

**'The Active Soul':
Transcendentalism and Romanticism in *The Scarlet Letter***

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...the Soul differences itself from any other Soul for the purposes of symbolical knowledge by *form* or body only—but all form as body, i.e. as shape, & not as forma efformans, is dead—Life may be *inferred*, even as intelligence is from black marks on white paper—but the black marks themselves *are truly* “*the dead letter*”.... Is it any excuse to him who treats a living being as inanimate Body, that...we cannot arrive at the knowledge of the living Being but thro' the Body which is its Symbol & outward & visible Sign?¹⁾

Hawthorne's long introduction to *The Scarlet Letter* - entitled 'The Custom-House' - is so strikingly Emersonian in its repeated celebration of practical and intellectual 'self-reliance' as at times to make the Romantic influence on his ideas seem largely indirect, and mediated through the more local and contemporary theories of American Transcendentalism.²⁾ In particular, his description of his elderly colleagues in the Custom House (the recipients of politically-allocated sinecures) as exemplifying 'that lack of energy that distinguishes the occupants of alms-houses, and all other human beings who depend for subsistence on charity, on monopolized labor, or any thing else but their own independent exertions', and his critical warning to those who lazily seek 'to shelter themselves under the wing of the federal eagle', illustrate the distrust of all forms of practical dependency which, in Emerson, emerges as a distinctively American addition to and adaptation of Coleridge's emphasis on the necessity of individual thought and questioning of received opinion.³⁾ The connection between these two doctrines, indeed, becomes especially apparent when Hawthorne describes the effect on his own creative powers of the 'sluggish and dependent mode of life' (*SL*, 16) to which, like his elderly colleagues, he has had the misfortune to become habituated. At his first attempt to develop Hester Prynne's story, he writes, 'the almost torpid creatures of my own fancy twitted me with imbecility, and not without fair occasion'. "“What have you to do with us?” [their] expression seemed to say. “The little power you might once have possessed over the tribe of

unrealities is gone! You have bartered it for a pittance of the public gold. Go, then, and earn your wages!" (*SL*, 34-5) In this passage, indeed, Hawthorne not only echoes Emerson's distinctive association of intellectual with practical or economic dependency, but also Coleridge's theory that a preoccupation with material concerns inevitably distracts us from the higher truths of imaginative and spiritual insight.⁴⁾ Even the 'invigorating charms of Nature', Hawthorne revealingly adds, 'which used to give me such freedom and activity of thought', were unable to stimulate the 'tarnished mirror' of his imagination (*SL*, 34-5) - a statement which not only highlights the Transcendentalists' adoption of Coleridge's emphasis on activity of intellect and on nature's power to awaken imaginative insight and creativity,⁵⁾ but again combines the Emersonian critique of practical dependency (and especially of reliance on 'charity')⁶⁾ with a more distinctly Coleridgean notion of the 'tarnishing' of spiritual powers and ideals by a preoccupation with material values.⁷⁾ Even in these most obviously Emersonian passages of his work, that is, Hawthorne seems not merely to echo Emerson's distinctive rhetoric, but also to look beyond Emerson to the Romantic concepts he inherits and transforms. Despite the forcefulness of Emerson's disdain for charitable giving, indeed, Hawthorne's parallel - and partly self-directed - tirade against the evils of government employment seems, despite its emphatically American character, to reflect a distrust of material concerns and inducements in all their forms which is closer to the puritanical values of Coleridgean transcendence than to the Emersonian ethic of spiritual and practical self-assertion.⁸⁾ Remarking on how 'every individual who...leans on the mighty arm of the Republic' loses not only 'his own proper strength' but also 'the capability of self-support' (*SL*, 38), Hawthorne adds that

Uncle Sam's gold...has, in this respect, a quality of enchantment like that of the Devil's wages. Whoever touches it should look well to himself, or he may find the bargain to go hard against him, involving, if not his soul, yet many of its better attributes; its sturdy force, its courage and constancy, its truth, its self-reliance, and all that gives the emphasis to manly character' (*SL*, 39).

Hawthorne's echoing of 'Self-Reliance' is clearly most direct in this passage, albeit Emerson's own emphasis on the independence which enables one to be (as he also puts it) 'a man' - a category he interestingly contrasts not with that of woman, but rather with that of 'minors and invalids' - itself echoes Wordsworth's famous description of the ideal poet as 'a man speaking to men'.⁹⁾ Hawthorne's description of the dire effects of 'Uncle Sam's gold', however,

uncomfortably combines an Emersonian distrust of dependency - and specifically of dependence on the state (to which, paradoxically, Hawthorne says he intends no disrespect)¹⁰⁾ - with a more general disdain for money which is at once profoundly Puritanical, and more closely related to Coleridge's emphasis on the importance of transcending all material preoccupations. That Hawthorne should struggle to make it clear that despite these criticisms of state employment he means no disrespect to 'Uncle Sam' or the Republic, indeed, highlights the awkwardness with which his vigorous disdain for mercenary motives is combined with an explicit emphasis on the importance of financial 'self-reliance'. The awkwardness with which he seeks to combine these Coleridgean and Emersonian elements, moreover, is again evident in his statement in the same paragraph that the comfortable state-employee has no reason either to 'work for his living here, or go to dig gold in California, when he is so soon to be made happy, at monthly intervals, with a little pile of glittering coin out of his Uncle's pocket' (*SL*, 39). That this passage should so clearly echo Emerson's celebration of the 'sturdy lad...who in time tries all the professions...and always, like a cat, falls on his feet' cannot reduce the paradox of so explicitly adding the aim of financial gain to Emerson's celebration of personal independence, while at the same time so vigorously disdaining the 'gold' received from public office. Clearly, the love of one kind of money is implied to be at the opposite extreme from the love of another kind; yet while thus intensifying Emerson's dichotomy of individualism and dependency, Hawthorne at the same time invokes the broader biblical injunction against material preoccupations which Coleridge so clearly echoes, and which seems strikingly incompatible with his celebration of digging for gold in California.

