

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Andrew White for the degree of Master of Arts in English presented on May 3, 1999.

Title: Counterfeit Arcadias: Nathaniel Hawthorne's Materialist Response to the Culture of Reform.

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Abstract approved: _____

David M. Robinson

Nathaniel Hawthorne lived and wrote in an age of reform efforts, and the progressive movement with which he was most familiar was Transcendentalism. However, he was not sympathetic with Emerson's idealism, a sentiment which comes out in his fiction in way of critique. Throughout Hawthorne's work there is an emphasis on human limitation, in stark contrast to the optimism that characterized his time — a "materialist" response to idealism (as defined by Emerson in "The Transcendentalist"). And one important vehicle of this critique of human possibility is his shrewd use of biblical motif — particularly the tropes of Eden and the Promised Land, which were adopted by the Transcendentalists. Although these allusions can be traced through much of Hawthorne's work, they are especially apparent in two novels: *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) and *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). Hawthorne exposes the irony behind the use of these biblical motifs by the Blithedale community (in their effort to create a utopian society) and the Puritan community, which looked to its religious leaders as the embodiment of its ideals.

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Counterfeit Arcadias:
Nathaniel Hawthorne's Materialist Response to the Culture of Reform

by

Andrew White

A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Master of Arts

Presented May 3, 1999
Commencement June 1999

Master of Arts thesis of Andrew White presented on May 3, 1999

APPROVED:

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Major Professor, representing English

Redacted for Privacy

Chair of Department of English

Redacted for Privacy

Dean of Graduate School

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Andrew White, Author

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe much to David Robinson, my thesis advisor, whose insight, support and feedback were integral to the writing of this project. Thank you for your willingness to do an independent study with me on Hawthorne, a course which laid the groundwork for this project.

I am also grateful for the assistance of Jeff Sklansky, whose historiographical vigor and penetrating questions helped me to sharpen the focus of this project. Your American Thought and Culture course series also provided a rich historical context for this project.

I also am indebted to Chris Anderson, whose “soul-searching” reading of this project and suggestions for mechanical improvement were deeply appreciated. Thank you for your encouragement and willingness to adopt yet another grad student.

Lastly, I want to express loving gratitude to my wife, Daria, whose patience, mutual faith, and belief in me and my interests enabled me to complete this project.

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COUNTERFEIT ARCADIAS:

Nathaniel Hawthorne's Materialist Response to the Culture of Reform

INTRODUCTION

Hawthorne, the Culture of Reform, and Transcendentalism

Writing in 1941, literary critic F. O. Matthiessen observed that the 1840's "gave rise to more reform movements than any other decade in our history" (ix). It was a period that saw the tremendous growth of abolitionism, the temperance movement, education reform, women's rights, prison reform, and labor reform (Cain 4). Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose place at the head of the American literary canon has been secured, wrote much of his fiction in the context of these reform movements. Not only did Hawthorne have direct exposure to reform, but he also participated in it to some degree, particularly in his six-month residence at Brook Farm in 1841.

This first-hand experience of the culture of reform affected Hawthorne's writing — both its themes and its tone. As a literary artist, Hawthorne was especially intrigued by what he perceived to be its consistencies. He was influenced by the "rhetoric of a reform culture whose paradoxes he knew well and often discussed" (Reynolds 114). As seen in one of his early notebook entries (September 1835), Hawthorne had a distinct interest in the literary possibilities provided by the ironies of reform culture. In the entry, he drew up a "sketch of a modern reformer, — a type of the extreme doctrines on the subject of slaves, cold-water, and other such topics" (Reynolds 115). In this study, a zealous reformer is on the street preaching a gospel of change. He is about to win many converts

to his cause when his harangue is cut short by the appearance of the master of the madhouse from which he had escaped. Savoring this irony, Hawthorne concludes his entry by writing: "Much can be made of this idea" (Reynold 115). He was keenly aware of these kinds of ironic juxtapositions in reform culture, and, in many ways, this singular ability made his literary career.

Although Hawthorne responded to the general impetus of reform in his time, the one movement that particularly influenced the direction of his fiction was Transcendentalism. Nina Baym notes that his "acquaintanceship [with Transcendentalism] was . . . the single most important stimulus in his literary development" (85). Hawthorne encountered the movement on several fronts — in its more theoretical expression and in its utopian application at Brook Farm (1841-1846).

Concerning the theoretical or philosophical aspect of Transcendentalism, the person who most influenced Hawthorne was his wife, Sophia Peabody. Sophia was a great admirer of Emerson, indicating several years before her marriage to Hawthorne that he was "the greatest man — the most complete man — that ever lived" (Richardson 420). In many ways he was her intellectual model. This deep admiration for Emerson was initially a cause of jealousy for Hawthorne, but eventually Sophia came to appreciate her husband's genius more fully, writing in her journal that both men were "great," but that "Mr. Emerson is not so whole sided as Mr. Hawthorne" (Miller 216). Due to the survival of much of the substantial correspondence between Hawthorne and his wife, it is clear that they enjoyed a passionate marriage and a deep love which Sophia characterized as "Paradise" during their stay at Old Manse in Concord (Miller 223).

Like her sister, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, Sophia Hawthorne was actively involved in the Transcendental Club. Elizabeth Peabody was an especially significant figure in Transcendentalism. She was a contributor to *The Dial*, managed a bookstore, selling Transcendental periodicals and books, and was also the first American woman to establish her own publishing company. Along with the exposure that came from his intimacy with the Peabody sisters, Hawthorne was acquainted with Emerson and other key Transcendentalists, like Henry David Thoreau and George Ripley, though he was never intimate with Emerson or the movement.

In addition to encountering Transcendentalism in its more philosophical expression, Hawthorne was involved in Brook Farm, the failed attempt to flesh out Transcendental ideals in a utopian community. Brook Farm (1841-46) was founded by George Ripley, who, with his cousin Ralph Waldo Emerson, Amos Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller, Theodore Parker, and Jones Very, was an important member of the Transcendental Club. With Brook Farm, George Ripley wanted to implement a Christian community, a vision articulated in his "Letter to the Church at Purchase Street" (1840): "[T]he true followers of Jesus are a band of brothers; they compose one family; they attach no importance whatever to the petty distinctions of birth, rank, wealth and station" (Cain 11). In the last sermons that Ripley delivered to his church before his resignation, he had spoken about the increasing gap between rich and poor, and criticized the domination of capitalism over many facets of society. Brook Farm, then, was essentially an attempt to remove that gap.

In general, Transcendentalism (in all its complexity) was not primarily a movement geared toward practical reform. However, the Panic of 1837 forced the

Transcendentalists, as well as other intellectuals and reformers, to “scrutinize the American social and economic order and consider how it might be modified, both to relieve mass distress and to enable men and women to create conditions within which they could realize their higher selves” (Cain 7). This began a shift of sorts within the movement towards more active engagement with society. And yet, there remained considerable tension between theoretical idealism and “material” efforts at reform within the Transcendentalist camp. Emerson’s notion of “self-culture” was in opposition to the call for a collective reform effort. Emerson did give his general blessing to the Brook Farm effort, but declined direct participation, reflecting his deep-seated skepticism of collective reform.

When Hawthorne joined Brook Farm at its founding in April 1841, his primary motivation was economic. He had been engaged to Sophia Peabody for nearly two years, and was looking for a way of providing income for their upcoming marriage. He was also hoping to have more time to write. Initially, he considered the possibility of residing at Brook Farm with Sophia once a place was secured for them, but quickly became disillusioned with the community — he left for a time and went to Salem, and then returned again — and eventually abandoned the venture altogether, some six months after marrying Sophia (December 1842).

Hawthorne’s involvement with Brook Farm ended on a sour note, when he tried to recover his investment of \$1500 (going towards a house at the community). Ripley and Charles A. Dana were unable to return the entire sum — they were only able to give him about a third of that amount. Hawthorne sued Brook Farm for the outstanding amount, but after fire struck the main building of the community in March 1846, the enterprise went

bankrupt and it is unclear whether Hawthorne ever did recover his investment. In many ways this negative experience with Brook Farm illustrates the uneasiness of Hawthorne's relationship with Transcendentalism, and the optimistic impulse of reform in general, a sentiment which also surfaces in his fiction.

II

Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay, "The Transcendentalist" (1842), provides categories that are suggestive for more fully understanding Hawthorne's complex relationship with Transcendentalism. Responding to a growing number of critics who accused him and his followers of being intentionally oblique, Emerson uses the essay as an occasion to delineate the basic tenets of the movement he founded. At the outset, he connects Transcendentalism to philosophical idealism: "What is popularly called Transcendentalism among us, is Idealism: Idealism as it appears in 1842" (192). He then contrasts Idealism with "Materialism": the former, he argues, is founded on "consciousness," and the latter on "experience" (193). Even though Transcendentalism was an intriguing amalgam of religious, social, cultural, literary and philosophical concerns, Emerson characterizes it here primarily as a philosophical movement.

Emerson continues this contrast between idealism and materialism by discussing their respective epistemologies. According to Emerson, "the materialist insists on facts, on history, on the force of circumstance and the animal wants of man" (193). The materialist is one who relies on empirical or sensory experience in the determination of truth. The idealist, however, "affirms facts not affected by the illusions of sense, facts . . . not liable to doubt" (193). Emerson goes on to describe this ability to grasp immaterial

“facts” as “intuition, which supercedes all experience and has “all *authority* over our experience” (198 - emphasis added). By asserting intuition over experience, Emerson places Transcendentalism in the tradition of Platonic idealism — in which the material or empirical is inferior to the immaterial, or realm of pure ideas.

In many ways, the moral theory or philosophy of human nature that emerges from Hawthorne’s fiction fits into Emerson’s category of materialism. This is especially evident given Hawthorne’s insistence on history and experience, which he privileges over intuition. Michael Colacurcio has argued that Hawthorne is a “moral historian,” noting the author’s fascination with his New England past. But Hawthorne’s emphasis on moral history not only includes the failure of the Puritan venture in the New World — it also goes back to the Judeo-Christian history of the Fall and consequent Curse, which define the moral limitations of humanity. Hawthorne’s reiteration of Puritan history fits into this archetypal moral history because it contains echoes of the Fall.

But Puritan history is complicated because it contains a curious mixture of a belief in the creation of a new society, a “City upon a Hill,” and a belief in innate depravity which would seem to negate the possibility of a utopia in the New World. The Puritans essentially attempted to reconcile this tension by their emphasis on grace — that God alone provided the power for an individual to overcome fallen human nature and live a godly life. However, this tension often led to a dichotomy between ideals and practice, an intriguing problem within Puritanism that will be given fuller exposition later in chapter 3 of this project.

Hawthorne, the “materialist” author concerned with history, invokes the Puritans to critique the excesses of Transcendental idealism. This move is logical since there are a

number of striking parallels between the utopian aspirations of the Puritan community in New England and the ideals of the Transcendentalists, particularly in its Brook Farm expression. Both movements held to the possibility of moral improvement in human nature, whether on an individual or social basis. However, there are also key differences that complicate any comparison of these two very different movements. Given their belief in innate depravity, the Puritans' utopian hopes were more narrow — for God's elect only, unlike the more democratic emphasis of Emerson's "Divinity School Address." The Transcendentalists, for their part, rejected the doctrine of depravity, espousing a view of human nature more in keeping with Romanticism than with traditional Christianity. The complex relationship between Puritanism and Transcendentalism will be given more consideration in chapter 1.

But why is idealism — both in its Puritan and Transcendental expressions — such a pressing idea for Hawthorne? Why does it shape so much of his fiction? This is a difficult issue to address with any amount of accuracy, since Hawthorne never states his views on Transcendentalism in clear terms, but veils them with his fiction instead. However, it does seem that a large part of his concern is philosophical — he is caught up in a key debate of his time over the application of idealism and Romantic intuition in society — what it meant for the average person. Emerson notes in "The Transcendentalist" that this issue had "deeply colored the conversation and the poetry" of his day (198).

