As an adult, Rose Hawthorne related a deliciously symbolic incident from her father’s boyhood that her aunt Elizabeth, or “Ebe,” had told her. As a child Ebe had owned a tinted bust of John Wesley, one with flowing, white hair and a countenance that seemed to say, “My sermon is endless!” Hawthorne hated this bust even at the tender age of four and, failing to convince the family to get rid of it, took matters into his own hands. Having discovered the “hollowness” of this “melancholy” bust—in Rose’s story, the words sound like a protest against Methodism itself—young Nathaniel took it outside one winter day, filled it with water, and waited for the ice to burst it, like a pitcher. Wesley held his own; the plaster did not break.\(^1\)

The episode speaks both to Hawthorne’s deep-seated resistance to religious authority and to the enduring strength of that authority. Although Hawthorne’s fictive treatment of religious concepts such as sin, confession, and perfectionism is familiar critical territory, his imaginative engagement with the preaching of his own day has been overlooked. The most memorable preachers of his fiction—Ilbrahim’s mother in “The Gentle Boy,” Reverend Hooper in “The Minister’s Black Veil,” and Dimmesdale—are typically regarded as commentaries on the religion of the seventeenth century, not the nineteenth. Yet Hawthorne grew up and wrote in a world full of preachers, and we cannot understand the value he claimed for his fiction without reading his stories in this context. After examining Hawthorne’s early experiences with sermons, I first discuss how his short stories and sketches reveal his
disenchantment with preaching and his sense that fiction should displace it. I then turn to *The Scarlet Letter* to show how Hawthorne critiqued his contemporaries’ adulation of ministers by using Dimmesdale to satirize a famous Salem preacher and how he brought his preacher/author doubling to a head by figuring preaching as a powerful, meaningful mode of speaking that novelists might well envy even as they denied the sermon’s claims to totalizing truth and sacred difference.

Despite trying to smash Wesley, Hawthorne in his youth was no religious iconoclast, perhaps because his religious upbringing included latitude for him to develop his own beliefs. Childhood Sundays were spent listening to sermons with his mother and sisters at Salem’s Congregationalist First Church, where John Prince served as pastor from 1779 to 1836. An uncontroversial minister better known for his scientific experiments than for his preaching, Prince won Hawthorne’s abiding respect. Hawthorne would later recall him in terms that suggest a firsthand knowledge of the ministerial adulation he ascribes to *The Scarlet Letter’s* Puritans; Prince was “the good old, silver-headed clergyman, who seemed to me as much a Saint then on earth as he is now in Heaven.” As for theology, Prince’s church occupied an ambiguous position during the 1810s, a key decade for the splitting of Unitarian and Trinitarian congregations. As late as 1827 members were required to sign an agreement confessing belief in Christ as savior and committing to strict Sabbath observance. Yet the church was known for its liberal tendencies, and William Ware included a biographical essay on Prince in his two-volume *American Unitarian Biography*. The bustling Manning household exposed Hawthorne to other shades of Protestantism as well: his grandparents worshipped at William Bentley’s liberal East Church; his conservative aunts, with the orthodox at the Tabernacle.

“The Spectator,” the newspaper Hawthorne created and hand-printed as a teenager, is a surprisingly religious production that, for all its playfulness, captures a youthful piety in line with liberal Congregationalism. The first issue’s “Prospectus” explained the paper’s high and noble purposes, including reforming morals, instructing and amusing readers, and advancing “the cause of Religion.” In support of these goals, Hawthorne filled the paper with short homiletic essays on themes well suited to a liberal pulpit, including hope, benevolence, courage, ambition, idleness, solitude, and the transience of life as reflected in the passing year. He also applauded the sermons of two rather different ministers, reflecting how freely antebellum Americans crossed denominational lines in pursuit of a good sermon: William Staughton, an English Baptist immigrant who led a church and theological seminary in Philadelphia and visited Salem in the summer of 1820, and Henry
Colman, a Unitarian who would serve as the pastor of Salem’s Barton Square Church when it split from East Church in 1824. In praising Colman, Hawthorne managed to pat himself on the back as well: “We have never before heard a sermon which so perfectly coincided with our own sentiments.”

In college Hawthorne turned away from organized religion. Disdaining the theological conservatism of Bowdoin, he skipped mandatory chapel and dodged the revivals, joked with his mother about falling asleep in services, and griped to Ebe about being forced to hear the school’s president William Allen preach a “red hot Calvinist Sermon” on Sundays. Before entering, he had made it clear to his mother that he would not be preparing for the ministry: “Shall you want me to be a Minister, Doctor or Lawyer?” If so, too bad: “A Minister I will not be”—a veritable no! in thunder. A year later, he reiterated that “being a Minister is of course out of the Question” and proposed authorship as the alternative. He facetiously cast it as the abandonment of all piety: “But Authors are always poor Devils, and therefore Satan may take them.” Moral dichotomies ripple beneath the surface here: one avows not the ministry, but authorship—not God, but Satan. Choosing authorship meant competing not only with the “scribbling sons of John Bull” he mentions in the same letter, but also with religious authority.

Hawthorne’s adult religious views were a mystery even to contemporaries, and his relationship to preaching, private. As a young man he checked out dozens of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sermons from the Salem Athenaeum, as well as a couple of volumes of contemporary sermons, including one by Colman. But whatever appeal Unitarian sermons had for him was short-lived. In 1842, he grouped them together with the Christian Examiner, Liberal Preacher, and Unitarian polemics as “all such trash” and wrote that he preferred “the narrow but earnest cushionthumper of puritanical times” to “the cold, lifeless, vaguely liberal clergyman of our own day.” Nor did he wish to sit in a pew. He avoided attending church in Salem and Concord and declined Sophia’s invitation to hear Father Taylor. His antipathy to church-going was so marked that after his death friends and family felt compelled to try to recuperate this aspect of his life. Publisher James T. Fields blustered, “His religion was so deep and broad that he could not bear to be fastened in by a pew-door,” and Julian Hawthorne reported that his father was a “tolerably diligent reader of sermons” who preferred those of Laurence Sterne and Jeremy Taylor.