Lest this eccentricity should merely be considered a flaw in Hawthorne's application of Transcendentalist doctrines or values, however, I would also suggest that one of the novel's central themes - and perhaps, indeed, its most important one - is more distinctly Coleridgean than Emersonian, namely the fundamental difference between the roles and definitions imposed on us by others, and those which we freely and voluntarily establish or create through individual action.¹¹⁾ Most obviously, this theme expresses itself in the contrast between the enforced 'exposure' of Hester's vice in the symbolic 'market-place' - an act of definition whose requirement of passive acceptance is echoed in Chillingworth's more subtle intensification of Dimmesdale's sense of guilt - and the voluntary acts of confession and atonement in which both of Pearl's parents subsequently engage - most dramatically, of course, in Dimmesdale's final evasion of Chillingworth's efforts to enclose him in a passive and

helpless awareness of his own vice.¹²⁾ The theme of concealment and exposure - so central both to Puritan tradition and to Romanticism - that is, is treated by Hawthorne in a way which subtly and repeatedly distinguishes between *passive* exposure or definition - which not only misrepresents but also damages the individual subjected to it - and a voluntary act of self-expression which frees the individual more effectively than any mere flight from an externally-inflicted sense of vice.¹³⁾ The practical independence involved in Hester's laborious maintenance of herself and her daughter on the fringes of the town, that is, is surely a far less important act of 'self-reliance' than her voluntary decision to continue wearing the scarlet letter even after the authorities and her fellow-citizens have become indifferent to it, so that the letter itself progressively acquires a quite different symbolic meaning from that which was originally intended.¹⁴⁾ Dimmesdale's dramatic disruption of the passive suffering and guilt inflicted on him by Chillingworth might also seem to illustrate the individual self-assertion which Emerson contrasts with mere conformance to received opinion, except - of course - that the values he proclaims are still the biblical ones which, however hypocritically, his fellow-citizens have imposed on Hester. The difference which his voluntary confession makes, that is, again has primarily to do with its demonstration of voluntary action rather than passive reciprocity; and both his and Hester's active demonstration of the virtues of tolerance, forgiveness, and self-sacrifice seems to parallel the process by which both Emerson and Coleridge suggest the individual should, through independent effort and reflection, arrive at a fuller understanding of those ancient truths which, to the majority, are little more than the meaningless ciphers of repetition and rote-learning.¹⁵⁾ The active thought which - according to both these thinkers - is necessary to reanimate ancient truths,¹⁶⁾ that is, seems to have its moral reflection in those acts of practical confession and self-sacrifice which, in *The Scarlet Letter*, disrupt and defeat the empty and destructive rituals of punishment and exposure.

Despite these parallels with Emerson's theory of self-reliance, however, Hawthorne's emphasis on the evils of an enforced exposure of vice or of the hidden essence of the individual is, I will argue, more closely related to some of the central values of Coleridge's thought than to any aspect of Emerson's transcendentalism. In particular, the forcefulness with which Hawthorne not only rejects the punitive objectification of the sinner, but also highlights the near-universal deceptiveness of outward appearances, seems clearly to echo Coleridge's distinctive sense of the vacuity of our external roles or appearances, and the necessity of freeing ourselves from such objectification through the active pursuit of individual reflection.¹⁷⁾

As noted earlier, one of the passages of Hawthorne's novel in which the evils of such misconceived attempts to 'expose' the individual's inner character are particularly emphasized is that in which Hester is brought out of the prison to be paraded before her fellow-citizens, whose excessive crudeness and severity is among the first indications that Hester's exposure on the scaffold is far from being a simple revelation of her vice. Even before their vulgar comments begin, indeed, Hawthorne hints that though they may not be literally hypocritical in expressing such contempt for Hester's transgression, or arguing for much severer penalties than those the magistrates have imposed, the crudeness and conformity of their disdain for her dramatically-paraded vice itself renders them less than perfect examples of the Christian virtues they claim to uphold. 'Morally, as well as materially', he writes, 'there was a coarser fibre in those wives and maidens of old English birth and breeding', than in their nineteenth-century American descendants (*SL*, 50). 'The beef and ale of their native land', he adds, 'with a moral diet not a whit more refined, entered largely into their composition' (*ibid.*) - a comment which again associates the evils of the early American settlements with their European (and specifically British) origins, implying that the more 'refined' New England of Hawthorne's age has far less reason to demonstrate such unappealing (and often disreputable) qualities.

The full irony of Hester's 'exposure' on the scaffold, however - or the extent to which it manifestly fails to reveal her true character, demonstrating instead a largely-hypocritical fascination with exposure and degradation as such, and with a notion of revealing the individual's inner character which seems to parody Romantic ideals of self-expression - only becomes apparent in the speech made by the beadle as he introduces Hester to the citizens of Boston.¹⁸⁾ 'A blessing on the righteous Colony of the Massachusetts', he self-parodyingly cries, 'where iniquity is dragged out into the sunshine! Come along, Madam Hester, and show your scarlet letter in the market-place!' (*SL*, 54) The combination of archness and excessive literalism which characterizes these words again highlights Hawthorne's profound distrust of such rituals of revelation and humiliation, which transform their victim into a vehicle of her abusers' sense of virtue, in a pattern no less binary than that which characterizes the baldly-stated opposition between private vice and public revelation or enlightenment. In addition to its function as a place of assembly (and, as in the case of the ancient Greek 'agora', for 'public debating, elections, and trials'),¹⁹⁾ moreover, the 'market-place' is - of course - a place for buying and selling, and hence incongruously associated with the enforcement of puritanical morality. The implication that this transaction in the 'market-place' may, perhaps,

have more to do with a form of trade - namely that which maintains the status and position of Hester's accusers at her own obvious expense - than with any more spiritual matters is heightened by the suggestion (implied in the style of the beadle's declaration) that Hester's suffering is, despite its specific legal causes, not untypical of the kind which individuals suffer from the forms of objectification and static definition that Coleridge so vigorously opposes.²⁰⁾ 'Haughty as her demeanour was', Hawthorne writes, 'she perchance underwent an agony from every footstep of those that thronged to see her, as if her heart had been flung into the street for them all to spurn and trample upon' (*SL*, 55).