And yet, despite this element of philosophical critique, Hawthorne does not appear to be committed to what the Transcendentalists opposed in American society — particularly the market revolution and the rise of capitalism. Indeed Hawthorne's own

relationship to market is complex. On one hand, his famous remark about the best-selling, female sentimentalist writers — that “damned mob of scribbling women” — indicates his objection to the reduction of literature to the status of a commodity (Gilmore 6). But he is also keen to produce a best-seller, and *The Scarlet Letter*, with its subject of a minister who falls into sexual scandal, is produced in part from this desire. What can be said about Hawthorne’s opposition to the Transcendentalists, however, is that he finds that their view of human nature — particularly their embrace of possibility and the deity *within* — counters what he sees of human nature on the *outside* — in human behavior.

What I set out to do in the following pages is demonstrate Hawthorne’s materialist response to Transcendentalism via fiction. In Chapter 1, I will take a closer look at the nature of this critique. I will discuss more fully Hawthorne’s use of history — particularly Puritan history — in his critique, which he shapes in the context of the American Renaissance and the larger cultural impulse to glorify the figures of the American past. I will also discuss something of the complexity of the Transcendentalism to which Hawthorne responded, particularly the tension between idealism and social action within the movement. This tension is important for Hawthorne since he responds to both Emerson’s idealism and the social concerns of Brook Farm. Lastly, I will discuss how biblical allusion plays a significant role in Hawthorne’s critique, further accentuating his more general emphasis on “moral history.”

Building on this context, I will demonstrate how Hawthorne critiques Transcendentalism via biblical allusion in both in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) — novels which were both written immediately following a decade replete with failed efforts at reform — and then how he directs them towards a

critique of idealism and utopian rhetoric. In Chapter 2, I will examine the ironic inversion of Edenic imagery in *The Blithedale Romance*, Hawthorne's fictional response to Brook Farm. I will focus in particular on the Eve-like character of Zenobia, whose fate in the novel essentially symbolizes the fate of the utopian venture as a whole. As well, I will look at the Promised Land imagery used by the characters in the story to situate their ideals and aspirations, making their failure all the more inglorious and their fall all the more resounding. In part, this emphasis appears to be directed towards the Transcendentalists who took on themselves the mantle of the Puritan religious "energy." By alluding to important instances of moral limitation in history — both the Fall and the failure of the Puritan venture — Hawthorne exposes the inconsistencies between philosophical idealism and his view of reality.

In Chapter 3, I will develop a reading of the Puritan community's response to Dimmesdale's Election Sermon and his shocking confession in *The Scarlet Letter*. I will argue that part of what Hawthorne does with these scenes is expose the erroneous dualism of idealism, particularly its view of human nature. In these passages, Hawthorne subtly gets at the confusion that he believed characterized the historical Puritans, as well as the Transcendentalists and other reform movements. Although not as direct an attack on Transcendentalism as *The Blithedale Romance*, *The Scarlet Letter* also emphasizes the importance of history in understanding human nature — not only in its use of Puritan history, but also in its reiteration of the biblical history of the curse. With the response of the community to Dimmesdale's confession, Hawthorne illustrates the idiocy of subjecting sensory experience to "intuition."

CHAPTER 1

Hawthorne's Transhistorical Critique: Moral Realism and the Reversal of Biblical Motif

Nathaniel Hawthorne's "materialist" critique of Transcendentalism is rooted in history — most notably in the history of New England. Hawthorne was intensely interested in his history, both religious and political (for the Puritans the two were inseparable), and spent hours poring over colonial accounts and narratives. Not surprisingly, then, this preoccupation found its way into much of his writing.

Even though Hawthorne is often regarded as a "dweller in the shadows of history" — one who "weav[ed] his art out of the haunted memories of Puritanism" (Matthiessen 192) — he was equally concerned about the issues of his own day because he saw an interrelation between the past and present. More precisely, he saw the idealistic and utopian assumptions of the past being rehashed in his own time, and to illustrate and counter this, he reiterated the past in his short stories and novels. Hawthorne, who has been described as a "shrewd critic rather than a hapless heir of the New England orthodoxy" (Colacurcio, Doctrine and Difference 22), took distinctly American material and shaped it into a critique of the America of his time, directed especially at the other-worldly idealism of his Concord neighbors, the Transcendentalists.

This *trans-historical* critique — critiquing the past, but also using the past to critique the present — is possible, as least in part, because of the extensive influence of Puritan rhetoric, its "distinctive contribution" to early America (Bercovitch 219). One example of this rhetorical heritage is George Ripley who, in the formation of his vision of Brook Farm, not only read Charles Fourier but also drew heavily upon the notion of the

community in covenant that had been articulated by John Winthrop in “A Modell for Christian Charity” some two centuries before. Like Ripley, Hawthorne also turned to the past, but found in it something negative rather than positive — he noticed many similarities between the failed idealism of the Puritans and the aspirations of his contemporaries, and, because of this insight, was able to attack both simultaneously in artful fiction.

In *The Province of Piety* (1984), Michael Colacurcio addresses the significance of Hawthorne’s historical concern with the Puritans, arguing that Hawthorne “carried on a life-long dialectic with the historical thesis of American Puritanism,” making him “our first significant intellectual historian” (1, 3). This view of Hawthorne as historian is verified, for example, by the influence that his fiction has had on how the Puritans are perceived in American history. Clearly the most prominent example of this influence is *The Scarlet Letter*, which, probably more than anything or anyone else, has perpetuated the less than favorable image of the Puritans as grim, narrowminded killjoys. Instead of creating powerful myths and heroes from the annals of American history, like his contemporary Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Hawthorne often portrays the figures of the past in a negative and even denigrating fashion. Although there are times when he depicts the Puritans in a positive light, it is significant that in *The Scarlet Letter* and the major tales with a Puritan setting (e.g. “Young Goodman Brown,” “The Minister’s Black Veil,” “The Gentle Boy”) religious devotion is criticized rather than praised. Instead of portraying the Puritans as the devout founding fathers who kindled the flames of American democracy, Hawthorne disparages them for their hypocritical piety and intolerance.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, for example, when describing the Puritan children at play, Hawthorne implicates them in the narrowness of their parents: “[T]he little Puritans, being of the most intolerant brood that ever lived [played] at scourging Quakers; or taking scalps in a sham fight with the Indians; or scaring one another with freaks of imitative witchcraft” (65). In this passage Hawthorne deflates the religious self-importance of the Puritans by representing the activities which express their devotion to God and the truth — i.e., punishing religious dissidents and defending themselves against the Indians — as nothing more than cruel child’s play and petty games. In “The Maypole of Merry Mount” Hawthorne describes the Puritan community in disparaging terms, reducing its piety to self-righteousness and moral browbeating:

Not far from Merry Mount was a settlement of Puritans, *most dismal wretches*, who said their prayers before daylight, and then wrought in the forest or cornfield, till evening made it prayer time again. Their weapons were always at hand, to shoot down the straggling savage. . . . Should the *grisly saints* establish their jurisdiction over the gay sinners, then would their spirits darken all the clime, and make it a land of clouded visages, of hard toil, of sermon and psalm forever (93 - emphasis added).

As the story comes to an end, the Puritans “establish their jurisdiction” over the people of Merry Mount by military force, like moralistic bullies. The forces of gaiety are overcome by the forces of “dismal piety.” This passage, along with the others from *The Scarlet Letter*, indicates a more critical or negative reading of the past by Hawthorne. In another instance of this, the tale “My Kinsman, Major Molineux,” Hawthorne portrays the Sons of Liberty as sinister, base, and corrupting, instead of imbuing their activities with mythical greatness.

Hawthorne's tendency to see the Puritan past in negative terms stands in noticeable contrast to the many who emphasized its more attractive elements. This inclination to glorify the past, particularly that of New England, is not only seen in many writers of the American Renaissance, but also in the rhetoric of other intellectual and political figures of the time. Daniel Webster, W. H. Gardiner, and Rufus Choate all saw the New England heritage as central to the democratic values of the fledgling American republic. They argued that the Puritans were essentially the ones who had begun the fight for American liberty with their defiance of British intolerance. While praising these more democratic values in the Puritans, many tended to "soft-pedal" their religious idiosyncrasies in favor of this more "revolutionary reading" of New England history (Bell, Historical Romance 10).

Others during this time, however, did not gloss over the New England religious tradition, but found something seminal in it. Ralph Waldo Emerson highly valued his Puritan religious heritage, remarking in his lecture "Religion" (1842) that the religious aspirations of the seventeenth century were "the most creative energy in our experience" (Richardson, Jr. 385). Emerson deeply admired the Puritans for their religious devotion, a sentiment demonstrated by the profound affection he felt for his aunt, Mary Moody Emerson, whose "high-tuned" piety was unequalled (Journal entry for May 7, 1837). More generally, Emerson regarded his New England forbears with respect, despite his departure from their religious doctrine:

Great, grim, earnest men, I belong by natural affinity to other thoughts and schools than yours, *but my affection hovers respectfully above your retiring footprints*, your unpainted churches, strict platforms, and sad offices; the iron-gray deacon and the wearisome prayer rich with the diction of the ages. Well, the new is only the seed of the

old. What is this abolition and non-resistance and temperance but the continuation of Puritanism, though it operate inevitably the destruction of the church in which it grew, as the new is always making the old superfluous? (Journal entry for September 21, 1841 - italics added).

There are similarities here between Emerson's description of the Puritans and Hawthorne's. Adjectives such as "grim," "strict," "sad," and "wearisome" can also be found in *The Scarlet Letter*. However, unlike Hawthorne, Emerson regarded his forbears with respect, seeing himself as organically and spiritually connected to them — "the new is only the seed of the old."

This attitude of esteem and indebtedness towards the heritage of Puritan New England differs substantially from Hawthorne's attitude towards his ancestors, whose religious zeal¹ he apologizes for in the introduction to *The Scarlet Letter* ("The Custom House"):

I know not whether these ancestors of mine bethought themselves to repent, and ask pardon of Heaven for their cruelties . . . At all events, I, the present writer, as their representative, hereby take shame upon myself for their sakes, and pray that any curse incurred by them . . . may be now and henceforth removed (9).

This idea of ancestral guilt is suggestive for a broader understanding of Hawthorne's relationship with the Puritans in his fiction. This feeling seems to have motivated him to be less forgiving towards the Puritans, in *The Scarlet Letter* for example, and expose "the harsh, inhumane nature" of their society (Stouck 256). Hawthorne felt free to point out the glaring weaknesses in the religious heritage of New England, unlike many of his contemporaries who were more inclined to either gloss or gloss over Puritan orthodoxy.

¹ E.g., Magistrate John Hathorne [sic], who presided over several executions during the notorious Salem witchcraft trials in 1692.

II

Hawthorne's preoccupation with the Puritan past in his fiction is not limited to a desire to expiate his own personal past, however. His emphasis on the Puritans' shortcomings and ultimate failure to live up to their ideals clearly points to his dissatisfaction with idealism, particularly that of the Transcendentalists. Emerson rejected the notion of innate depravity and a judgmental God, and argued instead that human nature possessed great, even divine, potential. In "Self-Reliance," his manifesto of individualism and non-conformity, Emerson says, "Trust thyself," and "Obey thy heart," reflecting this optimistic view of human possibility.

As a "materialist" (according to Emerson's own definition) who privileged everyday, empirical experience, Hawthorne was at odds philosophically with Emerson's view of human nature, and "felt compelled to question the seemingly blind optimism of a system that did so little to account for the contradictions men daily confronted" (Gura 148). Hawthorne was painfully aware of these "contradictions," especially because of his disillusioning experience with Brook Farm, the practical application of Transcendental optimism. For him, Brook Farm was characterized by "impracticable schemes," as he puts it in "The Custom House," his introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*.

And yet, Brook Farm represents a deliberate effort on the part of the Transcendentalists to bridge their ideals and material reality. But this attempt exposed real tension in the movement. Of the members of the Transcendentalist Club, only George Ripley participated actively in the Brook Farm experiment. Ideologically, Brook Farm was clearly Transcendental in character. In "The Letter to the Church in Purchase Street," Ripley argued that the community would attempt to "cultivate the holiest principles of our

nature” (406), a view which asserted the possibility of improvement and reform and distinguished Brook Farm from other communes (Golemba 69).

