no doubt true that the state of manners and laws casts a necessary colouring; but the bearings, to use the language of heraldry, remain the same. . . . The wrath of our ancestors, for example, was colored gules; it broke forth in acts of open and sanguinary violence against the objects of its fury. Our malignant feelings, which must seek gratification through more indirect channels, and undermine the obstacles which they cannot openly bear down, may be rather said to be tinctured sable. But the deep-ruling impulse is the same in both cases; and the proud peer who can now only ruin his neighbor according to law, by protracted suits, is the genuine descendant of the baron, who wrapped the castle of his competitor in flames, and knocked him on the head as he endeavoured to escape from the conflagration. It is from the great book of Nature, the same through a thousand editions, whether of black-letter, or wire-wove and hot-pressed, that I have venturiously essayed to read a chapter to the public. (Scott 1901, 1:13–14)

We cannot be sure if Hawthorne had either passage consciously in mind, though almost certainly he knew them both. He was an attentive reader of Renaissance allegorical poetry, and he read and reread Scott, “his boyhood favorite among novelists” (Dekker 1987, 131), from youth until near his death. In any case, the passages underscore fundamental implications of the main plot: that love-longing is fulfilled in fantasy, not in real life, and that ancient and modern forms of deviance and oppression are nonidentical but akin. Hawthorne’s romance fuses the discrepant sable-gules polarities from the two pre-texts. Marvell and Scott use heraldry to achieve a stylized diagnostic control over very different passions. For Marvell, the passion of love;
for Scott, aggression. Marvell’s sable/gules antithesis refers to violently conflicted emotions within the lover, which can be resolved only in a certain kind of idealizing story. Scott’s antithesis is between different kinds of revenge. *The Scarlet Letter* subsumes both antitheses within its dominant polarity between the one passion and the other: love versus patriarchal repression, whether exerted from without or from within.

Would the author of *The Scarlet Letter*—supposing him to have had these pre-texts in mind—have expected readers to catch the allusions? I suspect not, seeing that a basic gestalt of some sort can be grasped without perceiving the esoterica, although it piquantly enhances the effect when you do. You’re bound to feel a sense of the story of Hester and Dimmesdale being converted into “legend” even if you remain oblivious to the antecedent realms of legend—all the more so given that the scene of graveyard pondering was a stock memorial and literary device in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” and the frame narrative of Scott’s *Old Mortality* being familiar to most middle-class readers of Hawthorne’s day.

To catch the two more deeply buried allusions helps make better sense of the ending’s strangeness, however. The injection of heraldry seems less freakish, seems indeed a sophisticated preemption of tradition by a mind steeped in the Anglo-European inheritance. For Marvell, the device urbanely evokes such courtly love topoi as the typical lover’s proverbial throes. Only in never-never land can he attain the apotheosis of the banneret (knighthood on the spot for valor in the field of battle). Abstraction underscores the remoteness of the prospect. Scott’s invocation of the topos is more complex, simultaneously bringing the past nearer and exoticizing the bourgeois present by the parallel to bygone feudalism. But here, too, the formal sable versus gules contrast urbanely rises above and displaces the phenomenon of aggression by rendering it as design. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the two levels of signification merge (the contortions of love and the aggressions of patriarchy), and on Scott’s complex terms, dramatizing a counterpoint of opposition versus affinity between the then and the now.