Not only the evils of this ritual of public contempt and implicit self-congratulation, but also its relevance to others than merely those defined (within the Puritan ethic from which Hawthorne never wholly detaches himself) as 'sinners', is made still clearer in his description of the platform on which Hester is exhibited. The principal feature of this platform, Hawthorne says, was the pillory - a device which 'was held, in the old time, to be as effectual an agent in the promotion of good citizenship, as ever was the guillotine among the terrorists of France' (*SL*, 55) - a statement which interestingly combines an emphasis on the crude enforcement of conformity which characterizes Boston society, with a stigmatization of revolutionary France scarcely less severe than Coleridge's reference to the 'strait-waistcoat of military despotism' imposed on his country by Napoleon.²¹⁾ That an author who, only a few pages earlier, patriotically ascribes the coarseness and vulgarity of Boston's 17th-century citizens to their British origins, should now express so strong a distaste for America's ally in the revolutionary wars would be surprising were it not for the sympathy with Coleridge's emphasis on voluntary action rather than passive conformance to the roles and definitions imposed by society which is implied in his vigorous critique of puritanical 'exposure'. Hawthorne, that is, seems in this passage to express a distaste for tyrannical power in all its forms, which does not shrink from criticizing either the seventeenth-century administrations of his own country, or that of its ally in the revolutionary wars, as well as the failings of its former colonial rulers. 'The very ideal of ignominy', he ironically continues, 'was embodied and made manifest in this contrivance of wood and iron' (*SL*, 55) - a sentence which plainly suggests not merely that the pillory seems to express the 'essence' of shame in a Platonic sense, but also that the Puritans are peculiarly attached to the principle of exposure and degradation. Most significantly, however, Hawthorne adds that 'There can be no outrage, methinks, against our common nature, - whatever be the delinquencies of the individual, - no outrage more flagrant than to forbid the culprit to hide his face for shame; as it was the essence of this punishment to do' (*ibid.*). The question of Hester's

'sin' and the merits of its exposure thus becomes quite secondary to Hawthorne's emphasis on the evils of exposure and humiliation as such, however mild or extreme the sins of which their victim might be accused. That Hester's role as 'sinner' in this performance is entirely a dramatic one, with no direct relation to any inner qualities she might possess - that, in other words, her outward identity as revealed sinner is, in fact, the purest fiction, depending merely on her powerlessness to resist the communal act of objectification and humiliation - is made explicit at the end of this paragraph, where Hawthorne writes that: 'Knowing well her part, she ascended a flight of wooden steps, and was thus displayed to the surrounding multitude' (*SL*, 55-6). Hester's greatest challenge in the novel, it appears, is to overcome the childish play-acting of her community - not, that is, merely in the sense of being seen as she really is, rather than as society portrays her (since the possibility of thus objectifying the individual's essence seems itself to be questioned by Hawthorne's novel), but rather in the sense of becoming active rather than passive, a doer, chooser, or creator rather than an object forced into certain roles or identities.²²⁾ Paradoxically, indeed, the method by which she becomes active rather than passive - becomes, that is, a human being rather than a figment of her fellow-citizens' fantastical imaginations²³⁾ - is by adopting the role of penitent so vigorously and persistently as to convert the mark of her 'ignominy' (a term which Hawthorne repeats with striking frequency, and which again seems to stress the outward rather than inward nature of her 'shame')²⁴⁾ into the symbol of a virtue far greater than that of the hypocrites who condemn her.

In stressing to this extent not only the falsity of social roles and definitions, but also (I would suggest) the insusceptibility of the individual's inner self to the forms of exposure or revelation sought by society, however, Hawthorne differs notably from the contemporary whose influence is most prominent in 'The Custom-House'. One of Emerson's most emphatically-presented doctrines in 'Self-Reliance', we recall, is that of the importance of the individual's realizing, fulfilling, and revealing his or her inner character or essence - or as Emerson himself puts it, of recognizing 'that imitation is suicide, that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of land which is given to him to till' (*ECW*, 2:27-8). Hester's conformity to the role of penitent can only be interpreted as exemplifying this message if that role derives not from her outward circumstances, or any imitation of existing customs and beliefs, but rather from a recognition and expression of her inner character or destiny - that 'little patch of ground' which, as

Emerson puts it in a sermon of 1830, each individual's 'Creator enclosed in the beginning for his use, ordaining him to reap as he had sown'.²⁵⁾ Emerson's concluding phrase here seems to involve the biblical implication that those who 'sow' unwisely must suffer the consequences²⁶⁾ - a view which, according to the ideology that condemns her, Hester's case might perhaps seem to illustrate. Its principal meanings, however, are less severely biblical, combining the familiar American view that everyone's success or failure depends on his or her own efforts with the idea that everyone has a certain character or potential which it is his or her duty to express and to fulfil.²⁷⁾ A certain ideology of 'openness' and honesty, that is, forms a central part of Emerson's message in 'Self-Reliance', and is still more explicit in *The Conduct of Life*, where he specifically urges his readers to 'speak as you think' and 'be what you are'.²⁸⁾ Though Hester clearly demonstrates 'Self-Reliance' in the most mundane sense of supporting herself and Pearl through her own efforts, therefore, both she and Hawthorne seem notably to resist the idea that the individual's inner essence can simply be laid bare - or, within the context of Puritan judgmentalism, that the act of declaring either one's guilt or one's virtue can be other than a sham - a performance whose content can never acquire the status of the actual and the absolute.²⁹⁾