However, the Transcendental emphasis on individualism and Ripley’s concern for the collective good of the community were in tension at Brook Farm. In a letter to Emerson, dated November 9, 1840, Ripley expressed his desire “to see a society of educated friends, working, thinking, and living together, with no strife, except that of each to contribute the most to the benefit of all” (Frothingham 310). Ripley mentions that he would prefer pursuing personal needs, but that sacrifice of individual desires is often necessary for the greater good, an approach is a noted departure from Emerson’s individual-based “self-culture.”

Many historians have commended Ripley for his initiative in the formation of Brook Farm, arguing that he was considerably more willing than Emerson to get his hands dirty (Francis 45). And yet, Emerson himself was deeply ambivalent about material reform. Much twentieth century criticism has looked on him as an aloof dreamer and sunny-minded idealist who had his head in the sand and was indifferent to the problems of society around him. However, more recent scholarship has focused on Emerson’s later work, and how it demonstrates an eventual orientation towards issues of practical reform. David Robinson notes that “the fading of visionary ecstasy as a reliable religious foundation eventuated in Emerson’s gradual orientation towards ethical engagement as a means of spiritual fulfillment” (3). This shift of sorts occurred by the early 1840’s — the time that Brook Farm began — and by the late 1840’s and early 1850’s the focus of Emerson’s writing was on social action and criticism, illustrating an attempt to reconcile his conception of reality with what he actually encountered in everyday life. Len Gougeon

has also attested to this change. In *Virtue's Hero: Emerson, Antislavery, and Reform* (1990), he argues that Emerson was an engaged social activist who was committed to the abolition of slavery, indicating his orientation away from individual, personal “reform” towards larger social reform.

This shift in Emerson’s thinking indicates that Hawthorne’s critique from outside of Transcendentalism echoes the self-critique within the movement in some ways. There was an apparent problem with translating ideas or theories into practice. However, even though Emerson makes an effort to reconcile his ideals with reality, admitting some limitation, he also continues to be committed to the realization of many of those ideals. Hawthorne, on the other hand, is skeptical of ideals altogether. Consequently, he preaches a gospel of human frailty or limitation that essentially precludes the possibility of reform, advocating instead what might be termed “moral realism” which emphasized what is and what feasibly could be.

By turning to New England history in much of his fiction, Hawthorne not only develops a moral history of that region, but also uses that setting to paint what he believes to be a picture of human nature that is more grounded in earthly experience. Hawthorne also finds something in that history which helps him articulate his view of human nature — the Calvinistic doctrine of depravity. Herman Melville, who was a great admirer of Hawthorne (*Moby-Dick* is dedicated to him) and essentially shared his view of human nature, was among the first to observe this, in his effusive review of Hawthorne’s tale compilation, *Mosses from an Old Manse*:

Whether Hawthorne has simply availed himself of this mystical blackness as a means to the wondrous effects he makes it to produce in his lights and shades; or whether there really lurks in him, perhaps unknown to himself, a

touch of Puritanic gloom, — this, I cannot altogether tell. Certain it is, however, that this *great power of blackness in him derives its force from its appeals to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin*, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free (341 - italics added).

Ironically, then, to counteract “progressive” ideas about human potential, Hawthorne turned to Puritanism, the archaic system he so vehemently attacked. F. O. Matthiessen has also observed this acceptance of the Puritan doctrine of human nature in Hawthorne — “his brooding absorption in what was common to human experience revealed to him the kernel of reality beneath the decayed husks” (199).

Matthiessen’s kernel metaphor echoes Emerson’s seed image, both connoting the seminal influence of Puritanism for both writers, although in quite different ways. Emerson admired the Puritans for their heritage of piety and religious experience, but rejected the doctrine of innate depravity. Hawthorne, conversely, condemned the Puritans for their hypocritical piety, and yet essentially embraced their view of depravity.

Because of Hawthorne’s heavy emphasis on human weakness, some have argued that he develops not so much a realistic vision of humanity as a tragic vision. In this way, Hawthorne almost moves from one extreme to another in response to Transcendentalism, replacing optimism with pessimism, and utopia with dystopia. There is something of an imbalance in Hawthorne’s fiction that veers towards tragedy, as Melville suggests in his review of Hawthorne’s *Mosses*: “Perhaps he does not give us a ray of his light for every shade of his dark” (341). Hawthorne himself was quite aware — perhaps even painfully so — of his orientation towards the dark side of life. Before starting the ill-fated *Dolliver Romance*, Hawthorne remarked to his publisher: “I wish God had given me the faculty of writing a sunshiny book” (qtd. in Matthiessen 234). This “power of darkness,” as

Melville puts it, is also apparent in *The Scarlet Letter*, whose tone is so gloomy that Hawthorne suggested publishing a brighter piece together with it to avoid putting off his reading audience: “Judging from its effect on [Sophia] and the publisher, I may calculate on what bowlers call a ten-strike. . . . [I]t lacks sunshine, etc. To tell the truth . . . it is positively a hell-fired story, into which I found it almost impossible to throw any cheering light” (Baym 153).

Nevertheless, given the brilliant character of the optimism of his time, one can understand Hawthorne’s more sober, materialist appraisal of humankind, based solidly on his own experience. Hawthorne is answering this general positive impulse with a dose of moral realism, a perspective which characterizes much of his fiction.²

III

Given Hawthorne’s emphasis on the experience of history: of Christian history with the Fall, and Puritan history, it is fitting that he employs the language of that history — biblical motif — in that critique. Although there has been extensive debate over the significance of biblical language (or theology) in Hawthorne, there are essentially two groups of thought regarding Hawthorne’s relationship to the theological aspects of Puritanism and Christianity in general. The first group generally regards the theological language and moral overtones in Hawthorne as important to his overall moral vision of humanity (8). The second group, on the other hand, generally argues that Hawthorne toyed with defunct, outdated conceptions of the Puritans for aesthetic reasons, and was not particularly concerned with theological issues.

² His comments about the fad of spiritualism in a letter to his fiancée, Sophia Peabody, epitomize this outlook on life: “The view which I take of the matter is caused by no want of faith in mysteries, but from a deep reverence for the soul — *Keep the imagination sane*” (Matthiessen 205 - italics added).

Henry James, who deeply admired Hawthorne, was among the first to emphasize Hawthorne's concern with aesthetics, noting that the author's imagination selected the "grim precinct of the Puritan morality for its play-ground" (352,3). More recently, Nina Baym has argued in *The Shape of Hawthorne's Career* (1976) that too much significance is read into Hawthorne's theological or religious references, maintaining, like James, that Hawthorne uses the Puritan backdrop primarily for artistic purposes. Responding to much of Hawthorne criticism of the 1950's, Baym rejects the notion that Hawthorne was a "neo-orthodox writer controlled by a vision at once Christian and tragic" (9). Instead, she claims that Hawthorne's concerns are "too evidently secular, his distrust of doctrine too obvious, his language too patently untheological" (9) for theological questions to have an important place in his writing.

However, as many have noted, it is hard to overemphasize the influence of Puritan orthodoxy on Hawthorne. Philip Gura observes that, although Hawthorne was not a theologian, he was affected by the theological debates of his time which were fueled by new understandings of traditional New England Christianity. Both he and Melville "opened up both bygone American Calvinism and sacrosanct texts such as the Bible and *Pilgrim's Progress* for non-dogmatic use in modernized allegories and metaphysical fictions" (Reynolds 16). And yet, Hawthorne's emphasis on depravity, although apparently not motivated by personal faith, is doctrinal in a sense — he believes religiously that man is tragically flawed. In the final analysis, his religious and theological allusions are more than just aesthetically motivated — Hawthorne uses this rich language to develop his own moral philosophy of human nature, based on his own empirical observation, or experience, and reading of history.

Although many have discussed the place of biblical allusion and theological reference in Hawthorne, not all agree that Hawthorne was a “biblical” writer in the strict sense of the term. Edwin Cady, for example, notes that Hawthorne does employ biblical and theological tropes in his writing, but ones that had been adapted by Puritan writers, such as Edmund Spenser, John Milton, and John Bunyan. In light of this, Cady argues that Hawthorne was not a biblical writer, although he does recognize a marginal biblical influence: “Perhaps Hawthorne’s sense was that with the Bible the artist indeed needed to be oblique, disguising it in other media, be rather distant, make it a memory quickening aroma, not a noise” (38).

Even though Hawthorne was influenced by Spenser, Milton and Bunyan in his portrayal of human nature, he also took biblical motifs in new, unorthodox directions in the formulation of his own moral theory. This practice is also seen in Herman Melville. Edwin Cady, in speaking of Melville, argues that if Captain Ahab was a “grand godlike ungodly man,”³ his creator was a “great biblical unscriptural writer” (38). In Melville’s fiction, Cady suggests that “anything [biblical] may be . . . inverted, pulled inside out, torn down, and reconstructed into its mirror opposite” (9). Perhaps the most startling example of this device of biblical reversal is Ahab’s blasphemous dedication of the newly-forged harpoon intended for the flesh of Moby-Dick: “Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli!” [I do not baptize you in the name of the father, but in the name of the devil] (*Moby-Dick* 404). In this passage Melville takes Christ’s commission to his disciples — that they baptize “in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost” — and turns it on its head with a statement that is blatantly heretical. In a letter to

³ Captain Peleg’s description of Ahab in *Moby-Dick*.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, Melville describes Ahab's blasphemous statement as the "secret motto" of the novel (Feidelson 676), suggesting a personal affinity with the captain's heresy.

This inclination towards biblical inversion is also seen in Hawthorne, although perhaps (as Cady suggests) Hawthorne's is a suggestive "aroma" to Melville's "noise." This reconstruction of biblical motif is seen, for example, in several instances in *The Scarlet Letter*. Although they do not carry the kind of weight in the novel as Ahab's statement does in *Moby Dick*, they do add the strong undercurrent of irony in the story and demonstrate Hawthorne's sensitivity to biblical motif. In one such reversal Hester and the baby Pearl are compared to the Madonna and Christ-child. However, as the narrator explains, instead of reflecting "that sacred image of sinless motherhood, whose infant was to redeem the world," the reader is confronted with a woman in whom "was the taint of deepest sin in the most sacred quality of human life, working such effect, that the world was only the darker for this woman's beauty, and the more lost for the infant that she had born" (41). This kind of reversal is also apparent with Hawthorne's rendering of the 'pearl of great price' image — Hester names her daughter "Pearl" because she had "purchased her with all she had, — her . . . only treasure" (62). What is ironic about this image (at least for Hawthorne's original audience) is that an illegitimate child, conceived in a moment of lawless passion, is paralleled to the "pearl" that Christ compares to the Kingdom of God in Matthew 13.

In addition to these allusions, there are more complex biblical motifs that can be traced throughout Hawthorne's tales and novels (or romances). This is particularly true of the motifs of Eden and the Promised Land, which were often used to characterize

reform or utopian ventures. Hawthorne often takes the motif of Edenic paradise, inverts it and pulls it inside out (to use Cady's phrasing). In many cases he simply re-enacts the Fall. In a similar vein, Hawthorne also draws upon the motif of the Promised Land, a favorite of the Puritans, and exposes the ironies behind its use. This use of biblical motif is an important component or vehicle of Hawthorne's historical (or materialist) understanding of human nature and response to the idealist impulse of Transcendentalism. It also reveals the shrewd character of Hawthorne's critique — using the tools of the belief systems that he opposed (the biblical tropes of Eden and the Promised Land) to expose their inconsistencies.

CHAPTER 2

The Blithedale Romance:

Mocking Inept Idealism through Biblical Trope

In “The Transcendentalist,” Emerson notes that “the materialist, secure in the certainty of sensation, mocks at fine-spun theories, at star-gazers and dreamers” (193). *The Blithedale Romance* can be read as a mockery of the ineptitude of hopeless idealists trying to impose their far-fetched theories on everyday life. Hawthorne interprets the failure of the Blithedale community, and by extension that of the Brook Farm venture, through the history of moral failure — the Fall of Adam and Eve and of the Puritan vision for the New World. Hawthorne mocks the hopes of the Blithedale experiment not only with biblical echoes from Milton, but “more crucially, from the records of America’s own earlier lapses from social grace — the pitiful breakup of the original ‘Pilgrim’ experiment at Plymouth and the more exemplary failure of the Christian commonwealth of Massachusetts considered as a holy city set upon a hill” (Colacurcio, Province 33). *The Blithedale Romance* is essentially a critique, then, of utopian aspirations that employs numerous references, allusions, and tropes to ridicule the whole idea of serious social reform.