In so doing, Hawthorne and his precursors also emphasize something timeless, perennial, about their stories. Costumes differ, emotions remain the same. Marvell’s hapless wight is a perennial lover-loser. *The Scarlet Letter*’s quiet affiliation with these texts helps establish its story not just as a Puritan tale but also as part and parcel of Euro-diasporic collective memory stretching back to the Middle Ages. Hawthorne’s redeployment of the sable-gules schema is no more hermetically American than filmmaker Akira Kurosawa’s retelling of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* in *Ran* is hermetically Japanese.
The more we start to think of Hawthorne in relation to figures like Scott and Marvell, the less *The Scarlet Letter* looks like a text firmly and unshakably embedded within a line of American descent from Puritan history or as a critique of American Transcendentalism or nineteenth-century American Victorian moralism. The more it makes sense that the precursor to which Henry James thought to liken it was Scottish writer John Gibson Lockhart’s *Adam Blair* (1822), a novel of ministerial adultery in an old-world puritanical culture. The more it begins to make sense that the first rewriting of *The Scarlet Letter* was not an American novel but George Eliot’s *Adam Bede*. It, too, is a historical fiction that features a pair of illicit lovers named Hester and Arthur, with an illegitimate child—also in a provincial social context that intensifies the mixture of guilt, suffering, and repression. Why should not an English country town of the turn of the nineteenth century be every bit as promising a venue for a Hester-Arthur story as seventeenth-century New England?

That is not the way the majority of Hawthorne scholars, who are mostly Americanists, have been conditioned to think about Hawthorne’s legacy. We are much more inclined to think of Hawthorne in relation to William Faulkner or John Updike or Toni Morrison than to compare him to George Eliot, even though Eliot is on record as declaring Hawthorne “a grand favorite of mine” (Eliot 1954–78, 2: 52). The underlying assumption is that Hawthorne was a classic American writer chiefly of importance to “our” literary history as an agent of U.S. literary emergence and the propagation of distinctive strains in national fiction thereafter.

With one side of his mind this was also how Hawthorne himself thought. He was attracted to the idea of writing “tales of my native land” (the working title of an early, uncompleted project). He was one of the several dozen antebellum New England authors who answered lawyer-orator Rufus Choate’s call for a series of New England-based fictions—in a lecture given in Hawthorne’s native Salem, Massachusetts—that would rival Scott’s Waverley novels (Choate 1852, 1: 319–46). Hawthorne was by far the most talented of the lot (Bell). Historically ordered, his colonial tales together with his first three book-length romances constitute an episodic epic of New England history from the first generation of settlement through Transcendentalist communitarianism.

Yet with another side of his mind, Hawthorne doubted whether a distinctively national fiction or narrative was possible or even desirable. Much of his late writing was devoted to the Anglo-American connection and unfinished romances of ancestral linkage and/or inheritance. His American masterpiece indicates a hesitancy about the viability of the story of an autonomous American history repeated soon afterward in seriocomic form
in his last published historical tale, “Main-Street,” in which an earnest, vol-
uble, but self-undermining showman attempts to stage a series of tableaux
of colonial history to a marginally invested audience of townsmen, only to
break down during the Great Snow of 1717 when his crude mechanical con-
trivance fails. So much for the patriotic boosterism of Rufus Choate.

In The Scarlet Letter, likewise, the story of Hester and Arthur is not
shown as having any lasting American issue. The mother country is pic-
tured wistfully as a place of healthy vitality and merriment, the new world
of Puritan Boston seen as a diminished shadowland by contrast. “We have
yet to learn again the forgotten art of gaiety,” the narrator sighs (232) as he
describes the book’s one festive scene. “The Custom-House” portrays a
nineteenth-century America already moribund. That this was an age of
unparalleled national expansion and economic growth one could never tell
from Hawthorne’s essay. The author’s home town is in decay. The country
doesn’t seem to be going anywhere. That is perhaps the most strikingly
idiosyncratic aspect of this novel’s vision of history: not its representation
of Puritan nostalgia for the mother country (for many Puritans did return
home, as Hawthorne would have known); not the comparison between
Puritan austerity and latter-day lightening-up (already a cliché in
Hawthorne’s day), but rather the sense that the whole new world experi-
ment may be fizzling out. Two centuries of New England history end in the
anticlimax of the aptly named Custom-House.