Where Hester does seem to exemplify 'self-reliance' in (I would argue) the most important sense, however, is in the self-sacrificing generosity and sympathy towards her fellow-citizens (however ungrateful they might be) which ultimately transforms the significance of the scarlet letter, showing 'so much power to do, and power to sympathize...that many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. They said that it meant Able; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength' (*SL*, 161). Hester's individualistic activity of mind and spirit, that is, distinguishes her fundamentally from the identity imposed on her by the town's authorities. Her new identity, in other words, is acquired not through any direct assertion or expression of her character or opinions, but rather through an activity whose effect is precisely to free her from passive definition and make her (in Emerson's words) an 'active soul' - that soul which 'sees truth...or creates' (*ECW*, 1:56). Hester's example thus highlights the tension in Emerson's thought between the ideal of self-expression in the sense of honesty or openness - of 'being oneself' - and the Coleridgean view that truth consists not in any static form of definition (which, like the Puritans' objectification of Hester, creates an object of a distinct kind, and incommensurable with the mind or potential of the individual) but rather in a process either of practical or of reflective activity - either in actively changing the world, or in questioning the capacity of any definition

to reveal the sublime activity which is its essence.³⁰⁾ In Coleridge's own language (derived from that of Spinoza and his scholastic precursors), the essence of the individual is *natura naturans*, or active and productive energy as distinct from *natura naturata*, or the static products or contents of any definition.³¹⁾ Clearly, this conflict in Emerson's ideas is not wholly resolved in Hawthorne's novel, either; yet not only his portrayal of Hester, but also that of Dimmesdale and his ultimately successful resistance to Chillingworth's efforts to intensify his sense of inward vice, suggests that the individual's character is revealed neither in passive acceptance of externally-determined roles, nor in mere indifference to and flight from the society which seeks to impose them, but rather in a voluntary act which transforms the individual from the shaped into the shaping power, or from *natura naturata* into *natura naturans*.

Certain of Hawthorne's descriptions of Dimmesdale, however, might well lead one to think that far from rejecting Emerson's distinctive emphasis on personality and individual character - a preoccupation which Coleridge emphatically opposed³²⁾ - he in fact endorses it, and that despite stressing the evils of Hester's dramatic 'exposure' on the scaffold, he largely shares the Puritans' emphasis on 'dragging into the sunshine' the private sins or iniquities of the individual. Immediately after describing how Chillingworth's subtle victimization of Dimmesdale causes him to engage in self-flagellation, fasting, and a 'constant introspection' giving rise to strange hallucinations, Hawthorne writes:

It is the unspeakable misery of a life so false as his, that it steals the pith and substance out of whatever realities there are around us, and which were meant by heaven to be the spirit's joy and nutriment. To the untrue man, the whole universe is false, - it is impalpable, - it shrinks to nothing within his grasp. And he himself, in so far as he shows himself in a false light, becomes a shadow, or, indeed, ceases to exist. The only truth, that continued to give Mr. Dimmesdale a real existence on this earth, was the anguish in his inmost soul, and the undissembled expression of it in his aspect. Had he once found power to smile, and wear a face of gayety, there would have been no such man!

(SL, 145-6)

At first glance, it would be hard to place more emphasis on the value of honesty and openness than Hawthorne does in this passage. Its concluding suggestion that the anguish caused by Dimmesdale's concealment of his relationship with Hester has become his only 'real existence', and that had he succeeded in concealing this, he would therefore have ceased to

exist, however, takes the ethic of openness or exposure which Emerson in fact shares with Hawthorne's Boston Puritans to such extremes that it acquires a quality of overstatement, and even of absurdity, which seems to problematize the very doctrine to which Hawthorne at first seems so intensely committed. Clearly, Hawthorne's reference to the prospective non-existence of one who could thus hide 'the anguish of his inmost soul' is figurative rather than literal; yet the near-fanatical obsession with 'baring' one's inmost soul to those around one which it clearly invokes is precisely the preoccupation which, in the scene of Hester's emergence from the prison, Hawthorne so clearly deprecates and satirizes. If - as I have suggested - the implication of that passage is that no supposed exposure of the individual's inner self can actually achieve what it claims to, but is rather an act of dramatization which substitutes an object, artificially constructed, for the active and creative mind it ought to acknowledge, however, Hawthorne's reference to the 'falsity' of Dimmesdale's life, and - still more - his description of him as an 'untrue man', would seem to refer not to his concealment of his sinful nature, nor even to his congregation's ever-greater admiration of the ideal he falsely represents to them, but rather to precisely the introspective obsession which Chillingworth has prompted in him, and which leads Dimmesdale to see himself as the quintessence of falsity.³³⁾ Perhaps the most significant aspect of Dimmesdale's unhealthy preoccupation, indeed, is his tendency to keep 'vigils' in which he viewed 'his own face in a looking-glass, by the most powerful light which he could throw upon it', so that 'He...typified the constant introspection wherewith he tortured, but could not purify, himself' (*SL*, 145). In this description, indeed, Dimmesdale's preoccupation with searching out and exposing his inner self seems ironically to resemble the extremest form of vanity, while the association of his inward quest with visual self-examination additionally suggests a degree both of superficiality and of mistakenness in his self-objectification resembling that involved in the authorities' exposure of Hester to public ignominy. Hence a central part of the falsity which leads to Dimmesdale's 'unspeakable misery' appears to be precisely this attempt to transform his inner self into an object no less solid and visible than his physical surroundings - a comparison additionally suggested by Hawthorne's description of the way in which Dimmesdale's visions of angels and devils compete for solidity with 'yonder table of carved oak, or that big, square, leathern-bound and brazen-clasped volume of divinity' (*SL*, 145). Viewed in this light, Hawthorne's half-ironic statement that were his private anguish to 'wear a face of gayety, there would have been no such man!' could well be read as implying that his efforts to expose an inner essence of vice or criminality are so deluded - so immersed in a vain (and pointless) obsession with the self as an