In the preface of *The Blithedale Romance*, Hawthorne claims that the novel does not in fact attempt to make a statement positive or negative about utopian efforts — that it does not “put forward the slightest pretensions to illustrate a theory, or elicit a conclusion, favorable or otherwise, in respect to socialism” (38). Nevertheless, this disclaimer is discredited by the overall content and tone of the book. A. N. Kaul argues that “Hawthorne’s apologia in the preface . . . should be treated in the same light as Mark

Twain's celebrated warning against finding a moral in *Huckleberry Finn*" (204). And Edwin Miller argues that "such disclaimers are useless, people believing what they wish, and false, authors inevitably drawing more extensively upon personal experience than they usually care to acknowledge" (367). Many of the original readers, in fact, approached *The Blithedale Romance* as a roman de clef, in spite of the disclaimer. Which character, readers wondered, was Margaret Fuller, Emerson, Ripley, Alcott, Brownson? (Donahue 96). Emerson himself also disregarded Hawthorne's apologia, objecting to the book as a "ghastly and untrue account" of the Brook Farm community (E. Miller 367).

On one level, then, the novel can be read as a satire of the Transcendentalist utopian experiment in which Hawthorne pokes fun at inept idealists, and possibly even himself, for believing that serious reform is plausible. There are many components of this laughing critique of utopian application of Transcendental idealism, but what I would like to focus on in this chapter is how Hawthorne uses the history of moral failure to critique Brook Farm in particular, and idealism in general. With subtlety and shrewdness, Hawthorne reverses the biblical motif of Eden, reenacting the Fall (and borrowing heavily from John Milton), and, in the process, exposes the ironies of the Promised Land motif, as adapted by the Puritans.

I

When Hawthorne arrived at Brook Farm in April 1841, it was in a snowstorm, and it is not coincidental that Miles Coverdale, the narrator of *The Blithedale Romance*, arrives at Blithedale in an April snowstorm. Coverdale describes this event sardonically, speaking of it as an inauspicious beginning for the community's "exploded scheme for beginning the life of Paradise anew" (43). Riffing on the theme of Paradise, he continues:

Paradise indeed! Nobody else in the world, I am bold to affirm — nobody, at least, in our bleak little world of New England — had dreamed of Paradise, that day, except as the pole suggests the tropic. Nor, with such materials as were at hand, could the most skilful architect have constructed any better imitation of Eve's bower, than might have been seen in the snow-hut of an Esquimaux. *But we made a summer of it*, in spite of the wild drifts (43 - emphasis added).

Along with the obvious contrast between the wintry New England April day and the tropical climate of Eden, Coverdale makes a significant statement about the artificial nature of the utopian effort — “we made a of summer of it.” In Hawthorne's estimation, idealists and reformers typically ignored the cold reality of everyday life around them (in this case, an April blizzard!) in their fiery zeal to bring about change. This sense of forced optimism is also seen in Coverdale's sarcastic response to the unseasonable conditions of their journey towards Blithedale: “‘How pleasant it is!’ remarked I, while the snow-flakes flew into my mouth, the moment it was opened. ‘How very mild and balmy is this country-air!’” (45). Here Hawthorne uses Coverdale's sarcasm to mock idealism — the practice of putting sunny face on things. Coverdale is confronted with the material absurdity of the utopia's summer-like hopes, as driving snow flies into his warm mouth.

It is especially in Chapter 3 — “A Knot of Dreamers” — that Hawthorne asserts the history of the Fall, and reverses the Paradise motif. The chapter teems with Edenic irony, particularly in the character of Zenobia. Coverdale sees her as an Eve figure who represents the Edenic hopes of the community and manifests the beauty and freshness of a “newly gathered people”: “One felt an influence breathing out of her, such as we might suppose to come from Eve, when she was just made, and her Creator brought her to Adam, saying — ‘Behold, here is a woman’” (49). This comparison of Zenobia to Eve

begins when Coverdale, responding to the discussion about who would staff the kitchen, remarks (perhaps sarcastically):

What a pity that the kitchen, and the house-work generally, cannot be left out our system altogether! It is odd enough, that the kind of labor which falls to the lot of women is just that which chiefly distinguishes artificial life — the life of degenerated mortals — from the life of Paradise. Eve had no dinner-pot, and no clothes to mend, and no washing-day (48).

It is difficult to take Coverdale seriously here given his general tone of insincerity and cynicism in the narrative. But whether he is sincere or not, Hawthorne seems to be getting at the tension between everyday reality and idealism with this passage. Coverdale's comment about "artificial life" is ironic, in one sense, because what the community is attempting seems as unnatural as what it is leaving behind, if not more so. The comment is also indicative of the great difficulty that the community would encounter in its attempt to break loose from the society around it.

Zenobia's playful, tongue-in-cheek response to Coverdale, also demonstrates the battle that the community faces, given the harsh realities without the farm:

I am afraid . . . we shall find some difficulty in adopting the Paradisiacal system, for at least a month to come. Look at that snow-drift sweeping past the window! Are there any figs ripe, do you think? Have the pine-apples been gathered to-day? Would you like a bread-fruit, or a cocoa-nut? Shall I run out and pluck you some roses? No, no, Mr. Coverdale, the only flower hereabouts is the one in my hair, which I got out of a green-house, this morning. As far as the garb of Eden . . . I shall not assume it till after May-day! (49).

The hot-house flower that Zenobia uses to adorn her head, is another example of the artificiality or unnatural character of Blithedale, an image related to Coverdale's earlier statement about "making a summer" of wintry conditions. Instead of blooming with the

blessing of all of nature, the greenhouse flower is the product of a manmade environment imposed on the natural growing process which is subject to the seasons. This is an analogy of what the Blithedaleans were attempting: to impose an unnatural way of living on stubborn, fallen human nature.

Zenobia's last comment about the "garb of Eden" evokes a peculiar response in Coverdale that contributes to Hawthorne's inversion of Paradise and his re-enactment of the Fall: "... [T]hese last words, together with something in her manner, irresistibly brought up a picture of that fine, perfectly developed figure, in Eve's earliest garment. I almost fancied myself actually beholding it" (49).⁴ Instead of conjuring up an image of Eve as the symbol of virginal beauty, Coverdale imagines her in a lustful way. So, at the very beginning of the Blithedale venture — the first night, in fact — there is the introduction of sexuality.

With this reference, Hawthorne is clearly alluding to Milton's rendering of the Fall in *Paradise Lost*. After Adam joins Eve in partaking of the fruit, instead of rising to new heights of consciousness and wisdom, the first couple consummate their disobedience with lustful passion. But at first, after eating of the forbidden fruit, they experience a feeling of divine greatness: "... that now / As with new wine intoxicated both / They swim in mirth, and fancy that they feel / Divinity within them breeding wings / Wherewith to scorn the earth . . ." (9.1007-1011a). This experience of "divinity" is quite ephemeral, however, as the true fruit of their disobedience ripens within them: "... but that false fruit / Far other operation first displayed, / Carnal desire inflaming, he on Eve / Began to cast

⁴ The last sentence was deleted from the original manuscript, but restored in the Centenary edition of *The Blithedale Romance*.

lascivious eyes, she him / As wantonly repaid; they in lust burn” (9.1011b-1015). Soon, Adam and Eve take their “fill of love and love’s disport” (9.1042),⁵ the first human action after the fall, demonstrating their debasement, not glorification. Instead of winging it to the heavens, they roll in the flowers and earth of Eden.⁶

Given Hawthorne’s familiarity with Milton, the inclusion of sexuality here (Coverdale’s lustful thoughts) can be understood in several ways. First, it is a confirmation of the fallen character of humanity that would prove to be an insurmountable obstacle for the Blithedale community. Indeed, in many ways the end of Blithedale is precipitated by sexuality — when Zenobia has a falling out with Hollingsworth, the over-zealous reformer whom she has come to love.

In addition, the reference to this crucial scene in *Paradise Lost* exposes the illusory aspirations of the Blithedaleans. After eating of the fruit, Adam and Eve imagine that they feel “[d]ivinity within them breeding wings / Wherewith to scorn the earth” (9.1010-11a). In part, this seems to be an attack on Transcendentalism — Emerson emphasized human potential because of the divinity within. By invoking Milton, Hawthorne is essentially saying that no matter how hard they — the Transcendentalists or the Blithedaleans — tried to “make a summer” out of their world and no matter how optimistic they felt, their endeavors would fail. Carnal reality, the true fallen nature of mankind, would assert itself, rendering their efforts ineffective. The Brook Farmers and Transcendentalists emphasized possibility and potential for humanity. But Hawthorne notably emphasizes the opposite — limitation: We cannot accomplish these unrealistic

⁵ Milton borrows his phrasing from Proverbs 7.18, where a harlot invites her lover: “Come, let us take our fill of love until the morning.”

⁶ In Milton’s depiction of this event “flowers were the couch” (1039).

goals, and let me prove it to you by taking you back to the first incident of human effort to “scorn the earth” (*PL* 9.1011).

This moment of sexuality after the Fall in *Paradise Lost* is also alluded to in the fall of Hester and Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter*. The nature of their particular fall is, of course, sexual, and, although it is not clearly stated, their original sin or tryst apparently took place in the forest, making it probable that they, like Adam and Eve, took their fill of “love’s disport” on the vegetation of the wood. As many have observed, Hester and Dimmesdale ritually reenact the original Fall by eating of forbidden fruit, a reality which makes the idealism of the minister’s Election Day sermon seem ridiculous

Some also understand the second meeting in the forest (the forest interview) as another reenactment of the Fall, in which Hester, like Eve, “tempts” Dimmesdale with happiness by suggesting escape.⁷ Michael T. Gilmore notes that “the interview itself is evocative of Eve’s temptation of Adam in *Paradise Lost*, with Hester taking the initiative in urging the minister to break completely with the Boston community” (103). Hester encourages Dimmesdale to start over, and forget about their past failure: “Leave this wreck and ruin here where it hath happened! Meddle no more with it! Begin all anew!” (135). And she herself seems to deny the sinfulness of their original consummation — as implied by the narrational comment that “the scarlet letter had not done its office” — when she says: “What we did had a consecration of its own” (133). Hawthorne seems to be implying here that there is no reason why the Puritan community should be so severe with Hester (or potentially, with Dimmesdale), since her actions were in keeping with

⁷ After the interview, the narrator notes: “The wretched minister! . . . Tempted by a dream of happiness, he had yielded himself with deliberate choice, as he had never done before, to what he knew was deadly sin” (150).

fallen, human nature. There is something natural about what she did. In both *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Blithedale Romance*, then, Hawthorne alludes to the Fall in order to strengthen his argument against the divine aspirations of his contemporaries, which in his view had little bearing in a material universe.

This notion of the Fall (connected with Zenobia, representing Eve) is even more evident when Coverdale notices a seemingly insignificant action on the part of Zenobia: “Looking at herself in the glass, and perceiving that her once magnificent flower had grown rather languid, (probably by being exposed to the fervency of the kitchen fire), she flung it on the floor . . .” (52). In light of the depiction of the kitchen as representing practical necessity, as seen in Coverdale’s earlier remark about “artificial life,” the wilted flower seems to illustrate the effect that reality will have on the blooming hopes of the community. Again, Hawthorne is underlining the inescapable character of fallen human experience, which he seems to see in something as mundane as kitchen work.