One of Hawthorne’s earliest stories captures his sense that the nineteenth-century fiction-writer was both the Protestant preacher’s double and his secular replacement. In “Passages from a Relinquished Work” (1834), originally intended as the opening piece of a story collection called “The
Story-Teller” and eventually published in *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846), a light-hearted young man leaves the home of his stern foster father, a village parson whom irreverent parishioners call Parson Thumpcushion, to be an itinerant storyteller. Having escaped one preacher, the Story Teller meets another, the sober-minded young itinerant Eliakim Abbott. The two break bread, and Abbott proves so bashful and easily discouraged by the trials of the wayfaring life that the Story Teller feels obliged not to leave him. A fairy-tale quality marks the encounter and the pairing, with the preacher all but named as the Story Teller’s doppelganger: “We were a singular couple, strikingly contrasted, yet curiously assimilated, each of us remarkable enough by himself, and doubly so in the other’s company. Without any formal compact, we kept together, day after day, till our union appeared permanent.” Abbott clearly symbolizes traits that the insouciant Story Teller acquired under Thumpcushion but must shed or repress to succeed in his chosen career—above all his anxiety that he should be pursuing a vocation in which he strives to better humanity, not pander to its earthly pleasures. But if Abbott is the Story Teller’s repressed conscience, he is also his repressed fear, melancholy, helplessness, and inability to perform in public—in short, the worst of his youth. While Abbott performs miserably in the pulpit and cannot seem to learn from his mistakes, the Story Teller, like Melville’s confidence man, uses his skill as a performer and his insight into human nature to succeed among strangers. When the Story Teller fails in his first attempt at spinning stories on the stage, he refunds his disappointed auditors their money and dedicates himself to perfecting his craft. He cultivates “wide observation, varied knowledge, deep thoughts, and sparkling ones; pathos and levity, and a mixture of both, like sunshine in a rain drop; lofty imagination, veiling itself in the garb of common life; and the practised art which alone could render these gifts, and more than these, available,” a catalog of virtues applicable to Hawthorne’s own fiction, however self-satirically Hawthorne may have intended the parallel. The Story Teller’s commitment to his chosen work is transformative, catapulting him from youth to manhood: “ridiculous as the object was, I followed it up with the firmness and energy of a man.” He proceeds to enjoy flirtatious encounters and the thrill of high spirits. At the one performance described, the laughter is constant, the improvisation inspired, the applause so vigorous it breaks the benches. He succeeds so well that when, looking back as a self-professed “bitter moralizer,” he pontificates about “how much of fame is humbug [. . .] and how small and poor the remnant,” he seems to speak only half the truth. The crowd may have been tickled by slapstick, but the Story Teller achieved his aim of entertaining the masses—and gained maturity in the process. If the
story expresses Hawthorne’s anxiety about pursuing a career with no obvious moral meaning, it also validates the artistry of fiction-writing and the pleasures of success.

“Passages” ends by reinforcing its defense of storytelling against preaching. When the Story Teller receives a letter from Thumpcushion, he is pained and holds the letter unopened, imagining first that his guardian is grim and disapproving, then that he is sorrowful and self-reproaching. And then the Story Teller burns the letter without reading it and continues on his way—an act of rebellion that figures the rejection of ministerial authority as the precondition of storytelling. Yet the tale does not end on quite that note, just as Abbott and Thumpcushion were not the last preachers to walk the pages of Hawthorne’s fiction. Unable to escape the past, the Story Teller cannot stop thinking that in burning the letter he has made an “irrevocable choice between good and evil fate,” phrasing that leaves ambiguous which one he has chosen. Even if one interprets storytelling (versus, possibly, a return home) as the “evil fate,” Hawthorne’s Romantic notion that authors were Satanic heroes—self-determining “poor devils”—redeems and glamorizes this “evil.” That the Story Teller continues to travel with Abbott, who labors to convince him of the “guilt and madness” of his chosen life, underscores the difficulty fiction has escaping its moralistic past. It is hard not to see the nervous, helpless Abbott as a thorn in the Story Teller’s side, an ill-matched fellow-traveler who should say to the Story Teller what the hyperscrupulous minister Babcock finally says to his chance traveling companion Christopher Newman in Henry James’s *The American*: “I am very uncomfortable. I ought to have separated from you a month ago.” And so Abbott should leave the Story Teller but does not. The story is an argument for fiction’s liberation from preaching—and a meditation on the cultural and psychic forces that prevent fiction writers from achieving that liberation.

Hawthorne’s struggle with the cultural legacy of preaching and its significance for authorship is nowhere plainer than in “The Old Manse,” the preface to *Mosses*. As in “Passages,” Hawthorne professed to respect the past while proposing a supersessionist narrative in which fiction supplants preaching in New England’s cultural landscape. Living in Emerson’s ancestral home, Hawthorne claimed to feel intimidated by the manse’s former clerical occupants, especially Emerson’s grandfather, who wrote three thousand sermons on the manse’s desk; such solemn deeds made him ashamed to have written only “idle stories.” But the essay’s predominant mood is not veneration but vexation, as he fails to find any wisdom at all in the sermons and other religious writings that filled the attic. The leather-bound folios of the seventeenth century and the tracts of two decades back are alike barren. Further,
in telling readers that he entered the manse a “twelvemonth” after the funeral of its last clerical inhabitant, he intimated that the era of the minister was past and the mourning period over. More relevant to the current age, he implied, were his own stories, which drew their inspiration from nature itself and perhaps, too, from another work penned in the manse’s study, Emerson’s *Nature*. Hawthorne presented himself in his preface as interrupting an idyll of walking, boating, and lounging just long enough to pen the stories and sketches collected in *Mosses*. Thus were nature-loving fiction-writers to supplant gloomy, arid sermonizers. Yet the preface, like “Passages,” could not disown the sermon altogether. Hawthorne wrote that in moving to the manse he had hoped to write, if not profound moral treatises or stirring histories, at the very least “a novel, that should evolve some deep lesson.”

In an era in which many influential adults were loath to recognize reading fiction as a legitimate pastime, the statement makes a bold claim—one that testifies both to Hawthorne’s serious goals for fiction and, with that key verb, “evolve,” to his heterodox commitment to fiction as a means of developing usable truths.

**Rewriting Salem’s Unitarian saint**

Hawthorne’s antagonism toward the clergy culminated in Arthur Dimmesdale. Like Jervis in *Memoirs*, Dimmesdale is a hypocrite and coward, a variant of the “reverend rake” type and an intervention in the public discourse surrounding a specific minister—in this case, the Reverend John Emery Abbot (1793–1819) of Salem’s North Church. Dimmesdale was Hawthorne’s subversive reimagining of Abbot, a beloved minister whose ordination heralded the dawn of liberalism in Salem and who became an icon of liberal faith after dying at age twenty-six, when Hawthorne was fifteen. In modeling Dimmesdale on this romanticized, much-memorialized minister, Hawthorne critiqued not only the hero-worship surrounding Abbot and, indeed, ministers across denominations, especially the deceased, but also the Unitarian belief in the innate goodness of human nature and attainability of human perfection.