This was not, of course, the biographical Hawthorne’s full view of the
matter. In other moods, George Dekker usefully reminds us, “Hawthorne
could argue earnestly that the sadly imperfect liberal democracy nurtured
in the United States, and especially in New England, was the best hope of
mankind” (Dekker 1987, 170). This may even have been his prevailing view
as a citizen. But it was not a view that Hawthorne could make prevail in
either his fictive renditions of New England or in his history for children,
Grandfather’s Chair, neither of which manages to draw the line between
colonial New England and the present-day national efflorescence that was
axiomatic to the likes of Choate and Daniel Webster, not to mention the
New England-dominated schoolbook industry of Hawthorne’s day. In The
Scarlet Letter, the one moment during either the introduction or the
romance proper that the grand narrative is told with any enthusiasm, it
remains inaudible and suspect. That is the point before the denouement
when Dimmesdale sermonizes on the glorious destiny of New England—
a standard topic for ministers on certain ceremonial occasions, then and
(even more) in Hawthorne’s day. The Scarlet Letter makes sure to put the
reader at a great distance from this performance—outside the church
alongside Hester, who doesn’t catch a word of it. All we know for sure is
that Dimmesdale is in an abnormal and agitated state. His rapturous prophecy is not to be believed.

The skepticism Hawthorne generally evinces toward historical pieties in both “The Custom-House” and *The Scarlet Letter* has generally been explained in Americanist terms. Lauren Berlant brilliantly reads Hawthorne as offering “a counter-National Symbolic marked by a hermeneutic of negativity and defamiliarization” (Berlant 1991, 34). Catherine Jones, in a thoughtful comparative discussion of the uses of history and tradition in Hawthorne and Scott, sees in Hawthorne a distinctly American tendency to disown the past. (“The self-definition of America precludes direct access to a continuous folk memory” [Jones 2000, 136].) There is much to be said for these views of the case: the image of Hawthornian narrative practice as a process of wily skeptical negotiation within certain forms of ideological blockage attendant upon his inevitable embeddedness within his national and/or regional culture at a particular point in time. But we also need to question the prior assumption that the most fruitful way to situate Hawthorne should be in terms of his or his text’s standing as an “American” discourse, whether acquiescent or dissenting. The cosmopolitanism of perspective that his historical fictions imply in the course of engaging in their provincial struggles—as with *The Scarlet Letter*’s glimpses backward to the motherland, or the intertextual knot at the close—may indeed be so construed, but it is hardly imperative so to construe them. Hester’s return to Boston to her old role as letter-wearer, which Sacvan Bercovitch reads—thoughtfully, subtly, learnedly—as an enactment of the national covenant of consent (Bercovitch 1991),6 might also be conceived as confirmation of the impoverished options to which the decision to emigrate condemns one. The old world past cannot be disowned in this romance because the new world avatar is only a diminished version of the old. The reduction of the protagonists to ghosts of their former selves shows this plainly enough. Dimmesdale “had come from one of the great English universities, bringing all the learning of the new age into our wild forest-land” (66). It’s all downhill from there. Internalization of the provincial thought police socializes him into such timidity that Hester’s challenge in the forest (“[B]e a scholar and a sage among the wisest and the most renowned of the cultivated world. Preach! Write! Act!”) sickens rather than invigorates him (198). Hester’s mind, by contrast, expands to the point that she assumes “a freedom of speculation, then common enough on the other side of the Atlantic.” But by colonial Puritan standards this is “a deadlier crime than that stigmatized by the scarlet letter” (164). In this brave new world, what Hester has become cannot socially exist. Despite the fact that *The Scarlet Letter* takes place entirely on American soil, despite its attention to colonial culture and institutions,
despite its having been written in the heyday of national expansion, it remains at heart a diasporic rather than a nativized imagination of place, in the sense that the standard of cultural vitality remains transatlantic and colonial life and culture by contrast diminished, underactualized, and without issue—with characters, narrator, author all self-consciously detached from the new world place that is supposed to be their habitat.