The description of Zenobia’s faded flower, like the earlier reference to sexuality, is also an allusion to the depiction of the Fall in *Paradise Lost*. While Eve is being tempted by the serpent, Adam, eager for her return (because for the first time they had done their duties separately at Eve’s insistence), makes a garland of “choicest flow’rs” for her. However, when Adam meets Eve on her return, and learns what she had done, the beautiful garland fades, reflecting the freshly fallen state of Eden’s queen: “On th’ other side, Adam, soon as he heard / The fatal trespass done by Eve, amazed, / Astonied stood and blank, while horror chill / Ran through his veins, and all his joints relaxed, / From his slack hand the garland wreathed for Eve / Down dropped, and all the faded roses shed” (9.886-893). As with Eve’s garland in Milton’s Eden, the faded flower of Zenobia bodes

ill for life in Paradise at Blithedale. Coverdale interprets the event as indicative of the character of the Blithedale experiment — it “caused our heroic enterprise to show like an illusion, a masquerade, a pastoral, *a counterfeit Arcadia*, in which we grown-up men and women were making a play-day of the years that were given us to live in” (52 - italics added). This appraisal of Blithedale, as much as anything else in the novel, provides a statement of Hawthorne’s main argument against the utopian application of Transcendental idealism.

Besides the references to the Fall in *Paradise Lost*, there is another sign of imminent breakdown in Chapter 3. The black snowstorm raging outside the small farmhouse sets a “dreary” tone for the venture. Coverdale interprets it as “a symbol of the cold, desolate, distrustful phantoms that invariably haunt the mind, on the eve of adventurous enterprises, to warn us within the boundaries of *ordinary life*” (50 - emphasis added). The idea of “ordinary life” is especially important to Hawthorne and has echoes of his words to Sophia to “keep the imagination sane.” Unlike Emerson, Hawthorne is much more keen to emphasize the finitude of human nature, looking at the material evidence of ordinary life, and the aborted attempts to break free of it, to support his moral theory.

The Blithedale experiment, then, is doomed to failure at the outset and indicated by the series of signs in Chapter 3 that leave little hope for its success: lustful thoughts, the faded flower, and the storm. And from this point in the narrative, things go pretty much downhill. A series of events leads Coverdale to become disillusioned with the farm, and after a conflict with Hollingsworth, the fervent philanthropist, he leaves for a time. When he returns, matters have deteriorated even further. Zenobia, who had grown close to

Hollingsworth and his cause, is caught up in a struggle for his affection with Priscilla, a naive young lady who Zenobia had taken under her wing. In a state of deep disillusionment, Zenobia — or Eve, the embodiment of the community's spring-like hope — comes to terms with the make-believe nature of their effort. In exasperation, she tells Coverdale: "I am weary of this place, and sick to death of playing at philanthropy and progress. Of all varieties of mock-life, we have surely blundered into the very emptiest mockery, in our effort to establish the one true system. . . . It was, indeed, a foolish dream!" (203,4). This notion of playing (at progress) is seen earlier in Coverdale's interpretation of the faded flower — "making a play-day of the years that were given us to live in." However, unlike Coverdale, Zenobia is not able to view the Blithedale misadventure with a something of a detached skepticism. She claims that there is no point in shedding tears "over a broken bubble" (204), but her disappointment is bitter and connected to her broken intimacy with Hollingsworth.

Zenobia's distress over the breakdown of the community, at least over what it was for her, drives her to drown herself in the river, an event which brings the novel to its shocking climax. More than any other event in the novel, this suicide mirrors the death of the Blithedale vision. Like the beautiful Zenobia, it self-destructs, tripped up by its own unrealistic expectations. Coverdale, Silas, and Hollingsworth discover Zenobia's body, but find that its condition reflects the turmoil of her last hours in life. Coverdale describes her body as "the marble image of a death-agony," and observes that "her arms had grown rigid in the act of struggling, and were bent before her, with clenched hands" (210). There is defiance in her death posture — her hands are "clenched in immitigable defiance"

(210), ostensibly towards God.⁸ This singular aspect vividly embodies the painful disillusionment of one who had hoped for something better out of human existence.

After they recover the body and take it to shore, Silas Foster attempts to straighten it out, finding Zenobia's death-posture unseemly and inappropriate for burial. But despite his best efforts, he cannot alter Zenobia's rigidity in death. Coverdale contemplates the contrast between what he imagined Zenobia envisioned her death to be, and what it actually turned out to be:

Zenobia, I have often thought, was not quite simple in her death. She had seen pictures, I suppose, of drowned persons, in lithe and graceful attitudes. And she deemed it well and decorous to die as so many village-maidens have, wronged in their first love, and seeking peace in the bosom of the old, familiar stream — so familiar that they could not dread it But, in Zenobia's case, *there was some tint of the Arcadian affectation* that had been visible enough in all our lives, for a few months past (210,11 - italics added).

This “tint” that Coverdale sees in Zenobia is indicative, as he notes, of the artificiality of the whole Blithedale venture. Coverdale imagines that Zenobia thought she could at least recover some grace and beauty in death that was denied her in life, but she was mistaken. The cold, harsh reality of death is perfectly expressed in the distortion of her lovely frame, and cannot be erased by the best of Foster's efforts which, like the “tint” that Coverdale perceives in Zenobia's death, illustrates an artificial effort to put a good face on things — to “make a summer” of this horrid circumstance. With the suicide of Zenobia, the queen of Blithedale, the Paradisaical hopes of Blithedale also die out. This connection between Eve and Zenobia, more than anything else in the novel, bespeaks the demise of Blithedale, in the tradition of the Fall, and calls into question the feasibility of societal reform.

⁸ Perry Miller compares this defiance to that of Captain Ahab (262).

II

Another important way that Hawthorne undermines utopian aspirations in *The Blithedale Romance* is by making reference to the similar, but failed effort of the New England Puritans. The members of the Blithedale community sees themselves as the spiritual or moral successors of the Puritans, evidenced by Coverdale's observation about keeping the Sabbath:

Our Sundays, at Blithedale, were not ordinarily kept with such rigid observance that might have befitted the descendants of the Pilgrims, whose high enterprise, as we sometimes flattered ourselves, we had taken up, and were carrying onward and aloft, to a point which they never dreamed of attaining (123).

The Blithedaleans saw themselves as standing on the shoulders of their Puritan forebears, ready to take their ideals to even greater heights, but failing to see the faulty assumptions that they had in common with that heritage.

This reference to the Puritan forefathers is shot at reform in general, and the Transcendentalists, who, despite their denunciation of New England religious orthodoxy, regarded themselves as descendants of that religious tradition. Emerson saw Transcendentalism and many contemporary reform efforts as “the continuation of Puritanism.”⁹ In the novel this air of moral haughtiness is also evident from the moment Coverdale and his companions set foot in the farmhouse and greet those present: “We shook hands affectionately, all round and congratulated ourselves that the blessed state of brotherhood and sisterhood, at which we aimed, might fairly be dated from this moment”

⁹ From Emerson's Journal Entry for September 21, 1841. These remarks are interesting given his general ambivalence towards material reform efforts, and may indicate his shift towards “ethical engagement” that characterizes his later work.

(46). In response, Hawthorne objects to what he perceives as a attitude of arrogance in this sentiment — self-congratulation and flattery.

This unrealistic expectation of greatness is also seen in Coverdale's ridiculous-sounding suggestion to Hollingsworth that one day people would look back on them as "Uncles and Fathers," and "in a century or two" as "mythical personages, or exceedingly picturesque or poetical ones" (132). With this passage Hawthorne mocks the Puritans in particular (it had been "a century or two" since their heyday), and those of his contemporaries who romanticized the past. Coverdale mentions these ideas while he and Hollingsworth are repairing a stone fence, creating an absurd juxtaposition of glory and mundane reality, similar to what Flaubert does in *Madame Bovary* with the famous seduction scene at the agricultural fair, in which Rodolphe leads Emma astray with platitudes about romantic love while the rest of the crowd listens to the town councillor address on the prosaic concerns of agriculture.

Despite his general cynicism and lack of commitment, Coverdale affirms this rhetorical connection between the Puritan religious venture and that of the Blithedale community. On the first evening of his stay at the farm, as the community members warm themselves by the hearth, Coverdale uses the fire as a metaphor for the hopes for their utopian experiment:

I hope that our blazing windows will be visible a great way off. There is nothing so pleasant and encouraging to a solitary traveller, on a stormy night, as a flood of firelight, seen amid the gloom. These ruddy window-panes cannot fail to cheer the hearts of all that look at them. Are they not warm and bright with the beacon-fire which we have kindled for humanity! (55).

This beacon-fire imagery is reminiscent of Winthrop's notion of a "Citty vpon a Hill," the

moral guidepost for the rest of the world. As A. N. Kaul has observed: “Here again was the American theme of exodus: a determined band of people separating from a corrupt society to form a regenerate community, and expecting to light the beacon flame of new hope for the rest of the world” (145,6). In reality, however, instead of being standard for those around, Blithedale is a laughing-stock and the butt of farmers’ jokes. Rather than being a fixture of moral illumination, Blithedale is a flash in the pan, implied by the name that Zenobia suggests for the community — “Sunny *Glimpse*, as expressive of a vista into a better system of society” (63 - italics added). What is startling about the novel is how quickly this fiery, bright optimism fades, flickers and is eventually put out.

This idea of a glimpse of light is also seen in *The Scarlet Letter*. When Hester and Dimmesdale meet in the forest and Hester removes the letter from her chest, there is a brief moment of sunshine. However, it is soon clouded over when Hester takes up the letter again, at Pearl’s insistence: “There was a sense of inevitable doom upon her, as she thus received back this deadly symbol from the hand of fate” (143). Like the hope of Hester and Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter*, Coverdale’s “beacon fire” is unable to provide any sustained light or warmth.

The failure of the Puritans to realize the hopes for their New World effort is also reiterated in the belief of the Blithedale community that physical labor would somehow stimulate them and make them more conscious intellectually:

While our enterprise lay all in theory, we had pleased ourselves with delectable visions of *the spiritualization of labor*. It was to be our form of prayer, and ceremonial of worship. Each stroke of the hoe was to uncover some aromatic root of wisdom, heretofore hidden from the sun. Pausing in the field, to let the wind exhale the moisture from our foreheads, we were to look upward, and catch glimpses into the far-off soul of truth (85 - italics added).

Hawthorne alludes here to several elements of American Puritanism. First, he is making reference to the Puritan sanctification of labor — how they saw their physical efforts as worshipping God, a perspective that has been understood by many to be the roots of the so-called “Puritan work ethic.” More generally, Hawthorne appears to be mocking the Puritans’ tendency to view the world in spiritualized terms — that all events, regardless of how mundane, had spiritual significance and were capable of spiritual interpretation.¹⁰ In this passage we see again a distinction between “theory” and reality — something that Hawthorne often brings to the fore in his fiction.

With this passage, Hawthorne also mocks the Transcendentalist belief in the transmutation of labor, something that both Ripley and Emerson held to. In his “Letter to the Church at Purchase Street,” Ripley expresses his desire that the community would “convert the jarring elements of earth into materials for a pure, serene, and joyful life” (406). Ripley also expresses a desire to bring together the labor of the mind and of the hands in a letter to Emerson, dated November 9, 1840: “Our objects, as you know, are to insure a more natural union between intellectual and manual labor than now exists” (310).

This Transcendental notion that manual labor could produce something more precious for the mind is also seen in Emerson’s essay, “The American Scholar” (1837), in which he argues that action, or labor, is “the pearls and rubies to [the scholar’s] discourse.

¹⁰ A good example of this is seen in John Winthrop’s journal entry for July 5, 1632: “At Watertown there was (in view of divers witnesses) a great combat between a mouse and a snake; and, after a long fight, the mouse prevailed and killed the snake. The pastor of Boston, Mr. Wilson, a very sincere, holy man, hearing of it, gave this interpretation: That the snake was the devil; the mouse was a poor contemptible people, which God had brought hither, which should overcome Satan here, and dispossess him of his kingdom. Upon the same occasion, he told the governor, that, before he was resolved to come into this country, he dreamed he was here, and that he saw a church arise out of the earth, which grew up and became a goodly church” (Norton Anthology of American Literature, Vol. 1, 4th Ed., p. 181)

. . . It is the raw material out of which the intellect molds her splendid products” (70). In this way, Emerson saw manual labor as potentially profitable, the fodder for intellectual growth. In “Man the Reformer,” an essay published in *The Dial* the same month that Brook Farm was inaugurated (April 1841), Emerson, responding to capitalism (which he deems “a system of distrust, of concealment, of superior keenness, not of giving but taking advantage” - 412), states: “We need to put ourselves into primary relations with the soil and nature” (413). Farming was chosen as a suitable alternative because it contributed more to personal development, was distanced from the market, and made self-subsistence possible (Rose 138). This is what was attempted at both Brook Farm and its fictional counterpart, Blithedale.