The virtual beatification of Abbot began when William Ellery Channing, who had preached Abbot’s ordination sermon in 1815, returned to North Church to deliver the sermon of consolation. Channing’s ordination sermon had inspired the ire of the orthodox by proclaiming many of the same ideas that would mark his more famous rallying cry to Unitarianism, the 1819 ordination sermon for Jared Sparks in Baltimore—for instance, that preach-
ing Christ meant preaching his doctrines, not the crucifixion alone, that true religion celebrated the goodness in human nature, and that humanity was “formed for endless progress in intellectual and moral excellence and felicity.” The consolation sermon followed up on these themes by planting the seeds of an idea that would flourish in Unitarian circles for several generations: that Abbot’s unimpeachable character and exemplary death testified to the liberal tenet that Jesus and humanity shared a fundamentally good human nature—and that Unitarianism could create paragons of piety at least equal to those of orthodoxy. Throughout the nineteenth century, eulogies, prefaces to Abbot’s sermons, versions of his biography, and church histories all continued to celebrate Abbot as a hero of liberal faith. Though Abbot’s death preceded The Scarlet Letter by several decades, Hawthorne knew of the event both firsthand—family letters remark upon it, and he was living in Salem at the time—and through local history. Moreover, several events of the late 1840s had sent gusts of fresh air across the flame on Abbot’s shrine. After the death of Abbot’s fellow liberal clergyman and friend Henry Ware, Jr., memorialists had scrambled to honor Ware by comparing him to the saintly Abbot. When John Emery’s father, Benjamin Abbot, died in 1849, an essay in the Salem Gazette on the Phillips and Abbot families closed by praising the son as the family member who had, to the greatest degree, “all the qualities that fit men for angels.” He was “so pure in life, so pure in death!” New Englanders also praised Abbot anew in letters written for the Unitarian volume of William Buell Sprague’s Annals of the American Pulpit. Though Hawthorne would not yet have seen these letters in print, he likely knew of Sprague’s project, as Salem contributors in the late 1840s included Emerson, Andrew Peabody, Samuel Gilman, Benjamin Abbot, and Charles Wentworth Upham, successor to Prince at First Church and the driving force behind Hawthorne’s expulsion from the Custom House. In the 1850s Hawthorne’s sister-in-law Elizabeth Peabody would become one of Sprague’s most reliable contributors. In the meantime, Hawthorne may have encountered Abbot’s burnished memory through Elizabeth and the rest of Sophia’s family. Nathaniel and Elizabeth Peabody had joined North Church in 1816, and their three daughters followed suit: Elizabeth in 1816, Mary in 1823, and Sophia in 1827. Although no record remains of young Sophia’s perception of Abbot, Elizabeth recalled him through the rose-colored lenses of adolescent adoration and Unitarian loyalty. In her teens she had looked to him as a spiritual adviser; he had talked theology with her and offered to loan her books from his library. In after years, she praised his “rare personality and angelic ministry,” which though brief had left an “indelible impression” on Salem and been a “great experience” for the young people in the congre-
Secularizing the Sermon in *The Scarlet Letter*

gation. She summed up his legacy by hailing him as “one of the exceptional saints who glorified the rise of the Unitarian sect in New England.”\(^{27}\) Eying the wider implications of a legacy that celebrated unsullied human goodness, Daniel Walker Howe has called him “a culture hero to nineteenth-century sentimentalists.”\(^{28}\)

Much in *The Scarlet Letter* suggests that Dimmesdale is a sly rewriting of Abbot. Most notably, Dimmesdale’s parishioners regard their pastor with the same intense veneration with which Abbot’s remembered theirs. Where Ware had quoted an Exeter classmate saying of Abbot that “no one regarded him as capable of doing wrong; we looked on him as a purer being than others around him,” Dimmesdale’s admirers see him “as little less than a heaven-ordained apostle.”\(^{29}\) Where Ware had written that Abbot had “an extraordinary reverence for the sacred office,” Dimmesdale is, the narrator confides, “a true priest, a true religionist, with the reverential sentiment largely developed.”\(^{30}\) Where the anonymous “Elegiac Stanzas” penned in Abbot’s honor lamented, “Could earth no more thy spirit pure controul?,” some members of Dimmesdale’s congregation declare that the minister is dying because “the world was not worthy to be any longer trodden by his feet.”\(^{31}\) Like Abbot, Dimmesdale is praised for a moral purity that seems to rival that of ministers far older than he and that gains luster from his impending death. He is honored, too, for his ability to address “the whole human brotherhood in the heart’s native language,” much as the Boston Unitarian minister Francis Parkman had written that Abbot preached “truths, which all minds comprehend, and all hearts can feel.”\(^{32}\) The rhetoric of peak adulation was also much the same. Parkman had compared Abbot to Enoch, whom God translated to heaven, while “Elegiac Stanzas” pictured angels whisking Abbot’s soul to heaven: “But look! his spirit soars—it mounts amain! / Earth disappears—Heaven’s portals open spread— / Angels descend that spirit to sustain!”\(^{33}\) Intimations of supernatural intervention surround Dimmesdale as well. To those who hear his final sermon, “it was as if an angel, in his passage to the skies, had shaken his bright wings over the people for an instant,” and after the sermon, he is “apotheosized by worshipping admirers.”\(^{34}\) Of course, Abbot was not the only lavishly eulogized minister in the nineteenth century, and for all the parallels, I do not mean to suggest that his posthumous glorification was the sole inspiration behind the rhetoric surrounding Dimmesdale. A similar rhetoric of ministerial eulogy can be found in funeral sermons, obituaries, and Sprague’s *Annals*, suggesting that Dimmesdale was also a critique of the culture’s persistent idealization of ministers.\(^{35}\)

Still, several aspects of Dimmesdale’s character suggest that Abbot served as Hawthorne’s most immediate clerical inspiration. Dimmesdale
would have reminded Hawthorne’s contemporaries of Abbot in the combination of his youth and lingering, fatal illness. Abbot’s creeping respiratory disease (tuberculosis, one assumes) finds its analogue in the undefined ailment that gnaws away at Dimmesdale, forcing him to stagger through his duties with his hand on his chest. Abbot’s memorialists attributed his illness to a “feeble” frame and, echoing a common theme of ministerial eulogy, to his “great devotion to the studies and labors” of his office. Likewise, Dimmesdale’s parishioners blame his failing health on “his too earnest devotion to study, his scrupulous fulfillment of parochial duty,” and—in an embellishment that highlights Dimmesdale’s morbid conscience—“the fasts and vigils of which he made a frequent practice.” Like Abbot, who set off for Cuba to repair his health, Dimmesdale hopes to find healing in a sea voyage but does not.

Dimmesdale’s personal foibles seem borrowed from Abbot as well, despite the widespread sense that, as Parkman put it, “Malice itself could find nothing against him.” The scant imperfections Ware attributed to Abbot also define Dimmesdale: nerves and self-doubt. Ware noted that Abbot’s mind was “finely strung,” that his “sensibility was acute and delicate,” and that his heightened sensibilities, while not always under his control, made his personal attachments strong and his religion zealous. Similarly, Dimmesdale has a “nervous sensibility” kept in check through great effort. No word in The Scarlet Letter better captures Dimmesdale’s suppressed nervousness than the recurrent “tremulous,” used to describe his voice, mouth, lips, breath, touch, and even shadow. Closely related to this constant nervous shaking is his self-doubt. While humility was a standard-issue clerical virtue, Abbot seems to have felt his deficiencies keenly: “At times [. . .] his diffidence and self-distrust oppressed him with the idea, that he should disappoint the wishes of his friends, and become a useless being.” Abbot had marveled that the responsibilities of pastoral office were “committed to ‘earthen vessels’—who themselves are ignorant and wandering, surrounded with temptations, darkened by error, and polluted with sin.” Dimmesdale, too, feels the burden of his sinfulness and fears he will disappoint those who have believed in him. Thus he claims that if he dies it will be because he is unworthy of his office, and thus he tells himself that he stays for the Election Sermon so that the townspeople can say that he leaves “‘no public duty unperformed, nor ill performed!’”