As such, *The Scarlet Letter* seems less a reflection on issues of national consensus and less a template for narratives of American nationalization than a story of transnational dislocation whose investment in issues of nationhood is peripheral at best. To the extent that we take it as a barometric indicator or reference point for new world imagination, its closest affiliations are narratives of rebuffed or imperfect assimilation of a place conceived through unassimilated eyes as alien ground, from the narratives of Mary Rowlandson and Olaudah Equiano to James’s *The Europeans* to Cather’s *O Pioneers!* and Flannery O’Connor’s “The Displaced Person” to Chang Rae Lee’s *Native Speaker* and *A Gesture Life*. Like all these texts and others like them, *The Scarlet Letter* does not so much insinuate “Here is national fiction” as pose the question: “Can there be such a thing?” or “Why should there be?”

Here, then, is the “problem of ‘American’ fiction” *The Scarlet Letter* exemplifies and to which the title of this essay alludes. The cultural work that *The Scarlet Letter* has been made to perform is not quite the work it undertakes to perform. The book is arguably not an “American” performance so much as one that critical and creative repossessions have by and large tended to Americanize in ways that play down its cosmopolitan and deracinated aspects. In this respect, it is hardly unique among the canonical writings of our literary history. On the contrary, the larger significance of belaboring the point at hand is precisely that it is exemplary of a much larger-scale foreshortening of vista. The foreshortening I have described is akin to the centripetalism that leads Americanists to claim Equiano as an “American” writer or to block out the transnationalism of (say) Melville’s account of business culture in “Bartleby the Scrivener” (Why not Dickens? Why not Gogol? Why not Joyce’s “Counterparts”?). The examples are endless, especially for immigrant and expatriate writing. But *The Scarlet Letter* is an especially imposing case, insofar as more than any other premodern American novel it has come to stand as a point of origin in the history of American literary-cultural emergence and as a
point of textual origin for later artists. Few other novels have seemed for so many critics so pivotal for the solidification of national historical imagination.

Indeed, the sequence of American reinventions of *The Scarlet Letter* plot from Frederic and James to Updike and Mukherjee—the legacy of Hawthorne’s masterpiece as a master-plot for national writers—has unquestionably helped to create a solider sense of national literary tradition than Hawthorne could ever have felt. The ironic effect of this remarkable success story is its tendency to distract one from how desolidifying a text *The Scarlet Letter* is—although the plethora of rewritings testifies to that, too. “Most persons of ability,” Emerson remarks, “meet in society with a kind of tacit appeal,” as if to imply “I am not all there” (Emerson 1971–, 3: 127). *The Scarlet Letter* imparts just such an impression through its structural tightness, its laconic restraint of emotional tone, and its oscillation of narrative judgment—suggesting tortuous, self-conflicted operation within the reluctant confines of the mind’s own making. Among the various explanations for the amount of exegesis and reenactment that *The Scarlet Letter* has provoked, one is that its uneasy, self-conscious narratorial reticence invites second-guessing reappraisal and active rewriting of the author’s version of his own tale. That is why it is not utterly outrageous for the 1990s Hollywood adaptation of *The Scarlet Letter* to end with the Indians rescuing Hester, Dimmesdale, and Pearl and burning down Boston. For the narrator repeatedly emits signals to the effect that he might wish that things could work out differently, even though he fears they can’t and (in some moods, particularly near the end) agrees they shouldn’t.