However, despite the best efforts of the Blithedale community, and the model of their New England forbears, the manure pile never was alchemized into precious stones:

In this point of view, matters did not turn out quite so well as we anticipated. . . . The clods of earth, which we so constantly belabored and turned over and over, were never etherealized into thought. Our thoughts, on the contrary, were fast becoming cloddish. Our labor symbolized nothing, and left us mentally sluggish in the dusk of the evening. Intellectual activity is incompatible with any large amount of bodily exercise (85).

Instead of being compatible with labor, Coverdale finds that intellectual activity was actually hindered by physical exertion. This disillusionment with farm work is also reflected in Hawthorne’s own experience at Brook Farm. Initially, he hoped to have more time to write and welcomed the possibilities of physical labor, writing enthusiastically to Sophia on April 16, 1841: “Thy husband has milked a cow!” (qtd. in Cain 16). However, in a June 1 letter he expresses disappointment with farm work, claiming that it made him less inclined to write: “I think this present life of mine gives me an antipathy to pen and

ink” (Cain 16). The effect of constant manual labor has the opposite effect of that which is envisioned. Instead of clods of earth being transformed into nuggets of truth, the clods of earth turn potentially golden thoughts into dust.

Underlying the inversion of the motif of Eden and the mockery of modeling a community after the failed Puritan venture, is the cynicism of Miles Coverdale. His first person narrative has been troublesome for many readers because he is often insincere and sardonic, but also buys into the optimism of those around him at times. There are obvious parallels between Hawthorne and Coverdale, but how much can be made of the connection is debated. However, it does seem that with Coverdale, Hawthorne most clearly states his own beliefs about human progress. He finds in Coverdale a means to cover or veil his own views and a safer way to express his own skepticism.

Coverdale’s cynicism is plain from the beginning of the novel. Before he describes his journey to Blithedale, he qualifies his “quest of a better life,” noting that “if the vision have been worth the having, it is certain never to be consummated otherwise than by a failure” (44). Here Coverdale confesses that he does not believe utopian “day-dreams” are even possible, although somehow worthy of the human imagination. But he was not always without hope: “I once had faith and force enough to form generous hopes of the world’s destiny — yes! — and do what in me lay for their accomplishment” (43). In this case, Coverdale’s one-time “faith” echoes Hawthorne’s own youthful optimism. After arriving at Brook Farm, Hawthorne wrote Sophia a letter (April 12, 1841) expressing something of his hopefulness for the venture he was undertaking:

Here is thy husband in a polar Paradise! I know not how to interpret this aspect of Nature — whether it be of good or evil omen to our enterprise. But I reflect that the Plymouth Pilgrims arrived in the midst of a storm and stept ashore

upon mountain snowdrifts; and nevertheless they prospered and became a great people— and doubtless it will be the same with us (qtd. in Cain 416).

Coverdale, like Hawthorne, seems to have initially entertained the possibility that a utopian society could succeed.¹¹ However, looking back, Coverdale views it as a mistake. Recalling his first night by the fire at Blithedale, he observes: “In my own behalf, I rejoice that I could once think better of the world’s improbability than it deserved. It is a mistake into which men seldom fall twice, in a lifetime; or, if so, the rarer and higher is the nature that can thus magnanimously persist in error” (51). Coverdale makes it clear from the outset, before we have even set foot with him on the Blithedale farm, that the effort would fail, and, more generally, highlights the vanity of any human effort to bring about substantial moral change. Like Reverend Hooper in “The Minister’s Black Veil,” who attempts to get closer to God by placing an eery black veil over his face, such efforts are thwarted by the weaknesses of human nature. Despite Hooper’s good intentions, the symbolic veil does not lift him above his own weakness and depravity, and he is isolated: “[I]t had separated him from cheerful brotherhood and woman’s love, and kept him in that saddest of all prisons, his own heart” (104).

Some might attribute Coverdale’s cynicism (albeit fictional) to hindsight — that he was embittered by the failure of Blithedale and interpreted what happened there through the lense of his own disappointment. However, aside from his narrative commentary, we see Coverdale’s cynicism manifested in the story in his effort to check the child-like enthusiasm of Priscilla, the character who symbolizes the blithe and moody character of

¹¹ In the letter he says “our enterprise,” implying that he took some ownership of it, and looks at the example of the Pilgrims as encouraging to that cause.

the community. Taking her aside as she is romping through the May fields, Coverdale warns her: ““For, little as we know of our life to come, we may be very sure, for one thing, that the good we aim at will not be attained. *People never do get just the good they seek.* If it come at all, it is something else, which they never dreamed of, and did not particularly want’” (93 - italics added). Priscilla spurns this sober advice, and Coverdale comments: “It had taken me nearly seven years of worldly life, to hive up the bitter honey which I here offered to Priscilla. And she rejected it!” (93).

This outlook on life appears to accurately reflect that of Hawthorne, who, writing in 1852 (over a decade after his disappointing Brook Farm experience), seems to be dishing out some bitter honey — or unpleasant ideas about the futility of human effort — of his own, in the guise of fiction. At the close of the novel, Coverdale’s concluding remarks about progress seems to echo that of Hawthorne: “As regards human progress . . . let them believe in it who can, and aid in it who choose! If I could earnestly do either, it might be all the better for my comfort” (217). Coverdale also humorously implies that there is no cause really worth the effort that people often expend: “Yet, were there any cause, in this whole chaos of human struggle, worth a sane man’s dying for, and which my death would benefit, then — provided, however, the effort did not involve an unreasonably amount of trouble — methinks I might be bold to offer up my life” (217). With these final words of Coverdale, Hawthorne seems to be offering a parting shot to the whole notion of progress, as Michael David Bell argues: “Hawthorne rejects, finally, the whole notion of historical progress that lies behind so many of the works of his contemporaries” (Hawthorne 189).

The Edenic imagery, particularly the fall and death of Zenobia, and the references to the failed Puritan venture in the New World — the New Canaan — all work together, with Coverdale's cynicism, to undercut idealistic notions about human nature and the possibility of societal reform, especially in reference to Brook Farm and Transcendentalism. With *The Blithedale Romance*, Hawthorne, in his materialism, invokes moral history to support his case against idealism.

CHAPTER 3

The Scarlet Letter:

Reverend Dimmesdale, Puritan Idealism, and the Curse

The Scarlet Letter (1850), considered by many to be Hawthorne's magnum opus, epitomizes his general interest in history and the lessons that it holds for the present. In its pages there is an implicit critique of Transcendentalism, although more difficult to perceive than in *The Blithedale Romance*, with its satirical take on Brook Farm. Hawthorne targets idealism — especially the notion of given intuition and ideals “authority” over experience — in the novel, and uses the sentiments of the Dimmesdale's Election Sermon, its enthusiastic reception, and then the response to his confession to highlight the gap between theory and practice.

Immediately before this confession, which brings the story of *The Scarlet Letter* to its dramatic climax, Arthur Dimmesdale, the ailing, young Puritan minister, delivers a forceful sermon for Election Day:

His subject, it appeared, had been the relation between the Deity and the communities of mankind, with a special reference to the New England which they were here planting in the wilderness. And, as he drew towards the close, a spirit of prophecy had come upon him, constraining him to its purpose as mightily as the old prophets of Israel were constrained; only with this difference, that, whereas the Jewish seers had denounced judgments and ruin on their country, it was his mission to foretell a *high and glorious destiny* for the newly gathered people of the Lord (168 - italics mine).

These notions of the “wilderness” and “a high and glorious destiny for the newly gathered people of the Lord” are suggestive of the Promised Land motif, commonly used by the

Puritans to interpret their New World endeavor.¹² In his Election Sermon, Dimmesdale taps into this biblical trope, predicting a rosy and “glorious destiny” for the Puritan community in New England, a reference which Hawthorne uses to expose the alarming gap between ideals and experience.

The utopian implications of Dimmesdale’s Election Sermon stand in stark contrast to his inglorious failure, and for that reason, the subject of the sermon often confounds critics. Michael David Bell remarks that this odd juxtaposition is “positively puzzling” (Hawthorne 141), and Austin Warren admits that he is at a loss to interpret why the theme of the sermon is “the high destiny of New England” (Donohue 67). Admittedly, Hawthorne does create a paradox of sorts by juxtaposing glorious progress and gross personal failure.

There are several ways in which this apparent anomaly between the content of the sermon and the character of its preacher has been interpreted. Terence Martin argues that the theme of the sermon is incongruous with Dimmesdale’s life because it is part of his hypocritical act. The dying minister, knowing that the sermon will likely be his last, writes it “with a hunger for success, [molding] his idiom of anguish into a commanding statement” (Martin 235). Given Dimmesdale’s thoughts about the sermon — “At least, they shall say of me that I leave duty unperformed, nor ill performed” (146) — one can see an element of hypocrisy and even duplicity in the minister.

However, this understanding of the sermon as mere pretense, or the ultimate expression of Dimmesdale’s hypocrisy, does not seem consistent with the complexity of

¹² Mason Lowance, Jr. has observed that “the Bible and the language employed in its composition became for the Puritans a rich source for describing their own contemporary history” (viii).

his character as it is developed in the novel. Although his secret sin is exposed, he is not insincere and is portrayed sympathetically — a “subtile, *but remorseful* hypocrite” (italics added). Indeed, although Dimmesdale is conscious of his hypocrisy, he is also self-deceived. After his interview with Hester in the forest just before Election Day, he discovers startling things about himself that he had not perceived before. Something in him wants to blaspheme the communion-supper, or tell an old parishioner that the human soul is not immortal, or corrupt young women and children (147-9). These desires confound the minister. Explaining Dimmesdale’s new awareness of his sinfulness, the narrator tells us: “No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to himself, and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be the true” (146). It is in the midst of this confusion, or “maze,” about himself and his role in society that Dimmesdale writes his grandiose sermon. And this sense of self-doubt comes out in the tone of his sermon — even as he speaks with certainty about the future of the New England religious venture, there is an undertone of sorrow and remorse — “an essential character of plaintiveness” (165).¹³

In a fuller sense, the tension between the Election Day sermon and Dimmesdale’s character can be seen as being rooted in the Puritan community itself. Along with the young minister’s hypocrisy, Hawthorne seems to be addressing the unrealistic expectations that the Puritan community had of itself, given its moral limitations. Michael David Bell has suggested that possibly “it is Hawthorne’s intention to deflate or satirize

¹³ Sacvan Bercovitch explains that this juxtaposition of glory and sorrow contributes to the overall impact of the novel — it “owes much of its force to the tension between this tragic recognition [of human limitation] and the optimism of its New World vision” (*Puritan Origins* 178).

the sentiments of the sermon by placing them so inappropriately in Dimmesdale's mouth" (165). The notion of the "high and glorious destiny of New England" mentioned in the account of the Election Day sermon, which echoes the Promised Land motif frequently used by the Puritans to describe their God-sanctioned venture in the New World, does seem ironic coming from the lips of one whose destiny is quite inglorious.

The allusion to the Puritan utopian enterprise, however, is not connected to Dimmesdale's failure alone. The broader basis for Hawthorne's critique seems to be more the historical failure of the Puritan venture, something that Dimmesdale's fall from glory illustrates on a smaller scale. John Winthrop envisioned a community in covenant with God that would aspire to implement his will (as revealed in Holy Writ) in everyday life. However, this ideal quickly broke down. Soon, in order to curb the problem of decreasing church membership, Puritan leaders adopted the "Half-Way Covenant" (1662), a response to "the declension of the New English Israel from her original errand into the wilderness" (Lowance 142). The original vision was beginning to fade. This jeremiad concern for recapturing that disappearing ideal for New England was summed up in Samuel Danforth's Election Sermon of 1670, entitled *A Briefe Recognition of New England's Errand into the Wilderness*, which, like Dimmesdale's sermon, was delivered on Election Day, the holiday corresponding with the election of a new governor and set apart "to renew and celebrate their commitment to the idea of society" (Daigrepoint 2).