But what of Dimmesdale’s most obvious sin? Here Hawthorne seems to have used poetic license. No sexual scandal shadowed Abbot, and his parishioners, unlike Dimmesdale’s, did not engage in any postmortem character recuperation. Yet Hawthorne had an eye for moral ambiguity, and the
documents and lore surrounding Abbot would have provided fodder both for Dimmesdale's corporealization of guilt and for the sexual indiscretions themselves. That is, Abbot, too, had a burning chest—both literally, because of his lung ailment, and, metaphorically, as a sign of his supposed piety. As “Elegiac Stanzas” had it, “The good, ah, how for them thy bosom burn’d” and, when he spoke of Jesus, “How thrill’d that voice, how glow’d that sacred breast!” Hawthorne literalized these metaphors, attributing the minister's fiery chest not to piety but to conscious sin. In making Dimmesdale's burning chest a sign of sin and guilt, Hawthorne hinted at dark secrets cloaked behind Abbot's reputed personal reserve. Ware reported that Abbot did not enjoy talking about himself and that he “knew that religion did not consist in being forward to tell the secrets of the soul.” Although no sexual transgression besmirched Abbot's memory, he does seem to have been a favorite of young women—unsurprisingly, given that he led North Church in his early twenties. For Hawthorne, Elizabeth Peabody would have been the readiest example of a young woman who had admired Abbot. Other sources, too, hint at his human appeal. Though not published until 1853, the memoir of Henry Ware's wife Mary suggests that at least a few young women of his acquaintance may have been, like the young woman Dimmesdale passes on his return from the forest, enshrining his image in their hearts so that it imparted “to religion the warmth of love, and to love a religious purity.” Born in 1798, Mary was in her late teens and early twenties during Abbot's ministry, and her biographer reported that both she and a friend found in Abbot “a Christian helper when they most needed Christian counsel and encouragement.” A week after Abbot's death, Mary sent this friend, who witnessed the young minister's passing while staying with the Abbots in Exeter, a long letter of spiritual consolation that represented the death as an overwhelming personal loss. She professed her “almost entire inability” to write about it yet anguished over it at length. She praised his pure and blessed spirit, mourned the “loved and cherished” earthly form, and affirmed that his memory yet “awakens every emotion of affection which he excited while on earth.” She assured her friend that the purification of souls after death meant that those who had died were connected to the living “more closely than earthly ties could bind us.” It seems no great leap for Hawthorne to have played out the potential consequences of the sexual tension surrounding this young Salem minister and his female parishioners.

Hawthorne may also have drawn inspiration for the contours of Dimmesdale's character from Abbot's published writings. Aside from the fact that there seems to be little difference between Dimmesdale's Puritanism and Abbot's Unitarianism—both focus on morality and piety with little
reference to metaphysical doctrines or biblical authority—two of Abbot’s printed sermons are particularly suggestive. “Religious Sincerity” warns readers against hypocrisy and secret sin, and the more theologically distinctive “Knowledge of One Another in a Future State” affirms that social bonds survive the grave—that “friends who have been dear to us on earth, will, if we and they are worthy, be again restored to our knowledge and affection” (my italics). Abbot held that only the virtuous, those persons “whose friendship religion has hallowed,” would meet in the afterlife—stern philosophy that Dimmesdale echoes in his warning to Hester not to expect a heavenly reunion.

Hawthorne may also have taken a cue from the only title Abbot published during his lifetime, A Catechism of the New Testament, a twenty-page pamphlet of religious questions for children. Hawthorne treaded lightly in translating this aspect of Abbot’s ministry to Dimmesdale’s story; one assumes that then as now, the representation of a sexually aberrant minister interacting with children was apt to discomfit readers. The novel allays these anxieties by reassuring readers that children will naturally avoid such sinful men; as Dimmesdale tells Hester, “I have long shrunken from children, because they often show a distrust,—a backwardness to be familiar with me.” Pearl is the all-too-significant exception. It is intriguing that instead of avoiding this delicate subject altogether, Hawthorne worked with the idea of catechism to hint at the difficulties raised when a sinful minister is responsible for the moral instruction of the young. There is Bellingham’s order that either Dimmesdale or Wilson must catechize Pearl if she is to remain with Hester (after she does not answer correctly Wilson’s “who made thee?”) and Dimmesdale’s temptation after leaving the forest to pervert his catechetical role by teaching a group of young children “some very wicked words.” But Dimmesdale is not shown quizzing Pearl on Puritan theology and resists the desire to pollute young ears. The avoidance of such scenes helps preserve whatever sympathy readers might have for him.

My aim in tracing the many parallels between Abbot and the young, attractive, dying, and idealized minister of The Scarlet Letter is to show that Hawthorne resisted not merely the hagiographic treatment of ministers common to this period but also, closer to home, the mythology that had grown up around one of the pulpit lights of early nineteenth-century Salem. Hawthorne’s revision of Abbot’s story in Dimmesdale challenged the Unitarian faith in the possibility of moral purity and in the peculiar moral benefits of Unitarianism, offering in place of these liberal dogmas the unsettling idea that all hearts, even those that seem purest, have something of “the worst” in them that needs to be acknowledged. Like the alchemist that Aylmer in “The Birthmark” aspires to be, Hawthorne in The Scarlet Letter transmuted
ordinary raw materials into something far different and more valuable. From the obituaries, sentimental verses, hagiographic memoirs, and gossip surrounding a now-forgotten nineteenth-century minister came the memorable figure of Arthur Dimmesdale. Or perhaps it is more fitting to say that Hawthorne reversed the alchemic process, dissolving Abbot's golden reputation into the base realities of professional ambition, pride, sin, shame, and a community's wishful thinking.

The Election Sermon

It is a credit to Hawthorne's art that readers can pity the "miserable priest" at all. If Dimmesdale does not come off as quite the villain that Jervis does, it is only because he is partially redeemed by the poignancy of his internal conflict, evident in his dialogues with Hester and with Chillingworth, in his solitary brooding, and, most dramatically, in his sermons. Dimmesdale's single most powerful act of preaching is the Election Sermon, worth scrutinizing for how it reconceptualized preaching while projecting Hawthorne's authorial anxieties and ambitions.