One of the book’s early reviewers praised *The Scarlet Letter* on just such grounds: for the author’s ethical restraint, allowing “his guilty parties to end, not as his own fancy or his own benevolent sympathies might dictate, but as the spiritual laws, lying back of all persons dictated to him” (Whipple 346). Modern readers have tended by contrast to long for a breakaway from the book’s self-imposed emotional/ethical/ideological confines—most especially as they constrain its heroine. So Frederic I. Carpenter, in the classic essay in this vein, assigns Hawthorne a grade of A-minus for inability to get past “emotional” to full “intellectual” realization of Hester’s potential for “embodying the authentic American dream of freedom and independence in the new world” (Carpenter 1944, 180). Since the advent of critical feminist studies, debate around the general issue of whether the narrative undercuts Hester has continued—at a far higher level of sophistication—as in Nina Baym’s defenses of *The Scarlet Letter’s* feminism (“Hester has certainly changed the Puritans more than they have changed her”) and David Leverenz’s critique of its misogyny (Baym 1986, 29; cf.
Baym 1976, 142–51; Leverenz 1983). Even more variable have been the fic-
tive rewritings of Hester, such as Frederic’s flirtatiously sophisticated Celia
Madden; Faulkner’s matriarch-victim Addie Bundren; Updike’s wily, self-
indulgent, misnamed Sarah Worth; and Mukherjee’s picaresque world-
traveling Hannah Easton. Read them in a series, throw in for good measure
the filmic Hesters from Lilian Gish to Demi Moore, and well might the
curious interpreter perplex him or herself with the question: “Whose
Hawthorne?”

Even if one agrees that *The Scarlet Letter* is the kind of text that provokes
revision, it does not follow that the revisions thereby provoked will ques-
tion the legitimacy of reading Hawthorne in Americanist terms. Indeed,
few of the just-mentioned texts do so. One that does, however, and with a
metahistorical self-consciousness whose perspicacity compensates for its
intervals of zany froth, is Mukherjee’s *The Holder of the World* (1993). This
novel is equally instructive for its resistance to *The Scarlet Letter’s* status as
a founding document in the history of imagined nationness and for the
form in which it eventually succumbs to a version of the temptation that it
critiques in Hawthorne.

*The Holder of the World* features a female latter-day narrator, Beigh Master-
s, who, like Hawthorne, is a skilled historian conscious of her family’s
New England antecedence, nominally engaged in money-making (“asset
management”) but overtaken—more wholeheartedly than Surveyor
Hawthorne—by an identification with the novel’s primary Hester-figure,
Hannah. (*Holder* also features two other characters provocatively named
Hester.) This Hannah is not an immigrant but a Massachusetts frontier
child whose widowed still-youthful mother deserts her during King Philip’s
War for the sake of her Indian lover. Thus begins a picaresque plot that takes
Hannah through a Puritan girlhood in Salem, brief residence in London,
then to the original India—the obverse transit from that of the Indo-Amer-
ican author. There she becomes the mistress of the ruler of a Hindu state,
fleeing it after his death (which she unintentionally helps bring about) at the
hands of the Moghul emperor in order to return to New England with her
unborn child, predictably named Pearl. The shady merchant-pirate who
whisks her from Salem to England to India is a blow-up of the swashbuck-
ling sea captain who makes a cameo appearance near the end of *The Scarlet
Letter*, contracting to take Hester, Dimmesdale, and Pearl back to England.
Hannah’s marriage to Gabriel Legge, in order to escape stultifying Salem, is
one of several exploitations of *The Scarlet Letter’s* fleeting glimpses of the
wider, livelier world beyond—and behind—the infant colony.7

Hannah’s extrication from her stiff, monitory Puritan foster-parents
does not save her from a series of irksome domestic enclosures thereafter.
But it makes for a vertiginous and mind-expanding peripeteia starkly different from The Scarlet Letter’s intense confinement. Hawthorne multiculturalized, Hawthorne transnationalized, Hawthorne in technicolor. Holder wants to put the New England experiment in the global Anglophone context just barely visible in Hawthorne’s text: to connect the remotest ends of Empire, and dramatize in the process the hyperactive, raffish fortuity of colonial enterprise, as against the tightly regimented affair The Scarlet Letter foregrounds. Significantly, two of the clues by means of which the narrator reconstructs Hannah’s lifeline are a youthful fantasy-sampler of “the uttermost shore”—yes, like Hester Prynne, Hannah is deft with the needle—and an Indian artist’s renditions of “the Salem Bibi”: two happenstance mirror images of the termini of the Anglophone world.