Arthur Dimmesdale's election sermon is delivered to celebrate the inauguration of the governor who succeeded Governor Winthrop.¹⁴ By making reference to the death of

¹⁴ Winthrop died in 1649. Based on this, many who have studied the chronology of *The Scarlet Letter*, and its correspondences with actual events in New England history, have argued that the action of the novel occurs between 1842-1849 (e.g. Charles Ryskamp).

John Winthrop, the figure who most clearly articulated the Puritan vision for New England most clearly, Hawthorne insinuates the death of that vision. Dimmesdale attempts to keep the vision going, but is undermined in his effort by his own miserable failure to live up to its ideals. In this way, Dimmesdale's failure is really an indication of the larger historical failure of the Puritan vision. The sermon content is inappropriate, but not merely because it is articulated by a hypocrite. In reality, given the vision of flawed human nature that Hawthorne puts forth in much of his fiction, the ideals presented in the sermon are no more inappropriate in Dimmesdale's mouth than they would be in that of someone else. As Perry Miller has argued, Puritan ideals failed because their did not jibe with reality — the covenant theory “broke down because it tried, in disregard of experience . . . to stereotype the image of America, to confine it to the Procrustean bed of a priori conception” (7). Instead of shaping their vision of the New World on their experience, the Puritans tried to impose their idealism on their experience. Winthrop's “Modell” of Christian love was an ideal to be attained, but history proved it to be impractical or unrealistic.

III

Hawthorne's criticism of the Puritan community's over-commitment to idealism at the expense of experience is articulated in the passages describing by their response to Dimmesdale's sermon and confession. It is significant that the narrator gives little attention to the actual content of the sermon, although there is much to be gathered from what is mentioned. Instead the focus is on the utopian response of the community. What Hawthorne demonstrates in his portrayal of the public response to Hester, and then to

Dimmesdale at the close of the novel, is the faulty dichotomy behind the utopian thinking that he opposes. Hawthorne opposes the hierarchy of idealism: that the immaterial or ideal — in the case of the Puritans, their attempt to establish a New Canaan or moral beacon for humanity — has precedence over experience.

Following the sermon, Dimmesdale is esteemed even more highly by the community and placed high on a “lofty pedestal” (168). This almost worshipful estimation of the minister seems to be part of what is behind the later response of some in the community to ignore the obvious implications of Dimmesdale’s confession. By relating this denial of experience Hawthorne is critiquing a kind of Puritan dualism, in which spiritual ideals are disassociated from human weakness. Herbert Schneider notes that Hawthorne “recovered what the Puritans *professed* but seldom *practiced*: the spirit of piety, humility, and tragedy in the face of the inscrutable ways of God” (qtd. in Matthiessen 199 - emphasis mine). Schneider implies a Platonic duality between profession (belief / mind) and practice (behavior / matter) that existed in Puritan thinking, illustrated by the community’s deification of the very human Arthur Dimmesdale. As one who privileged experience over ideals, this was especially troublesome to Hawthorne. If the Puritans held to innate depravity, how could they believe in this degree of potential? They would likely posit that God’s election or grace would make these kinds of ideals attainable. However, for a materialist like Hawthorne, notably secular for his time, grace does not factor in, and instead, Hawthorne argues for a more sane “profession” that is rooted in moral reality.

The firm foothold that this dualism has in the Puritan community, and the tension it creates, is illustrated by the response of the community to the Election Day sermon. After

Dimmesdale completes his message, the amazed audience has trouble moving from his lofty ideas to its more mundane life:

There was a momentary silence, profound as what should follow the utterance of oracles. Then ensued a murmur and half-hushed tumult; as if the auditors, released from the high spell that has transported them into the region of another's mind, were returning into themselves, with all their awe and wonder still heavy on them. Now that there was an end, they needed other breath, more fit to support the gross and earthly life into which they relapsed, than that atmosphere which the preacher had converted into words of flame, and had burdened with fragrance of his thought (167).

Hawthorne makes reference here to this dualism, describing idealism and realism in terms of air or atmosphere: a more elevated atmosphere for the “high spell” of the sermon, and a thicker atmosphere more appropriate “to support the gross and earthly life” which the auditors faced following the raptures of the sermon. By using these images, Hawthorne illustrates the disparity that exists between the reality of the community and what it believed itself capable of.

Dimmesdale himself also struggles with this gap as he preaches. He is amazed by the “inspiration” breathing through his lips: “Its influence could be seen, as it were, descending upon him, and possessing him, and continually lifting him out of the written discourse that lay before him, and filling him with ideas that must have been as marvellous to himself as to his audience” (168). Dimmesdale seems as transported as his audience, and is able to move beyond the physical (matter: the pages containing his sermon) to the immaterial (ideas) — an action that is as powerful and “marvellous” to him as it is to his auditors.

This feeling of marvel or surprise is also seen in Dimmesdale's response to the composition of the sermon, another experience characterized by “inspiration”:

[H]e wrote with such an impulsive flow of thought and emotion, that he fancied himself inspired; and only wondered that Heaven should see fit to transmit the grand and solemn music of its oracles through so foul an organ-pipe as he. However, leaving that mystery to solve itself, or go unsolved for ever, he drove his task onward, with earnest haste and ecstasy (152).

The “mystery” that Dimmesdale struggles with appears to stem in part from the dualistic belief system that is reflected in the community at large: the ideal, reflected in the content of the sermon, should not be associated that with that which is sinful or fallen.

Dimmesdale was aware of this anomaly in his ministry before, often declaring himself unworthy in his sermons (which the congregation interpreted to be Moses-like humility), but at this point in the narrative he notices the quandary of this dualism more clearly, as his own dual-self starts to disintegrate and his hypocrisy begins to invade the inner sanctum of his ministry. Given the lustful thoughts that he had just discovered in himself after returning from the forest interview with Hester, Dimmesdale is astonished and troubled by the apparent divine inspiration that he experiences in the writing of his sermon. Even though he is swept up in the high-sounding rhetoric of his sermon, he is also burdened by the inconsistencies that it exposes in his own heart, and by implication, that of the entire Puritan community.

In many ways, then, the pathos that exudes from Dimmesdale’s final sermon can be seen as a hidden plea for the community not only to forgive him, but also to release him from the burden of this constructed duality. While standing outside the meetinghouse during the sermon, Hester is able to perceive “an essential character of plaintiveness” — an “expression of anguish of suffering humanity” in the tone of his voice, even though she is not able to make out the words that Dimmesdale is speaking (165). Hester perceives

Dimmesdale not as being alone in his sinfulness and hypocrisy, but as representing collective human weakness— in his voice one can hear the pain of “suffering humanity.” At the same time, there is Dimmesdale’s individual “cry of pain,” a reality which reflects his isolation from the community because of his hypocrisy, which, in part, stems from his attempt to maintain the unrealistic duality in his life and ministry. He is attempting to expose his dark secret to the community in order to find release from it: “What was it? The complaint of a human heart, sorrow-laden, perchance guilty, telling its secret, whether or guilt or sorrow, to the great heart of mankind; beseeching its sympathy or forgiveness” (165). Unfortunately, however, the Puritan community is unable to understand or heed his subtle call, as it were, to break down this isolating dualism. This may be partly true because, in many ways, Dimmesdale is the representative of their idealism — an icon of utopian hope to be venerated.

This isolation that Dimmesdale feels due to the idealism of his community (which he, too, upholds as a Puritan minister, who is highly respected and holds considerable sway over his flock) is seen in the metaphor for the enthusiastic reaction of the people to his oratorical skill: “It was as if an angel, in his passage to the skies, had shaken his bright wings over the people for an instant, — at once a shadow and a splendor, — and had shed down a shower of golden truths upon them” (168). The description of the “angel” as “at once a shadow and a splendor,” points to two Dimmesdales: the constructed Dimmesdale (in his social role as minister), characterized by splendor, and the real Dimmesdale as an individual, characterized by a shadow. In order to maintain their idealistic hopes, the people cling to this more flattering image of their minister, interpreting the shadow in a positive way (some, even after the confession). Dimmesdale revels in this glory, dizzied

by the heights of the pedestal on which his listeners have placed him: “He stood, at this moment, on the very proudest eminence of superiority, to which the gifts of intellect, rich lore, prevailing eloquence, and a reputation of whitest sanctity, could exalt a clergyman in New England’s earliest days, when the professional character was of itself a lofty pedestal” (168)

Following the sermon, the utopian community rejoices in its feeling of moral significance and spiritual destiny, as seen in its response to the procession of “the Governor and magistrates, the old and wise men; the holy ministers, and all that were eminent and renowned” (168-9) as they move towards the town center:

[T]heir presence was greeted by a shout. This — though doubtless it might acquire additional force and volume from the *childlike loyalty* which the age awarded to its rulers — was felt to be an irrepressible outburst of the enthusiasm kindled in the auditors by that high strain of eloquence which was yet reverberating in their ears (169 - emphasis added).

In response to this passage, Sacvan Bercovitch suggests that this shout of affirmation “is surely one of the memorable moments in the utopian strain that critics have identified with classic American literature” (Office 61). Bercovitch reasons that the sermon and its context are utilized by Hawthorne to draw attention to the character of utopian community, at least that of the New England Puritans, and sees this depiction of utopian joy as a critique of Hawthorne’s own society: “. . . this infant people [reference to “childlike loyalty”] united in the marketplace by a ‘universal impulse which makes one vast heart out of the many,’ stands as a sweeping reproof to the mature marketplace republic satirized in ‘The Custom House’” (Office 61,2). In other words, the utopian joy

and simplicity of the Puritan community in *The Scarlet Letter* expose the shortcomings of the more cynical time in which Hawthorne lives.

Although Hawthorne's times (and his relationship to them) are complex, he does not appear to condone the "child-like loyalty" of the Puritans in this passage but, on the contrary, seems to condemn it. To support the idea that Hawthorne portrays simple loyalty a positive characteristic, Bercovitch maintains that child-likeness here should be understood as "the state closest to the divine fount," particularly "in light of Romantic Neoplatonism" (Office 62). However, at least in *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne does not portray children as innocent or anywhere in the vicinity of the "divine fount." The Puritan children tease Pearl, and play at hanging witches and flogging Quakers. And even Pearl is portrayed as having an uncanny, almost eerie, awareness of her ignoble origins, an ability that reflects her symbolic representation as the incarnation of Hester and Dimmesdale's unlawful passion. It is she who upholds Hester's punishment by insisting that her mother take up the discarded letter, after she had temporarily disenthralled herself of its physical and symbolic weight.

In light of these considerations, there seems to be more in common between the utopian mindset of the Puritan community in *The Scarlet Letter* and the idealistic sentiments of many Americans in the late 1840's than there are differences. Hawthorne may be embittered by the loss of his position at the Salem custom house and therefore disillusioned with the American political system (a feeling which he expresses in the introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*), but he does not seem inclined, either, to endorse a child-like naivete that resembles what he sees in Transcendentalism.

Hawthorne's approach to the "shout" of enthusiasm passage also seems more a critique than an endorsement, given the fact that the utopian response is based on a *false* perception of Dimmesdale. Even in his moment of greatest honor, the edges of the celebrated minister are beginning to seriously fray. The energy or "inspiration" which had animated him is beginning to fade, and he looks "feeble and pale . . . amid all his triumph" (169). This fading glory is ironically compared to Moses, whose face glowed in the wilderness after he spoke with God, and who was the mediator between God and Israel: "The glow, which they had just before beheld burning on his cheek, was extinguished, like a flame that sinks down hopelessly among the late-dying embers" (169). This mediator or angel of the Puritan community, entrusted with its idealistic hope, is nearing his resounding crash to earth, as indicated by the fading glow on his cheek. His humiliating confession is at hand.