One way to defamiliarize this climactic scene is to recognize it as a distinctively Hawthornean embellishment to a storyline borrowed in large part from an older novel of ministerial adultery, *Adam Blair* (1822) by Scotsman John Gibson Lockhart. Hawthorne's debt to *Adam Blair* is tremendous. In *Adam Blair*, the title character is a young, upright, much-beloved Calvinist clergyman thrown together in the same house for several months with Charlotte, his dead wife's cousin. Full-spirited, dark-haired, and unhappily married, Charlotte becomes a mother-figure to Adam's beautiful little girl and Adam's conversational companion on countryside rambles. The two drift into platonic yet smoldering intimacy. Soon Charlotte's estranged husband gets wind of the town gossip around the pair's unusual living arrangement and banishes his wife to a deserted castle in the Highlands. Adam, beside himself with longing and despair, pursues Charlotte to the castle, and after a few glasses of wine, a stormy night, a tale of marital woe, and four rows of close-set asterisks, the minister awakens as that rarest of novelistic types, a fallen man.

Illness strikes. Wan and visibly aged after enduring the fever that carries off Charlotte, Adam refrains from public confession just long enough to travel to Glasgow, where a meeting of presbyters is debating the rumors surrounding him. As an older clergyman avows Blair's innocence before the assembly, Blair enters and addresses his fellow clergymen: "The unhappy
Blair, laying his hand upon his breast, answered quickly and clearly, ‘Call
me no more your brother—I am a fallen man.—I am guilty’53 His peers are
incredulous, but, shaken and contrite, he reasserts his guilt, announces his
intention to become a peasant as his father was before him, and beseeches
their prayers. The scene closes with a tableau of repentance: the gathered
elders on their knees and Adam weeping with his forehead in the dust. Hum-
bled, penitent, almost broken, he exiles himself to a desolate cottage with
his daughter, where he lives and works the land for ten long years, until his
former parishioners insist that he resume his pastoral role.

Both Adam Blair and The Scarlet Letter are stories in which a young
Calvinist minister commits adultery with a beautiful young woman and
endures a subsequent public humiliation. Both have a little girl to triangu-
late the relationship and a jealous husband to haunt it. Both have a midnight
scene midway through the story in which the minister screams but wakes no
one. Both have a lonely cottage where one of the sexual transgressors labors
for years before achieving reintegration into the community. And both claim
to be historical fictions, Lockhart’s in earnest, as Adam Blair draws upon the
transgressions of the Scottish divine George Adam (1722–1759). Yet for all
the similarities of the two novels, they take very different directions at the
end, especially in the final scenes of ministerial self-revelation. In Adam
Blair, there is no glorious exit, “triumphant ignominy,” or elevation of any
sort. Sin means only sorrow, silence, one’s head in the dust. Dimmesdale’s
confession, in contrast, is famously equivocal, its sincerity marred by the
grandiose, Pauline claim that he is “the one sinner of the world!” and that
evasive grammatical shift from first- to third-person.54 And in The Scarlet
Letter, we have not one climactic speech, but two.

To the speech of confession Hawthorne added the Election Sermon,
when Dimmesdale preaches with unsurpassed eloquence and reaches the
apex of his professional achievement and popular acclaim. The listeners are
entranced and afterward jubilant: “Never, from the soil of New England,
had gone up such a shout! Never, on New England soil, had stood the man
so honored by his mortal brethren as the preacher!”55 It is an inspired nar-
rative addition. It magnifies the tragedy by widening the distance between
the heights to which Dimmesdale rises and the depths to which he falls, and
it prolongs the suspense before the lovers’ fate is disclosed. Like Hester, the
reader must wait out this uninterruptible discourse.

The sermon’s content matters less than one might expect. Readers learn
only that the subject “it appeared, had been the relations between the Deity
and the communities of mankind, with a special reference to the New Eng-
land which they were here planting in the wilderness,” and that Dimmesdale,
unlike the prophets of old, issues no warnings of doom for disobedience. Instead he promises a “high and glorious destiny for the newly gathered people of the Lord.”

Although this topic was common enough for a Puritan election sermon, there is little distinctively Puritan about the discourse: no introductory text, no biblical proof texts, no mention of Christ, no jeremiadic warnings that declension will bring destruction, no topical references to colonial politics. In fact, Hawthorne may have taken his inspiration for Dimmesdale’s discourse not from a Puritan sermon, but from another election sermon he checked out of the Salem Athenaeum, Ezra Stiles’s The United States Elevated to Glory and Honour, delivered in 1783. Stiles took as his text Deuteronomy 26:19, in which God announces the election of Israel. After tracing God’s dealings with the Israelites, Stiles explained that he meant such remarks “only as introductory to a discourse upon the political welfare of God’s American Israel; and as allusively prophetick of the future prosperity and splendour of the United States.”

In assigning Dimmesdale this theme, Hawthorne may have intended not only a limited measure of historical accuracy but also, as some readers have maintained, a critique of the mid-nineteenth-century rhetoric of Manifest Destiny. Henry Nash Smith, for one, went so far as to call Dimmesdale’s sermon a “ranting political oration.” Perhaps, yet it is also true that crediting Providence for the creation and growth of the United States was the white noise of nineteenth-century political discourse, a pervasive trope that circulated independently of specific national policies. Hawthorne may not have approved, but the topic itself does not damn Dimmesdale or make the sermon a satire.

More important than the sermon’s content is how listeners perceive and respond to Dimmesdale’s voice. They attend not as ministers instructed, with soul-searching and humility, but as nineteenth-century audiences actually listened, with a readiness to experience the sermon through conceptions of the sublime. Filtering a sermon through this aesthetic paradigm secularizes it by stopping short of claims that it is divinely inspired while still exalting it as a peak experience, individually transporting and communally unifying. A host of rhetorical markers code the Election Sermon as sublime. Dimmesdale’s voice has the grand dimensions Burke considered a hallmark of the sublime in nature: it is “high and commanding,” gushes “irrepressibly upward,” rises “through progressive gradations of sweetness and power,” and bears its listeners “aloft,” all while being haunted by a “deep,” “low” pain. It is also described with the sublime’s familiar watery tropes, being likened to the “swelling waves of the sea” and to a natural force that “gushes,” “overfills,” and “bursts” through the church walls. Further, the sermon seems boundlessness, just as Kant held that one experiences the sublime through those
objects that are apprehended but not comprehended—that are “formless” yet whose “totality is also present to thought.” 61 This apparent limitless ness is essential to the Election Sermon’s power. Listeners are entranced by indiscernible words, the sound seems to “envelop [Hester] with an atmosphere of awe and solemn grandeur,” and Dimmesdale’s voice contains an insistent note of anguish whose source listeners cannot pinpoint. The sermon is a pervasive, powerful force that defies rational understanding. Rather, Hester listens to the rise and fall of Dimmesdale’s voice, which yields “a meaning for her, entirely apart from [the sermon’s] indistinguishable words.” 62 The response of other listeners, too, suggests that the sermon contains an ineffable teaching. Spilling onto the street afterward, they try to share their experiences, telling “one another of what each knew better than he could tell or hear.” 63 To Hester and to the rest of the community, Dimmesdale has conveyed some important meaning—though not one that they can put into words or that the narrator explains.