In all this one sees a more lighthearted version of Carpenter’s judgmentalism: The Scarlet Letter lacked the courage of its best convictions. Hawthorne “shied away from the real story of the brave Salem mother and her illegitimate daughter,” even though it was Hannah’s “stories of the China and India trade” that induced Hawthorne’s great-grandfather to become the first of the clan to go to sea (Mukherjee 1993, 283–85). In applying her corrective, Mukherjee’s narrator far outdoes “The Custom-House”’s ponderously whimsical anecdote of imagined reconnection with the past, when the surveyor puts the moth-eaten letter to his chest and feels that strange, unexpected pulsation of heat. With the aid of virtual reality simulation software designed by her Indian boyfriend, an MIT researcher, Beigh is transported back to the moment Hannah and her servant-companion Bhagmati (whom she has renamed Hester after a childhood friend) are fleeing the emperor with “the world’s most perfect diamond.” One-upping Hawthorne, Beigh feels the diamond as it is handed off by faltering Hannah to the fleeing Bhagmati/Hester, feels herself mowed down by the sharpshooter’s bullets that mortally wound Bhagmati, then feels herself wield Bhagmati’s knife and “plunge the diamond into the deepest part of me” (283). The boyfriend’s program doesn’t get Beigh precisely where she’d expected—into Hannah’s mind/body—but at least she meets Hannah (virtually) face to face.

Given Holder’s insistence on deterritorializing Hawthorne, one of its most arresting moves is its Americanization of the denouement. Mukherjee’s Hester and Pearl come back to New England to stay. What’s more, they come back as proto-republican libertarians. “We are Americans to freedom born!” White Pearl and Black Pearl [their local nicknames] were heard to mutter, the latter even in school.” Holder here sets itself against Hawthorne’s “morbid introspection into guilt and repression that many call our greatest work. . . . He wrote,” she adds, “against the fading of the
light, the dying of the old program, the distant memory of a shameful, heroic time,” whereas this novel seeks to “bring alive the first letter of an alphabet of hope and of horror stretching out, and back to the uttermost shores” (285, 286). This is intriguingly congruent with Colacurco’s and Bercovitch’s diagnoses of a Hawthorne fascinated by America’s Puritan origins—although *Holder* posits a(n even) more culturally embedded Hawthorne and arrives at the diagnosis through a very different route: locating national beginnings in the experience of global roaming rather than in the localized Puritan experiment per se.

*Holder* might have given *The Scarlet Letter* more credit for anticipatory resistance to Americanist-centripetal historical criticism. For *The Scarlet Letter* anticipates something of Mukherjee’s geocultural plenitude at those moments when it pauses to wonder whether “we perhaps exaggerate the gray or sable tinge” of early Puritan manners, when, after all, these “were native Englishmen, whose fathers had lived in the sunny richness of the Elizabethan epoch; a time when the life of England, viewed as one great mass, would appear to have been as stately, magnificent, and joyous, as the world has ever witnessed” (230). Asides like this one show that the author was aware—as was his heroine—that *The Scarlet Letter*’s here and now was not the whole seventeenth-century world, certainly not the whole Anglophone world and indeed not even the whole world of early Massachusetts settlement culture. Such passages are calculated fissures in the seeming monolith, standing invitations to tell this provincial tale differently if one feels so moved. But nothing more than hints. *The Scarlet Letter* finally leaves it to the curious inquirer to decide whether to read the book more as an open secret (deliberately a fragment of all that it knows might be said) or as a closed book (a resolutely self-contained local tale “of human frailty and sorrow” [48] notwithstanding whatever cracks and fissures). *The Holder of the World* seems—too hastily—to have presumed the latter intent, at least for the purpose of establishing by contrast its own wider geocultural horizon.