But even this terrible moment is not depicted as a moment of complete failure — it is also a moment of "triumphant ignominy" for Dimmesdale (173). When he summons Hester and Pearl to come with him to the scaffold, he regards them with a "ghastly look" which contains "something at once tender and strangely triumphant in it" (170). In this moment, which is paralleled to the passion of Christ, the minister resists the "temptation" of Chillingworth to not confess his deed, and stands before his community "with a flush of triumph on his face, as one who, in the crisis of acutest pain, had won a victory" (172). Dimmesdale lays bare his hidden brand of torment and is finally freed of the burden of unrealistic utopian expectations.

III

Following Dimmesdale's dramatic confession, Hawthorne is careful to delineate the response of the community to this declaration of human weakness. First we learn of the majority response to the sensational occurrence: "Most of the spectators testified to having seen, on the breast of the unhappy minister, a SCARLET LETTER— the very semblance of that worn by Hester Prynne — imprinted in the flesh" (174). Nevertheless, in spite of this common observation, there is considerable disagreement over the origin and significance of the mark. Some feel that it is a voluntary badge of "penance" (174). Others believed that Chillingworth, whose magical powers are generally viewed with suspicion in the community, had "caused it to appear" (174). Others still argued that the mark was the "effect of the ever active tooth of remorse, gnawing from the inmost heart outwardly, and at last manifesting Heaven's dreadful judgment by the visible presence of the letter" (174). What these responses have in common, however, is a recognition that Dimmesdale was Hester's guilty partner, and for that reason was made to suffer as he did. More generally, there is a realization that the young minister was a flesh and blood man, and is as subject to moral failure as anyone else.

And yet, despite this seemingly straightforward revelation of guilt, there were those in the community whose "child-like loyalty" would not permit them to see reality for what it is: "It is singular, nevertheless, that certain persons, who were spectators of the whole scene . . . denied that there was any mark whatever on [Dimmesdale's] breast" (174). In addition to denying that there had been a mark, these people also refused to recognize the import of Dimmesdale's confession that explained the significance of that mark:

Neither had his dying words acknowledged, nor even remotely implied any, the slightest connection, on his part, with the guilt for which Hester Prynne had so long worn the scarlet letter. According to these highly respectable witnesses, the minister, conscious that he was dying, — conscious, also, that the reverence of the multitude placed him already among saints and angels, — had desired, by yielding up his breath in the arms of that fallen woman, to express how utterly nugatory is the choicest of man's own righteousness (174).

Because of their dogged belief in their idealism and in the minister who embodied it, these members of the community would not allow reality to strip them of their hopes. Instead, they interpret Dimmesdale's uncharacteristic words to be an expression of his humility — a self-defacing gesture. And yet, even though they admire Dimmesdale for his apparent implication that piety is essentially worthless in God's sight, it is also plain here, and elsewhere, that they highly value this piety nonetheless.

With the notion of man's righteousness being "nugatory," Hawthorne appears to be getting at the tension he perceived in Puritanism — if all man's righteousnesses are as filthy rags and he is depraved, how can he even attempt to accomplish a utopian society? Agnes Donohue has noted that for Hawthorne this was "a central paradox of the Calvinist experiment in America: the coupling of a profound conviction of man's depravity with an earnest hope for a new Canaan" (96,7). However, by emphasizing this essential characteristic of depravity with Dimmesdale, Hawthorne not only counteracts optimism, but also corrects the imbalance he perceived in Puritan theology between the ideal and the real in humankind. He emphasizes the limits of human nature — what is and what actually *can* be, not what might be or even *should* be.

The narrator further elucidates the nature of the people's blindness by noting that their defense of Dimmesdale's character was "an instance of that stubborn fidelity with

which a man's friends — and especially a clergyman's — will sometimes uphold his character; when proofs, clear as the mid-day sunshine on the scarlet letter, establish him a false and sin-stained creature of the *dust*" (175 - emphasis added). This comparison of human weakness to the dust of the earth is seen earlier, when Dimmesdale is in his ephemeral state of glory following the sermon: "How fared it with him then? Were not the brilliant particles of halo in the air about his head? So etherealized by spirit as he was, and so apotheosized by worshipping admirers, did his footsteps in the procession really tread upon the dust of the earth?" (169). In this case Hawthorne uses the term "dust" as a metaphor for prosaic, every day reality.

The connection of dust to human weakness is also a reference to the curse that God pronounces on Adam after he and Eve ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Essentially, there are two elements of the curse directed towards Adam, both of which are suggestive for a broader understanding of the fall of Dimmesdale (who is essentially a representative of fallen man — "Adam," meaning "man" in ancient Hebrew) in particular, and of Hawthorne's critique of utopian idealism in general. First, the land or "ground" is cursed, making it difficult to work for sustenance: "Cursed is the ground for thy sake . . . In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread" (Genesis 3.18,19). Second, the body of man is cursed — God had told Adam he would "surely die" if he partook of the fruit — and after death the body returns to that cursed ground, implying possibly that the ground is partly cursed because of it — "cursed is the ground for thy sake."

This notion of the land as cursed is ironic in the context of the utopian Puritan emphasis on the land of blessing — the Promised Land. Hawthorne brings out this

tension between blessing and curse early in *The Scarlet Letter* — in the second paragraph — with his statement about the oversight on the part of utopian idealism concerning “practical necessities”:

The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison (35).

As we discover early in the narrative — in the second paragraph, in fact — the Puritan colony in the New World is no exception to this general rule. Indeed, both the prison and the cemetery are manifestations of human mortality and moral weakness.

In his sermon, Dimmesdale makes reference to the “newly gathered people of the Lord,” an ironic notion in light of this passage. America was called the New World, a place that provided the opportunity for a fresh start, a new beginning for humanity. However, the projected Promised Land, like all other land, is cursed by human weakness, and for that reason the Puritan venture is doomed from the outset. And the ground in which they are “planting” their New England is cursed. If the novel does begin around 1642, as some critics suggest, it has only been a little over a decade since the first Puritans arrived in the New World (not including the Pilgrims), and in that short span of time, signs of decay were already evident:

The rust on the ponderous iron-work of its oaken door looked more antique than anything else in the new world. Like all that pertains to crime, it seemed never to have known a youthful era. Before this ugly edifice, and between it and the wheel-track of the street, was a grass-plot, much overgrown with burdock, pig-weed, apple-peru, and such unsightly vegetation, which evidently found something congenial in the soil that had so early borne the black flower of civilized society, a prison (35).

The rust on the door of the prison seems to manifest the spiritual decay of idealism, as does the prison as a whole. The prison, surrounded by “unsightly vegetation,” represents anything but a new beginning. F. O. Matthiessen observes that “unlike virtually all the other spokesmen for his day, [Hawthorne] could never feel that America was a new world. Looking back over the whole history of his province, he was more struck by decay than potentiality” (322).

This ironic notion of decay in the New World is also evident in Hester and Dimmesdale’s plan of escape. Paradoxically, they seek refuge in the Old World, indicating that the New World was not “the proclaimed city upon the hill — the refuge and sanctuary of oppressed generations and the future hope of mankind” (Kaul 181). The curse had manifested itself in the New World, and, ironically, they look for protection in the very place from which the previous generation of Puritans had fled.

In his description of the prison-house, Hawthorne is careful to mention that along with the unseemly weeds that surround the structure, there is a wild rose bush, covered with “delicate gems” (36). So, although there is decay present in the New World, there is also beauty in the midst of that decay. The rose itself signifies that kind of mixture — it is adorned with beauty, but also replete with thorns, like the sin-cursed ground. This admixture of good and evil is also seen in “The Birthmark” where the scientist Aylmer is troubled by a small, hand-shaped birthmark on the cheek of his beautiful wife. The narrator describes the mark as a manifestation of human imperfection and mortality:

It was the fatal flaw of humanity, which Nature, in one shape or another, stamps ineffaceably on all her productions, either to imply that they are temporary and finite The crimson hand expressed the ineludible gripe in which mortality clutches the highest and purest of earthly mould, degrading them into kindred with the lowest, and

even with the very brutes, like whom their visible frames
return to dust (120).

This “fatal flaw” is significant for Hawthorne because it marks the “temporary and finite” character of human nature. This view is key to Hawthorne’s “tragic vision” (as Roy Male puts it), and marks a departure from the Transcendentalists, who were sold on the notion of human potential, not finitude.

Despite its smallness in size compared to Georgiana’s overall loveliness, Aylmer is tortured by the birthmark and can no longer see his wife’s beauty because of it. Finally, he can take its “tyrannizing influence” no longer and attempts to remove the imperfection by administering a liquid concoction. After Georgiana imbibes the drink, the birthmark fades, not because the concoction is successful, but because the life blood is draining from her face. The beautiful Georgiana dies because of the arrogance and unrealistic expectations of her husband. This tale lucidly illustrates both the fallen character of human nature and the utter foolishness of attempting to eradicate imperfection.

Hawthorne’s allusion to the curse at the end of *The Scarlet Letter* also indicates that he found the notion of ‘dust to dust’ more true to his experience than the optimistic appraisal of human potential held by the Puritan community and the Transcendentalists. Instead of accepting broad daylight experience, they choose instead to place reality in their Procrustean bed of idealism. Referring specifically to the denial of Dimmesdale’s mortality, Hawthorne encourages his readers to embrace a more authentic and humble view of themselves: “Among many morals which press upon us from the poor minister’s 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!’” (175).

In the “American Scholar” Emerson argues that the scholar must have confidence in his own views of reality, and should not be swayed by what others think: “Let him not quit his belief that a popgun is a popgun, though the ancient and honorable of the earth affirm it to be the crack of doom” (74). In a way Emerson is saying the same thing that Hawthorne does at the end of *The Scarlet Letter*: Be true to yourself, no matter what others might say. However, this emphasis on confidence in one’s own perception is rooted to Emerson’s belief in the veracity of intuition. When Emerson says to be true to one’s beliefs, he is talking about a positive opinion of oneself. But when Hawthorne says to be “true,” on the other hand, he is saying to be true to your limitations and weaknesses: “Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!” (165). Emerson, in his idealism, argues for unhindered imagination; Hawthorne, in his materialism, argues for imagination that is kept in check by moral limitations.

Given the economy of *The Scarlet Letter*, it is difficult to tease out precise assertions from Hawthorne regarding Transcendentalism and other reform movements of his day. However, the notion of limitation, rooted in flesh and blood reality, is clear, and seems to be directed towards Transcendentalism, given his proximity to the movement. In the novel, as well as in *The Blithedale Romance*, Hawthorne uses the history of limitation and the religious parlance of the time to talk about human nature and, in so doing, repudiate idealism. As he argues in “The Birthmark,” human nature is grounded in mortality, the greatest manifestation of human limitation. Consequently, any attempt to escape this innate limitation is not fruitful, as seen in the biblical account of the Fall which

Hawthorne re-enacts time and time again in his fiction. Adam and Eve were the first idealists who had high hopes — like Lucifer, they wanted to be like the Most High — and their foolishness resulted in the Fall, the definitive failure of the human aspiration for a higher state, however envisioned. For Hawthorne, any attempt to escape our innate limitations is futile.

With the failure of the utopian community in *The Blithedale Romance*, Hawthorne apparently allies himself with those “who see [utopian communities] as a refuge from the pressures of everyday reality” (Francis 54). They attempted to escape the greed of capitalism, but Hawthorne appears to be saying in his portrayal of Blithedale’s miserable failure that these sort of things cannot be escaped because they are somehow intrinsic to human nature. For Hawthorne, the Transcendentalists, then, were escapists of a sort, implied in their name which connotes a transcending of reality — putting a sunny face on societal problems like some members of the Puritan community did in response to Arthur Dimmesdale’s shocking confession.

Hawthorne’s interest in human limitation is an intriguing issue, and given his subtlety, can be read in several ways, much like Dimmesdale’s confession. One can understand this preoccupation as aesthetically motivated and in the interest of producing artful and moving fiction. *The Scarlet Letter* is a story of human sorrow and frailty, accentuated by limitation. Dimmesdale is unable to move beyond his ministerial role, and the expectations people had of that role, and Hester cannot sway him to leave it all behind and find freedom. But it is also apparent that with Hawthorne’s portrayal of limitation is a response to the impulse of idealism which he was close to, and possibly even entertained

briefly, but ultimately could not stomach. In the end, he preferred the bitter honey of his own sensory experience.

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