The narrator takes pains to prevent readers from interpreting these meanings as divine, or as reflecting Dimmesdale’s insight into the Puritan God. Like those who described eminent ministers in Sprague’s Annals, the narrator remains hypothetical about the idea that preaching accesses a supernatural realm. 64 While the community credits Dimmesdale as the conduit of unrivalled inspiration, the narrator explains, in knowing equivocations, that this inspiration “could be seen, as it were” in his extemporaneous departures from the written sermon, and that toward the close of the sermon, “a spirit as of prophecy had come upon him.” 65 These qualifications distance the enchanted worldview of the Puritans from Hawthorne’s own perspective, which can commit only to the “secondary sublime” that always stops short of affirming a connection between the human and the divine. 66

What the Election Sermon suggests is that great sermons derive their power not from God’s grace but from a minister’s private, unspeakable experience and, above all, from his pain. 67 On one level, Dimmesdale’s pulpit cri de coeur dramatizes the counsel to ministers to write sermons after consulting their own “joys or trials or necessities” and to draw their sermons “[f]rom the toiling brain and the beating heart” and “from the fountain of tears.” 68 Yet this scene also challenges axioms about good preaching by implying that the most eloquent sermons are fueled by a pain with ambiguous, complex origins. The narrator has already explained that Dimmesdale owes his popularity to his sorrows: “His intellectual gifts, his moral perceptions, his power of experiencing and communicating emotion, were kept in a state of preternatural activity by the prick and anguish of his daily life.” 69 Is this “prick
and anguish” godly remorse for misdeeds, sexual frustration, or both? The Election Sermon puts this enigmatic pain on center stage: listeners hear in Dimmesdale’s voice “an essential character of plaintiveness,” a “loud or low expression of anguish,” “the whisper, or the shriek [. . . ] of suffering humanity,” a “deep strain of pathos,” “a certain deep, sad undertone of pathos,” and that persistent “cry of pain.”70 The source of this pain is a mystery. It may be “guilt or sorrow,” regret at not having escaped with Hester sooner, or, as some listeners infer, “the natural regret of one soon to pass away.”71 Indeed, this last interpretation would have made sense to nineteenth-century readers given how thoroughly the Election Sermon scene conforms to the rhetoric surrounding ministerial farewell sermons. These sermons, like Dimmesdale’s, were described as spectacular addresses to a beloved congregation, powerfully delivered despite bodily suffering that portended death.72 The underlying idea was that pain made preaching great: for Dimmesdale, “It was this profound and continual undertone that gave the clergyman his most appropriate power.”73 The remarkable word here is “appropriate.” To imply that Dimmesdale’s pain is his most fitting, right, and morally acceptable source of power—more so than, say, his religious faith or the grace of God—is to argue that preaching is the human expression of a tortured self, no more sacred than any other Romantic artistic production.74

With Dimmesdale, Hawthorne challenged the assumption that ministers needed to be pious and pure of heart in order to preach well. In The Power of Preaching, Spring had called this idea a self-evident truth and described the difficulties that a minister who harbored “secret sin” would have leading his congregation. With a “bosom [. . . ] agitated by the thought that he is a suspected man,” he would tremble, be troubled, and lose “his relish for his sacred employment.”75 The Scarlet Letter describes Dimmesdale’s mental perplexity in nearly identical terms, while making the opposite point about the effect of hidden sin on ministerial performance: paradoxically, it quickens the means of grace. So much is suggested when the narrator explains that though the older ministers of the colony are more scholarly and pious, only Dimmesdale has “Heaven’s last and rarest attestation of their office, the Tongue of Flame.” In fact, it is the other ministers’ superior piety that prevents them from expressing themselves in familiar language: “Their voices came down, afar and indistinctly, from the upper heights where they habitually dwelt.”76 Dimmesdale’s sin and sorrow keep him grounded, so to speak. He can connect with his listeners because he is as fallen as they are. Read as counsel to young ministers, The Scarlet Letter dangles a Faustian bargain. Would you preach like an angel and enjoy communion with your congrega-
tion? Then sin and persist in sin. As long as you feel remorse, guilt, shame, and frustration, you will shine. At least one reviewer of the novel was troubled by this implied link between a minister’s “experience in sin” and pulpit efficacy.\(^{77}\)

The idea that a preacher could derive strength from sin rather than piety stayed with Hawthorne. Reflecting in *Our Old Home: A Series of English Sketches* (1863) on his time as consul in Liverpool, he told the story of a cosmopolitan Doctor of Divinity who sailed in from America, his congregation having sent him to Europe to repair his health. The minister stopped by the consulate for his mail and, charming Hawthorne with his intelligent, lively conversation, arranged to dine with him that night. But the minister neither showed up nor sent his regrets. Days passed, and Hawthorne figured he must have left for the Continent. A week later, a shabby, unshaven figure in a military coat showed up in Hawthorne’s office. Behold the minister! A week of dissipation had left him virtually unrecognizable. When Hawthorne started lecturing him—indulging, Hawthorne himself confessed, in “such a fulmination as the clergy have heretofore arrogated the exclusive right of inflicting”—the minister’s overwrought contrition made it horrifyingly evident that he was suffering from *delirium tremens*. Hawthorne called the degrading loss of self-control he saw then “the deepest tragedy I ever witnessed” and resolved to deal sympathetically with sinners henceforth. As for the minister, the indiscretion would most likely result in new pulpit power: his congregation “very probably, were thereafter conscious of an increased unction in his soul-stirring eloquence, without suspecting the awful depths into which their pastor had dived in quest of it.” The unction came because only in sinning so egregiously could the minister understand his own “latent evil.” Without this catastrophic episode, he might have gone his whole life through without being “let into the miserable secret what manner of man he was.”\(^{78}\)

That Hawthorne did not fault the minister for returning to his congregation and, presumably, not confessing his sins abroad—what happens in Liverpool, stays in Liverpool—should prompt us to ask how harshly *The Scarlet Letter* would have us judge Dimmesdale for postponing the dread day of confession. Hester’s plea that Dimmesdale now lives a holy life and that his penitence is “sealed and witnessed by good works” speaks a truth as surely as her “What we did had a consecration of its own.”\(^{79}\) From a Puritan perspective, both statements are outrageous, willful rejections of God’s law. But to nineteenth-century religious liberals, and perhaps to Hawthorne as well, they are plausible moral arguments because they affirm the value of human relationships over religious rules.
An authorial fantasy

As one of the most vivid representations in Hawthorne’s fiction of a writer addressing an audience, the Election Sermon is a window onto Hawthorne’s own anxieties and ambitions about publishing. To be sure, the novel’s other major characters reflect concerns about authorship as well: Hester, thinking dark thoughts as she sews in solitude; Chillingworth, coldly probing the minister’s heart; Pearl, giving voice to “a multitude of imaginary personages, old and young.” But in Dimmesdale, and more specifically in his final scene of preaching, we return to the dominant motif of “Passages,” the twinning of preacher and author.