Mukherjee is not alone in this sort of rewriting. English novelist Christopher Bigsbys concurrent *Hester* (1994) is in some ways an even more de-centered retelling than *The Holder of the World*. Its best energies are devoted to the in-England, voyage-over, and pre-*Scarlet Letter* backstory of Hester’s involvements with Chillingworth and Dimmesdale. Bigsbys elaboration of Hawthorne’s Hester’s memory-snatches, on the scaffold, of her former family and married life are comparable to Mukherjee’s exfoliation of Hawthorne’s skipper into Gabriel Legge; and the result is almost as much of a re-Englishing of *The Scarlet Letter* as *Adam Bede*. The New England phase of the novel, particularly the recapitulation of *The
Scarlet Letter plotline, is perfunctory by comparison to the earlier life and adventures of the three principals. Holder of the World expends an even smaller percentage of text than Hester on American shores; but it is careful to begin in New England initially so as to make its protagonist an American original whose idiosyncracies are brought out, broadened, then returned home through globalization. The contrast makes sense in light of Mukherjee’s insistence that “I am an American writer, in the American mainstream, trying to extend it . . . I am not an Indian writer, not an exile, not an expatriate. I am an immigrant” (Alam 1996, 11). So Holder of the World, relative to Hester, participates in the “Americanization” of The Scarlet Letter, even as it critiques Hawthorne for Yankee parochialism. Participates not only in the sense that Holder finally becomes still another self-identified American writer’s rewriting of an American classic, but also in that it strives to make its version of The Scarlet Letter into an image of reflection on Americanness no less strenuously than do (say) Updike or Berlant or Bercovitch in their own quite different ways. So too with Toni Morrison’s Beloved, whose reweaving of the tropes of the pariah-mother, the elf-child, and remembered diaspora turned potential cul de sac constitute in its own way perhaps the single most brilliant contemporary heterodox re-Americanization of The Scarlet Letter plot, though less to my purpose here since for Morrison The Scarlet Letter is a secondary and more occluded pre-text.8

Altogether, the 500-year palimpsest from Marvell to Mukherjee reviewed here shows, I hope, that the absorption of The Scarlet Letter as American discourse makes cultural-historical sense, but that it is not the only plausible outcome. The romance offers itself as a portable archetype. “The Puritan community in The Scarlet Letter,” as Baym declares, can be thought of as “a symbol of society in general” (Baym 1976, 141). Solemn visitants to Hester’s grave who “on a certain day still lay blood-red roses in the tangled grass,” opines Bigsby’s narrator in similarly generalizing fashion, “tell the story of a woman’s love and of man’s capacity for good and ill” (Bigsby 1994, 186). England, New England, India, the essential story is the same, one might argue. This is not to deny the presence of cultural particulars. Bercovitch writes no less cogently that “Hawthorne rendered Puritan intolerance more vividly than any other historical novelist,” because “better than any other” he understood the complexities of Puritanism “as an interpretive community” (emphasis in original)—as well as both the dead and living dimensions of that legacy for the nineteenth century (Bercovitch 1991, 48). But then again, insofar as Puritanism itself is diasporic, one might reply that Hawthorne’s chief glory is of a transcultural kind: to have represented Puritan doctrines “as an expression of an
enduring states of the human soul,” or to have rendered Puritanism “lyrically, with a purity of intensity of focus which makes it, for the time, inescapable” (Manning 1990, 181). And beyond that, insofar as the Puritan experiment in Massachusetts was but a variant manifestation of the Anglophone diaspora generally, an experiment itself fissiparous and pluriform, should not a more sprawling and unglued diasporic rendition like Mukherjee’s be prized, however fanciful at certain points?