objectified, solid essence - that there really is nothing more to Dimmesdale, at this stage of the novel, than the deceptiveness of this very obsession. Even Hawthorne's elaborately pointed reference to the 'leathern-bound and brazen-clasped volume of divinity' which he contrasts with the 'misty lack of substance' (*ibid.*) that characterizes Dimmesdale's visions, indeed, seems implicitly to invoke both Emerson's and Coleridge's view that truth is never to be found in books or repositories of learning, but only in the immediate creative activity of the individual mind.³⁴⁾ As Emerson puts it in 'The American Scholar',

I had better never see a book, than be warped by it clean out of my own orbit, and made a satellite instead of a system. The one thing in the world of value, is, the active soul....The soul active sees absolute truth, and utters truth, or creates....In its essence, it is progressive....To create...is the proof of a divine presence. Whatever talents may be, if the man create not, the pure efflux of the Deity is not his. (*ECW*, 1: 56-7)

In striving to give his inner self the solidity and fixity of a devout and learned volume, that is, Dimmesdale adopts a course precisely opposite to that which both Emerson and Coleridge recommend - not only following the opinions and ideas of others,³⁵⁾ but seeking to emulate in his own being the form and degree of closure which Hawthorne so vividly evokes in his description of the book.

Again, however, we should also note that though Emerson follows Coleridge in deprecating 'Book-knowledge', or an excessive reliance on whatever can be set down and recorded 'in books or other conservatories of intellect',³⁶⁾ he differs from Coleridge in celebrating the discovery and expression of one's inner identity, and in implicitly conceiving of that identity as a fixed essence rather than something continually made anew in the act of thought or reflection.³⁷⁾ This aspect of Emerson, indeed, seems strikingly incompatible with his theory, in 'The American Scholar' as in 'Self-Reliance', that truth as such is inaccessible except to the 'active soul'. And in thus implicitly opposing Emerson's view of personal identity while following his emphasis on activity as the source of any genuine knowledge, Hawthorne again seems closer to the principal source of Emerson's ideas (that is, to Coleridge) than to Emerson himself.³⁸⁾

As noted earlier, however, perhaps the most important contrast or opposition in the novel is that between the imposition of guilt or 'ignominy' - or more generally, of a fixed identity - and the voluntary adoption and creation of one's identity through acts in no way determined or commanded by others, and which themselves constitute the distinctive qualities

of the individual. What distinguishes Dimmesdale's exposure of the letter on his breast from Hester's exposure on the scaffold, in other words, is that he makes this revelation at precisely the moment when the citizens of Boston are most convinced of his almost angelic status. The fact that Dimmesdale's act is that of freely or voluntarily confessing a guilt which exists only in terms of the Christian teachings he has inherited, however, reminds us that Hawthorne's text is also far more directly concerned than most of Emerson's essays with traditional Christian theology - a further respect in which it may seem closer to Coleridge.³⁹⁾ It was, indeed, precisely Emerson's resistance to the imitation or conformity involved in preaching a received doctrine that he gave as his primary reason for leaving the ministry even of so relatively latitudinarian a church as the Unitarian.⁴⁰⁾ Though Hawthorne repeatedly criticizes many aspects of 17th-century Puritanism, moreover, he is in many respects far more orthodox than Emerson in the opinions and values he propounds - a fact which might well seem difficult to reconcile with a Transcendentalist emphasis not only on the more practical forms of 'self-reliance', but also on the habit of intellectual and imaginative individualism. The message which the 'Conclusion' of *The Scarlet Letter* most clearly presents to the reader, indeed, is ostensibly an emphatic endorsement of that aspect of Emerson which seems most strikingly to contradict his (and Coleridge's) recommendation of active thought and transcendence of fixed roles or identities, as much as of other forms of received opinion. 'Among many morals which press upon us from the poor minister's miserable experience', Hawthorne writes, 'we put only this into a sentence: - "Be true! Be true! Be true! Shew freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!"' (SL, 260) The puritanic insistence on honesty is, of course, no less compatible with Coleridgean transcendence than with the crude objectification of the sinner which Hawthorne satirizes at various points in the novel: if anything, indeed, it is *more* compatible with a Coleridgean or Sartrean *critique* of the objectification of the self than with a mere repetitive conformance to its rituals - which, as in the case of Dimmesdale's self-examination in the mirror, creates phantoms still less edifying than those which issue from a 'brazen clasped volume of divinity' unmediated by the critical mind. Hawthorne's emphasis not merely on honesty in a general or abstract sense, but also on the 'showing' or displaying of visible signs of inner identity and moral worth, however, makes the honesty which he refers to precisely that which is also invoked by the 'beadle' who leads Hester into the market-place - an act of 'exposure' whose disreputableness (indeed, whose *dishonesty*) is suggested by so many aspects of Hawthorne's commentary on this ritual.