If it seems arbitrary to focus on the Election Sermon scene apart from the rest of Dimmesdale’s character, the circumstances of the book’s composition provide some warrant. When Hawthorne sent Fields the manuscript in January 1850, he explained that the novel’s last three chapters had yet to be written—presumably “The Procession” (containing the bulk of the Election Sermon description), “The Revelation of the Scarlet Letter,” and “Conclusion.” Hawthorne attributed his tardiness with the last three chapters to family illness and other, unnamed interruptions. The break in Hawthorne’s compositional process may help explain the shift in tone between accounts of the Election Sermon’s writing and delivery, as well as why the minister who marches through the crowd on Election Day is a different man from the one who left Hester in the forest. Moreover, the fact that most of the book was already in Boston—and that Hawthorne now faced the publication of his potentially scandalous novel not as a distant prospect but as a present reality—may help explain why he dwelled on the speaker–audience dynamic in the Election Sermon.

Indeed, in January 1850 Hawthorne needed the financial rewards of success more than ever. Out of work for the previous six months and with a wife and two children to support, Hawthorne was so strapped for cash that his friend George Hillard secretly organized a collection on his behalf. Hawthorne received a letter from Hillard, along with a check for $500, just five days after sending the incomplete manuscript to Fields. Thanking his friend for the gift, Hawthorne confessed that Hillard’s letter had brought tears to his eyes and vehemently maintained his belief that people were largely responsible for their own success or lack thereof and that his financial struggles made him ashamed. A week before the book was released, Hawthorne began a letter to Fields with the fervent wish that his fortune would take a turn: “I pray Heaven the book may be a quarter part as successful as your prophecy.” He then denied that such good luck could be his.
Read against these personal trials and fierce longings, the scene of the Election Sermon reads as a fantasy of authorial success—a vision of mass acclaim capable of compensating for past suffering and shame. Years later, Hawthorne admitted in his notebooks that when he read the novel’s ending to Sophia, he could barely control his emotion: his voice “swelled and heaved, as if I were tossed up and down on an ocean as it subsides after a storm.” It may be that one reason Hawthorne’s voice shook as he read the Election Sermon scene was that these passages epitomized and dramatized his anxieties about letting loose the novel before him. Dimmesdale’s ability to communicate his pain yet not its source echoes the attitude toward authorship in the Custom-House preface, where Hawthorne writes that standing in a “true relation” with one’s audience requires both addressing the reader as a “kind and apprehensive, though not the closest friend” and keeping “the inmost Me behind its veil.” As Michael Gilmore has noted, Hawthorne both yearned for “a human connection with his readers” and resented a culture that demanded that authors sacrifice a measure of privacy in coming before the public. What the Election Sermon suggests is that Hawthorne hoped to achieve this veiled yet powerful connection not simply with individual readers, imagined as friends, but with that same “wide world” in which the indecorous writer sought “to find out the divided segment of [his] own nature, and complete his circle of existence by bringing him into communion with it.”

In fact, Hawthorne wrote about this very act of coming into communion with the public just three days after the publication of *The Scarlet Letter* and the same day that *The Salem Gazette* published one of the first reviews of the novel. The review was as hyperbolic as any author could wish: “Nothing in the whole range of modern literature seems to us more absolutely perfect in its way than this exquisite creation.” Seemingly buoyed by praise, Hawthorne told L. W. Mansfield, a poet for whom he had been acting as a paid critic for several months, that when one addressed the world at large, one in effect spoke only to “cognate minds,” to those “invisible friends” scattered throughout the world who, though one never met them, understood one better than one’s actual friends and family:

My theory is, that there is less indelicacy in speaking out your highest, deepest, tenderest emotions to the world at large, than to almost any individual. You may be mistaken in the individual; but you cannot be mistaken in thinking that, somewhere among your fellow-creatures, there is a heart that will receive yours into itself. And those who do not receive it, cannot, in fact, hear it; so that your delicacy is not infringed upon.
Secularizing the Sermon in *The Scarlet Letter*

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Whereas the Custom-House preface had frowned on authors who failed to protect their privacy, this letter suggested that one *should* speak one’s most intimate feelings to the great wide world because one’s meaning, however private, reached only those who understood it, and anyone who understood would sympathize. The extravagant optimism here makes one suspect that Hawthorne knew his luck had turned. In a letter to Fields written that January as he was finishing the manuscript, Hawthorne had described audiences in much less generous terms. There he had talked about printing *The Scarlet Letter* alongside half a dozen other, shorter stories “so that, failing to kill the public outright with my biggest and heaviest lump of lead, I might have other chances with the smaller bits, individually and in the aggregate.” Now, with success rounding the bend, he could look on the public not as quarry but as potential sympathizers. We cannot hope, of course, to know the precise nature of Hawthorne’s own, secret “highest, deepest, tenderest emotions,” alluded to in Dimmesdale’s nameless pain. What matters is that by describing authorship in terms that parallel Dimmesdale’s experience, Hawthorne implicitly critiqued the conventional wisdom that would have novelists be “genial.” Indeed, reviewing the novel for *Graham’s*, Edwin Percy Whipple faulted it for a “lack of sufficient geniality,” complaining that “A portion of the pain of the author’s own heart is communicated to the reader.”

With the Election Sermon, Hawthorne seems to have entertained a vision of *The Scarlet Letter*’s own reception. The novel insinuates that most readers will not be able to formulate adequate interpretations of the story—and that these imperfect readings are just fine. The chaotic, rapturous, critical “babble” anticipates conflicting readings of the novel with equanimity, as does the narrator’s description of the competing interpretations of what was on Dimmesdale’s chest and why. A more tantalizing image of audience response is the collective effervescence following the sermon. As the minister and magistrates leave the church, the murmurs of the crowd coalesce into a mighty shout unprecedented in New England. Following Burke’s idea that the “shouting of the multitude” was a form of excessive sound that stimulated a sublime passion, *The Scarlet Letter* compares the crowd’s shout with other sounds traditionally considered sublime. It is “more impressive [. . . ] than the organ-tones of the blast, or the thunder, or the roar of the sea.” It is the “mighty swell of many voices, blended into one great voice by the universal impulse which makes likewise one vast heart out of the many.” The scene suggests that Hawthorne harbored a desire to move beyond being merely an “artist of the beautiful” and to claim for his fiction that other, grander, more masculine half of the Burkean dichotomy. It proposes that a novel could produce an aesthetic effect associated with supposedly more serious works
and genres such as the Bible, epic poetry, opera, and the sermon. The crowd’s sublime response helps frame authorship in noncommercial terms, complementing how Hester allegorizes authorship as artisanal labor. Though it may seem strange for an author to aim for a goal as nebulous as “sublimity,” this concept is precisely the one to which some of Hawthorne’s most sympathetic readers gravitated. Melville meditated, “It may be that to common eyes, the sublimity of Hawthorne seems lost in his sweetness,” and Anthony Trollope wrote that in reading Hawthorne, one could experience “something of the sublimity of the transcendent.”