There is no end to such rumination. No end to the reinterpretations and the retellings. After 150 years, it is clear that the percolation effect of The Scarlet Letter won’t diminish anytime soon, and with it the multiplication of possible Hawthornes. Lionel Trilling anticipated this, though somewhat grudgingly. For Trilling, some versions (the modernist) were undeniably closer to the true Hawthorne than others (James’s), and there seemed something wrong with Hawthorne’s artistry “in the degree that he does not dominate us” but leaves us with unresolved questions. In closing, Trilling went so far as to blame Hawthorne for instilling in readers the “sensation of having been set at liberty. . . . We find ourselves at a loss and uncertain in the charge of an artist so little concerned to impose upon us the structure of his imagination.” Yet in final qualification Trilling speculates that even though “our judgment of Hawthorne may have to be that he is not for today, or perhaps not even tomorrow,” he may nonetheless, as Nietzsche remarks in another context, be “one of the spirits of yesterday—and the day after tomorrow” (Trilling 1964, 457). Early-twenty-first-century postmodern transnationalism bears this speculation out. Today Hawthornian indeterminacy (at the heart of James’s admiration for Hawthorne’s delicacy, I think) is more in phase. No longer does it seem necessary to posit, much less to defend, an essential Hawthorne. We can feel more at home with the kind of interpretative liberty The Scarlet Letter invites, even while holding its narration under restraint.

The particular form of liberty for which this essay has argued, is willingness to suspend, even if not to scrap, the assumption that The Scarlet Letter must be read as a symptomatically “American” tale, as a cornerstone of “American literature.” It can, of course, be so read. It will continue to be so read. But it is neither necessary nor desirable that it should inevitably be so read. And if it is to be so read, it should be in consciousness of the extraterritorial circles of discourse, history, and migration lurking—often unseen by Americanist eyes—in such underexplored portions of the text as the encrypted closing allusions, and elaborated in transnational readings and repossessions of Hawthorne of the past dozen years or so. Reimagining in such terms a text like The Scarlet Letter—so salient and durable a cornerstone in the organization of Americanist thinking about national
narrative imagination—might go a long way toward a more expansive understanding of how “American” narratives actually do take form and work.

Notes

1. For preparation of this essay I am grateful to Jared Hickman.

2. It is important to stress that Tompkins does not deny the excellence of Hawthorne or The Scarlet Letter; her concern is rather to demonstrate the contingency as against the inevitability of what counts as literary merit. As such she provides a more self-consciously theoretical account than Trilling does—though by no means the only possibly account—of the instability of what counts as “our Hawthorne.”

3. The first comprehensive critical formulation of the romance-as-American-fictional-difference hypothesis was Chase. The most influential attack has been Baym (1976, 1981). The two most significant recent attempts at reviving a more critically scrupulous version of the romance hypothesis, in both of which Hawthorne figures significantly, are Budick and Thompson/Link.

4. An earlier scene, however, offers a glimpse of Pearl skipping among the tombstones of the same burying ground, stopping to dance upon “the broad, flat, armorial tombstone of a departed worthy,—perhaps of Isaac Johnson himself,” the lot’s first owner.

5. Hawthorne wrote his sister Elizabeth in 1820 that he had read all of Scott’s books except for Lord of the Isles (Letters, 1813–1843, 132). His son Julian Hawthorne remembered his father reading aloud to the family “the whole of Walter Scott’s novels” a few years before his death (J. Hawthorne 2: 9).

6. Like Berlant’s serendipitously concurrent study, Bercovitch argues that “Hawthorne sought to rise above [party] politics not by escaping history, but by representing it ironically” (Bercovitch 1991, 107).

7. Of the several critical discussions of Mukherjee as a reviser of Hawthorne, the most helpfully informative and satisfyingly complex to my mind is Newman, although I disagree with its argument that the novel attempts a “deconstruction” of new historicism.

8. For published discussions of Hawthorne-Morrison, see especially Stryz. I am especially indebted, however, to a comparative study still in ms. by C. Namwali Serpell, “Ghostly Secrecy and Palimpsest Secrecy.”