The paradox may be resolved, however, by considering the apparent decisiveness of Hawthorne's moral 'Conclusion' in the light of the extreme ambiguity of the 'revelation' which seems to prompt it - and, furthermore, in relation to the ethic of reading which underlies both Coleridge's and Emerson's critiques of 'book-knowledge'. The decisiveness of this conclusion, indeed, could scarcely be more at odds with the uncertainty of the 'facts' from which it is supposed to be derived, since the immediately preceding paragraphs not only offer three alternative explanations of the scarlet letter presumed to have appeared on Dimmesdale's breast, but also note 'that certain persons, who were spectators of the whole scene, and professed never once to have removed their eyes from the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale, denied that there was any mark whatever on his breast' (*SL*, 259). This latter view, moreover, is then used to substantiate a fourth interpretation - namely that because of his extreme virtue, the minister 'had desired, by yielding up his breath in the arms of that fallen woman, to express to the world how utterly nugatory is the choicest of man's own righteousness' (*ibid.*). Despite the 'highly respectable' (*ibid.*) nature of these last-mentioned witnesses, however, the narrator chooses to place more faith in the solidity of the physical 'letter', whatever its origin might have been, and furthermore to claim 'authority' for doing so in the manuscript supposedly discovered in the old custom-house at Salem. By invoking this manuscript 'source' as a basis for his preferred reading of the 'facts' and of their moral significance, however, Hawthorne not only draws attention to the fictional nature of both, but also highlights the contradiction between the ambiguity of the reports he claims to have received, and the decisiveness of his own reading. That his only means of shoring up this moral certainty should be a (fictional) 'manuscript of old date' (*ibid.*), moreover, ironically suggests a resemblance to the insubstantial visions of Dimmesdale's introspective vigil, which, though lacking the solidity of the written or printed word, were nevertheless 'the truest and most substantial things which the minister now dealt with' (*SL*, 145). And like that earlier reference to a book from which its readers seek to derive unambiguous moral certainties, this last appearance of the fictional documentary 'source' of Hawthorne's 'Romance' recalls the numerous warnings against placing too much trust in the written (or printed) word which Coleridge and Emerson both trace to Plato and, through him, to the Socratic emphasis on dialectical inquiry and debate as offering the closest approximation to knowledge.⁴¹⁾ To the extent that Hawthorne shares this scepticism about the 'wisdom' to be derived from books, and stresses the necessity of the 'active soul' or a 'perpetual progression' of thought or inquiry in order to transcend the 'fixities and definites' of received opinion,⁴²⁾ moreover, the contradictions of the novel's 'Conclusion' seem to make

more sense than might at first appear. Like that other antiquarian narrative of ambiguous crime and punishment - Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner' - that is, Hawthorne's novel seems, through the persistent ironies and contradictions surrounding its ostensible message, to invite the reader's questioning of the surface appearances of the text, as much as of the moral universe which it depicts.⁴³⁾ And though the surface unity of Hawthorne's narrative contrasts with the fragmented narratorial and interpretative voices of Coleridge's poem, both the identity and the opinions of its narrator remain - I would argue - fundamentally unstable, shifting between the historical persona of Hawthorne himself and the imaginary antiquarian who claims to have reconstructed the tale, as much as between the criticism and recommendation of puritanical 'exposure' and absolute moral certainty.

That Hawthorne's narrator should make the physicality of the supposed 'letter' on Dimmesdale's breast the basis of his unjustifiably decisive 'Conclusion', moreover, clearly suggests the possibility that this letter - like that magical one discovered in the custom-house, and like the 'letter' of the (fictional) manuscript-source which Hawthorne's narrator both strictly adheres to and mysteriously elaborates, has misled him into too 'concrete' a reading - or (as Emerson puts it) has 'warped [him] out of [his] own orbit', making him 'a satellite instead of a system'. The symbolic power of Hester's letter, indeed, has very much the same effect on her fellow-citizens, seeming to give concrete form to a moral character which is in fact far more ambiguous than the 'letter' of the law would have them believe.⁴⁴⁾ The character they give her, indeed, is scarcely any closer to the truth than the letter which evokes and represents it, and from which the narrator finally seeks support for his unjustifiable conclusion - albeit now in the hyperbolic (and possibly ironic) form of a letter which has actually become *part* of the body of the sinner it supposedly identifies. Like Coleridge's 'Ancient Mariner', however, Hawthorne's novel does not simply seek to undermine the moral judgements it depicts, but rather to promote a questioning of or reflection on them which highlights the far greater complexity of the issues which it raises.⁴⁵⁾ Active thought rather than passive reciprocity, in other words, seems ultimately to be what *The Scarlet Letter* seeks to stimulate through its persistent ironies and contradictions; and Hawthorne's combination of this ideal with persistent elements of religious orthodoxy seems itself to parallel Coleridge's paradoxical emphasis not only on the desirableness of pursuing truth and knowledge for ourselves, but also on the importance of acknowledging religious mysteries once the limits of human knowledge have been tested. Though Emerson also stresses the dependence of truthfulness on the 'active soul', therefore, both Hawthorne's religious orthodoxy and - most importantly - his emphatic

questioning of all objectifications of the self, I would argue, make his novel at least as Coleridgean as it is Transcendentalist.

Notes:

- 1) *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, 5 vols. (London: Routledge, 1957-2001) 3: 4066 (hereafter *CN*).
- 2) On the Romantic, and particularly Coleridgean, influence on Emerson's concept of 'self-reliance' see especially David Vallins, 'Self Reliance: Individualism in Emerson and Coleridge', *Symbiosis*, 5:1 (2001) 51-68.
- 3) See Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, ed. William Charvat et al., vol. 1 of *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne* ([Columbus, OH]: Ohio State U.P., 1962), 5-7 (hereafter *SL*), and Vallins, 'Self Reliance', 60-1; also Emerson's emphatic attack on what he calls 'your miscellaneous popular charities; the education at college of fools; the building of meeting-houses to the vain end to which many now stand; alms to sots, and the thousand-fold Relief Societies', in 'Self-Reliance', *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Robert Spiller et al., 5 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P., 1971-), 2:31 (hereafter *ECW*).
- 4) See especially *ECW*, 2: 42-7 on these various forms of individualism; also S.T. Coleridge, *The Friend*, ed. Barbara E. Rooke, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1969), 1:106 and 1:518 (hereafter *Friend*).
- 5) On the importance of individual thought and questioning of received opinion see, for example, *ECW*, 2:27 and *ECW*, 1:56 ('The American Scholar'); also *CN*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (London: Routledge, 1957-), 1:119, 2:2526, *Friend*, 1:419, and Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1971), 4, 7-9. The theme of nature's power to awaken an imaginative insight into what lies beyond it is especially prominent in such Coleridge poems as 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison' and 'Frost at Midnight' (see *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E.H. Coleridge [Oxford: Clarendon, 1912], 178-81, 240-2), and is echoed in, for example, Emerson's *Nature* (see *ECW*, 1: 29-39).
- 6) For Emerson's best-known criticism of reliance on 'charity', as well as of charitable giving, see *ECW*, 2:31.
- 7) See, for example, *Friend*, 1:105-6, and S.T. Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, ed. John Beer (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1993), 116-9. A similar emphasis on freeing oneself from material preoccupations, as well as on individual thought and questioning, is prominent in Thoreau, *Walden*, 4-16.
- 8) On the way in which Emerson's emphasis on individual thought or inquiry sometimes develops into an assertion of the superior value of one's own opinions see especially Vallins, 'Self Reliance', 57-8.
- 9) See *ECW*, 2: 28-30, and Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. W.J.B. Owen (Oxford: OUP, 1969); also the related passage in 'The American Scholar' where Emerson describes the 'institution of preaching' as 'the speech of man to men' (*ECW*, 1:92).
- 10) See *SL*, 39.
- 11) See, for example, Coleridge's statement in *Friend*, 1: 520 that 'individuality is only conceivable as with and in the Universal and Infinite', and that the phenomenal self is 'merely...a frame-work which the human imagination forms by its own limits'; also *CN*, 1: 119, and *Friend*, 1: 519 for expressions of his view that truth consists only in the activity of thinking, rather than in any static definition. Emerson's contrasting emphasis on the expression or development of one's essential identity is evident, for example, in *ECW*, 2: 27-8 and a passage of *The Conduct of Life* where he not only celebrates 'honesty and truth', but also urges his readers to 'speak as you think' and 'be what you are' (see *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. E.W. Emerson, 12 vols. [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903-4] 6: 322).

- 12) See *SL*, 252-7.
- 13) As I suggest in David Vallins, *Coleridge and the Psychology of Romanticism: Feeling and Thought* (London: Macmillan, 2000), 68-9, indeed, Coleridge's views on the self substantially anticipate those of Sartre, and particularly the latter's distinction between 'facticity', or externally-defined identity, and the act of 'transcendence' which negates it (see Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes [London: Methuen, 1957], 47-67), and a similar view is, I would argue, implied in *The Scarlet Letter*.
- 14) See *SL*, 160-3.
- 15) See especially *ECW*, 2: 27 ('the highest merit we ascribe to Moses, Plato and Milton is that they set at naught books and traditions, and spoke not what men but what they thought'), and the analogous passages in S.T. Coleridge, *Logic*, ed. J.R. de J. Jackson (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1981), 31-2, *CN*, 3: 4006, 4350, and *Friend*, 1: 472-3.
- 16) See especially Emerson's statement in '*The American Scholar*' that 'The one thing in the world of value, is, the active soul' (*ECW*, 1:56), and his echoes, in *ECW*, 2:46-7, of Coleridge's emphasis on the capacity of genius to combine 'the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects', or to contemplate 'the ANCIENT of days...with feelings as fresh, as if all had then sprung forth at the first creative fiat' (S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols. [Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1983], 1: 81).
- 17) See especially the passage from *Friend*, 1: 520 quoted in note 12 above, and *CN*, 3: 4066, where he stresses the incapacity of understanding or 'Fancy' to express the inner 'life' of consciousness or the soul.
- 18) The hypocrisy of Hawthorne's Boston society is made most explicit in chapter 5, where the 'sympathetic knowledge of the hidden sin in other hearts' mysteriously given to Hester by the scarlet letter seems to reveal that even the earthly 'saint[s]' of the priesthood or magistracy have a strange affinity with her, suggesting that the 'outward guise of purity' was indeed 'but a lie' (see *SL*, 86-7).
- 19) See Liddell, Henry George and Scott, Robert, *A Lexicon: Abridged from Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1909), 6-7.
- 20) On this point see especially Lockridge's suggestion that Coleridge 'is the first thinker in England to formulate what could loosely be called an existential viewpoint: one must act beyond one's essence, become more than what one is' (Laurence S. Lockridge, *Coleridge the Moralist* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1977], 68).
- 21) See S.T. Coleridge, *Essays on His Times*, ed. David V. Erdman, 3 vols. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978), 2: 78.
- 22) Again, Sartre's discussion of 'bad faith' seems the closest twentieth-century analogy to Hawthorne's vision of the falsity of social objectification. See, for example, his discussions of how 'the waiter in the café can not be immediately a café waiter in the sense that this inkwell is an inkwell', but can rather 'be he only in representation' (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 59-60).
- 23) This fantastical quality in popular conceptions of Hester is repeatedly stressed by Hawthorne, particularly in terms of the tendency of 'The vulgar' to assert that the scarlet letter 'was red-hot with infernal fire' (see *SL*, 69, 87-8).
- 24) In *SL*, 78, indeed, Hawthorne writes that Hester herself 'would become the general symbol at which the preacher and moralist might point, and in which they might vivify and embody their images of woman's frailty and sinful passion', and Hawthorne's (or in one passage, Hester's) use of the phrase 'her shame' to refer to the letter itself, rather than its symbolic meaning, similarly highlights this reductive objectification of her and the purely external nature of her public identity (see *SL*, 211, 246). See also *SL*, 87, where Hawthorne writes of 'the red infamy upon her breast'.
- 25) *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Albert J. Von Frank, 4 vols. (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1989-92), 2: 232.
- 26) See *Galatians*, 6.7 ('whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap').