An ethical sermonic voice

Hawthorne’s ambiguity makes it impossible to read the figuration of fiction-writing through preaching as an argument that the novel has a unifying moral to convey, but the conclusion does contain one powerful instance of sermonic voice. After tracing the community’s interpretations of the origin of the scarlet letter on Dimmesdale’s chest, the narrator steps up to the pulpit. First, he gestures to his authorizing text, the fictive papers of Surveyor Pue, presenting them in terms that call to mind contemporary descriptions of the New Testament: “[t]he authority which we have chiefly followed, drawn up from the verbal testimony of individuals, some of whom had known Hester Prynne, while others had heard the tale from contemporary witnesses.” Besides subtly working to de-authorize the Bible by implying that it, too, may be a work of the imagination, the allusion implies a blasphemous comparison between Hester and Jesus. Read in this light, Hester the adulteress becomes Hester the divine martyr and suffering servant—one who returns, no less, to wipe away tears and comfort the broken-hearted.

From this new gospel, the narrator draws his lesson: “Among the many morals which press upon us from the poor minister’s miserable experience, we put only this into a sentence:—‘Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred.’” The passionate exhortation, the oratorical repetition, the moralistic rhetoric of “the world” and “your worst”—all add up to sermonic voice. Seeking to soften the force of this sentence, Sacvan Bercovitch contends that since the book is about ambiguity, as evidenced in the various interpretations about the scarlet letter (or its absence) on the minister’s breast, this assertion, too, is a limited, partial perspective. Granted, yet it seems that the more salient point is that in a novel full of hypotheticals and indeterminacies, this lone sermonic moment foregrounds how, if we are to arrive at moral principles at all, they must be formulated despite epistemological uncertainty. In a
complex world that defies platitudes, one must struggle to draw meaning and morality from the daunting multiplicity of the world and its texts. Ironically, the message that “presses upon” the narrator, as if with supernatural agency, is heterodox. Telling readers to suggest their “worst” to others does not call them to the righteousness that would renounce sin in the first place. Homing in on the scandalous exhortation, one contemporary religious reviewer complained that “sincerity in sin” was no virtue and that a better moral would have been “Be clean—be clean!”

Although immoral in conventional terms, the narrator’s sermonic counsel can be seen as profoundly ethical. Challenging the idea that individuals should adhere, or seem to adhere, to strict moral and social codes, it posits a world that accepts individual difference and even deviance. It says that no one is perfect, nor—more radically—should anyone pretend to be. This plea for sincerity supports a major ethical aim of the novel as a genre, which Dorothy Hale describes as “the honoring of Otherness.”

That is, the narrator’s exhortation honors the otherness of individual temperaments, habits, drives, and desires that deviate from moral norms, as well as the otherness within the self that chafes at those norms. Much of Hawthorne’s fiction makes a similar point, calling individuals to accept moral imperfections in one another. Young Goodman Brown, for instance, grows to old age miserable and misanthropic because he cannot accept that his neighbors might be less righteous than they seem. “That old woman taught me my catechism!” he cries incredulously upon seeing Goody Cloyse in the forest. The story says, “And so?” What is different about the “Be true!” command is that it focuses not on tolerating others but on tolerating ourselves. The narrator hails us not as judges, but as sinners. The consequence of not accepting our moral failings and hinting at those failings to others is that we hold humanity to unattainable ideals and so perpetuate a false, stifling, unjust world—the Puritan community, as Hawthorne imagined it. As Gordon Hutner has explained, only by partial revelation can secrets forge a desirable community, one in which half-guessed secrets inspire self-recognition and sympathy in others.

With this narratorial sermonic moment, Hawthorne further humanizes the act of preaching. Not only does it advocate a non-Christian ethic, it throws open the door to the sausage factory by exposing the messy process of sermon-making—the textual ambiguity and interpretive uncertainty that precede the final, neat sermonic utterance. The story itself is drawn from questionable documents, and the narrator-editor may have diverged from his sources. The story has “many morals” that “press upon” the narrator, language that suggests potentially contradictory morals and disclaims responsibility for any of them. The one moral given defies ready articulation; it must be “put [ . . . ] into a sentence.” And then there are the quota-
tion marks. In scrupulously hedging this one sermonic moment, Hawthorne called attention to sermonic discourse as a conditional, imperfect, human mode of speech. The narrator-preacher weighs texts and ideas, then makes the cloud of ambiguity rain exclamation points. He has formulated a usable truth despite flawed texts and uncertain interpretations. Like the most liberal of liberal preachers, he deliberately undermines his own authority, preaching the sermon but letting the audience know they can do with it what they will. If this conception of humanized, secularized preaching defies the notion that it conveys divine messages, it also indicates a desire to retain the sermon as a rhetorical form. Rather than mocking the sermon or abandoning it altogether, Hawthorne used its paradigmatic features to propose an ethical teaching that made his contemporaries uncomfortable—just as the best sermons were supposed to do.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne captured the rhetorical energy and aesthetic splendor of the sermon while emphasizing that preaching was a fully human endeavor. Against those who would see great preaching as connected to a minister’s superior piety, he suggested that the best sermons welled forth from unsanctified fonts of pain and folly. Against those who saw preaching as the translation of a self-authorizing biblical text into a clear moral message, he cast it as a rhetorical gesture resulting from a perplexing encounter with ambiguous, pseudo-authoritative documents. In relativizing preachers’ claims to authority, he leveled the playing field for novelists.

*The Scarlet Letter* thus gave dramatic form to Hawthorne’s sense that ministers were unworthy spiritual leaders. “I find that my respect for clerical people, as such, and my faith in the utility of their office, decrease daily,” he wrote in his notebooks in 1842. “We certainly do need a new revelation—a new system—for there seems to be no life in the old one.” One searches his fiction in vain for this “new system.” The usual repositories of antebellum idealism—domesticity, romantic love, communalism, reformism, nature, Transcendentalism—are dissected and scrutinized, not championed. The end of *The Scarlet Letter* toys with the dream of a new system, as Hester promises her sorrowing sisters a “new truth” that will redefine the social order. But this truth is indefinitely deferred, to be revealed in “Heaven’s own time.” It is no exaggeration to say that Hawthorne’s substitute for Protestantism was fiction itself. There he found the revelation of writerly inspiration; there, a new system of motifs, symbols, and subjectivities; there, new life. But rather than letting the sermon die with the old order, he reclaimed it for the new by reinterpreting it as a vehicle of pathos and ethical communication. It was this secularized vision of the sermon that Melville would build on in *Moby-Dick.*