- 27) On the first of these points see, for example, Robert N. Bellah (et al.), *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 145-9, which notes that 'For those oriented primarily to upward mobility...major features of American society appear to be "the normal outcome of the operation of individual achievement." In this conception, individuals...are given the chance to make the best of themselves, and inequality of result is natural.' What is most notable in this widely-expressed attitude, I would suggest, is its implicit assumption of an equality of opportunity which, paradoxically, the 'normalization' of inequality itself seems to undermine.
- 28) See Emerson, *Complete Works*, 6:322.
- 29) In this respect Hawthorne again seems to anticipate Sartre's concept of the opposition between an individual's 'facticity' and his 'transcendence' (or the consciousness which observes and hence cannot be identified with his externally-defined role or 'self') - an opposition which, Sartre also suggests, inevitably undermines the ideal of 'sincerity'. See Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 57-67.
- 30) See especially my discussion of this theory in Vallins, *Coleridge and the Psychology of Romanticism*, 85-7. Perhaps Coleridge's most memorable expression of this theory occurs in *Friend*, 1: 519, where he celebrates the indefinableness of consciousness or spirit in terms of 'that life-ebullient stream which breaks through every momentary embankment, again, indeed, and evermore to embank itself, but within no banks to stagnate or be imprisoned'.
- 31) On this distinction see, for example, S.T. Coleridge, *Lectures 1808-19 On Literature*, ed. R.A. Foakes, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1987), 2: 148 and n., and S.T. Coleridge, *Logic*, 44-5.
- 32) See, for example, *Friend*, 1: 520 and S.T. Coleridge, *Shorter Works and Fragments*, ed. H.J. Jackson and J.R. de J. Jackson, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1995), 2: 1155.
- 33) The tendency of Dimmesdale's half-confessions of his 'sin' to increase his congregation's admiration of him, as one whose excessive self-criticism merely increases his saintliness (an outcome which Dimmesdale inevitably sees as exacerbating his dishonesty), is particularly stressed in *SL*, 143-4.
- 34) See especially Coleridge, *Logic*, 31-2, and *Friend*, 1: 472-3.
- 35) The necessity of avoiding reliance on the opinions of others is perhaps most directly stressed by Emerson in the opening pages of 'Self-Reliance': see *ECW*, 2: 27-30.
- 36) See *CN*, 2: 2526 and *Friend*, 1:419.
- 37) See *ECW*, 2: 27-8, and Emerson, *Complete Works*, 6:322.
- 38) On the extent of Emerson's indebtedness to Coleridge see, for example, Kenneth Walter Cameron, *Emerson the Essayist* (Hartford, CT: Transcendental Books, 1945), 1:78, 90n, 95n, 125n, 140n, and 151n, F.T. Thompson, 'Emerson's Indebtedness to Coleridge', *Studies in Philology*, 23 (1926), 55-76, Kenneth Marc Harris, 'Reason and Understanding Reconsidered: Coleridge, Carlyle, and Emerson', *Essays in Literature*, 13 (1986), 263-81, and Vallins, 'Self Reliance', *passim*. Coleridge's opposition to the 'fixities and definites' of 'understanding' or 'fancy', and his emphasis on the revelatory power of the creative imagination grounded by the divine 'Reason', are perhaps the most central aspects of his thought. See S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 1:304-5, and Vallins, *Coleridge and the Psychology of Romanticism*, 148-51.
- 39) Despite the irony often implied in Hawthorne's evocations of contemporary religious teachings, his occasional use of more direct and emphatic moral commentary is particularly evident, for example, in *SL*, 122, where he writes that in deciding to return to Europe with Hester, Dimmesdale 'had yielded himself with deliberate choice...to what he knew was deadly sin'.
- 40) Emerson's reasons for leaving the Unitarian church are, of course, particularly expressed in the 'Divinity School Address' (*ECW*, 1: 76-93), where he argues for a far greater reliance on individual feeling or conviction, and criticizes an excessive respect for the teachings and traditions of any organized church, or what he boldly calls 'our soul-destroying slavery to habit'

(*ECW*, 1:90).

- 41) See, for example, Coleridge, *Logic*, 31-2, *ECW*, 2: 27, and Plato, *Phaedrus*, 275a-278e (*The Works of Plato*, trans B. Jowett, 4 vols. in 1 [New York: Dial Press (1937)]), 3: 443-8).
- 42) See S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 1: 305.
- 43) On this point see also my discussion of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' in Vallins, *Coleridge and the Psychology of Romanticism*, 23-4, and Kathleen Wheeler, *The Creative Mind in Coleridge's Poetry* (London: Heinemann, 1981), 42-64.
- 44) This analogy between the concreteness of writing and the fixity of the ideas which it expresses, indeed, is central to Plato's argument in *Phaedrus*, 278b-278e, where (in the persona of the purely oral dialectician, Socrates) he writes that the best writings 'are but a reminiscence of what we know, and...only in principles of justice and goodness and nobility taught and communicated orally and written in the soul, which is the true way of writing, is there clearness and perfection and seriousness', adding that 'he who can not rise above his own compilations and compositions...may be justly called poet or speech-maker or law-maker' (*The Works of Plato*, 3: 447-8)
- 45) On this point see especially the quotation from the 17th-century theologian Thomas Burnet which Coleridge used as an epigraph to 'The Ancient Mariner', and which focuses directly on the necessity of individual thought and questioning if we are to acquire any sense of ultimate realities or of the limits of our understanding. The quotation (originally in Latin) is translated in Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling (eds.), *Romantic Poetry and Prose* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1973), 238n.