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**Calvin's hermeneutics in the American renaissance.**

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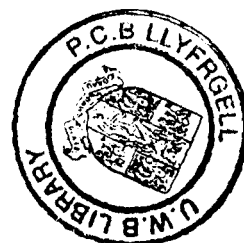
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**Calvin's Hermeneutics  
in the American Renaissance**

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## Summary

This thesis traces the development of Calvinist hermeneutic practices and their implications for social order as they relate to the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Nathaniel Hawthorne. The tension in Calvinist reform between its liberating, individualistic piety and its strict, pure social order carried over into hermeneutic practice, resulting in three distinct hermeneutic traditions: the dogmatism upheld by the ecclesiastical and political elite; the subjective dogmatism of "inspired" radicals; and an open hermeneutics which emphasized receptivity to new meaning but recognized the importance of community and community of meaning and aspired to a progressive harmony of ideas.

Through Puritan covenant theology, Calvinist dogmatism was transformed into American nationalism, a mode of thought with protean powers of co-opting dissent. Calvinist subjective dogmatism influenced American radicalism through Puritan antinomians. While Calvin's open hermeneutics had some influence on the Puritans, it was especially important in the writing of Emerson and Hawthorne, who were especially influenced by its development in the work of seventeenth-century English divines and of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. This development, paralleled in American thinkers such as Edwards, divorced dogmatic, traditional "Calvinism" from the Calvin who inspired personal experience and symbolic knowledge.

In response to the authoritarian dogmatism of American nationalism, both Emerson and Hawthorne turned to the Calvinist tradition of openness to new meaning. For Emerson, this meant a continual quest for authenticity and the consequent rejection of comforting structures and habitual modes of thought. Such hermeneutics led Emerson toward relativism and pragmatism. Hawthorne too recognized in the dominant ideology a threat to the integrity of the individual, as evidenced in his early "rites of passage" stories. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne suggested the need for community as a support of meaning and a foundation for the individual in a process of long-term change.

# Calvin's Hermeneutics in the American Renaissance

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## Introduction

While the symbolist movement has become one of the most important developments in modern literature, most critics have, until recently, focused on symbolism in European literature. Though Edmund Wilson observed in 1931 that the American romantics were precursors to the modern symbolists (12) and though interest in Melville's symbolism developed through the late 1940s,<sup>1</sup> it was not until 1953, when Charles Feidelson published his trailblazing *Symbolism and American Literature*, that American romanticism was seen as important in the development of symbolic literature. Feidelson showed how the symbolism of Hawthorne, Emerson, and the other American romantics is related to the crucial epistemological questions which dominate twentieth century philosophy and how it was rooted in the Puritan practice of typology. While Feidelson's work helped focus critical attention on this important aspect of American romanticism, his study leaves a crucial question unanswered: Why did Puritan typology evolve into romantic symbolism? Feidelson sharply contrasts symbolism with allegory, of which Puritan typology was one form. Allegorical thinking, according to Feidelson, perceives a clear relation between thought and thing or between type and meaning or fulfillment, and it results in modes of conventional thinking, in which the allegorical message corresponds to a previously accepted theory. On the other hand, embodying multiplicity, ambiguity, and contradiction, symbolism is open to more deviant interpretation (14, 45-74). How did allegory become symbolism in the hands of the Puritans' descendents? What did allegory and symbolism mean to the romantics in their political and social milieu? These are questions which Feidelson does not address.

Two studies which followed Feidelson's, Lowance's "From Edwards to Emerson to Thoreau: A Revaluation" and Ursula Brumm's *American Thought and Religious Typology*, offer insights into American symbolism but fail to address the shift from Puritan allegory to romantic symbolism.<sup>2</sup> Like Feidelson, Brumm distinguishes allegory—a contrived figure embodying a preconceived notion—from symbolism, a real figure in the world whose meaning is multivalent, ambiguous, and varying depending upon circumstances (7-19). However, she lumps these two devices together in reference to the entire tradition from Puritan to romantic, failing to note Emerson and Hawthorne's transformation of their ancestors' allegory into the symbolism of their own works. Similarly, Lowance's study has been invaluable in focusing critical attention away from Perry Miller's overemphasis on antinomianism<sup>3</sup> and onto typology as a crucial aspect of the continuity from Puritanism to Transcendentalism. Nevertheless, like both Feidelson and Brumm, Lowance ignores the distinction between allegory and symbolism, and he fails to address the historical question: How did allegory and symbolism relate to the social conditions which gave rise the writings of the Puritans and American romantics?

The most significant effort to address this gap in our historical understanding is the work of Sacvan Bercovitch. In an influential series of articles and books including *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, *The American Jeremiad*, *The Office of "The Scarlet Letter,"* and *The Rites of Assent*, Bercovitch demonstrates the relationship between Puritan typology, ideology, and social structure. Showing how typology served to channel the individualistic ethic of the Puritans into a cohesive social order, Bercovitch has brought to light the meaning of typology within Puritan society. Unfortunately, Bercovitch does not

distinguish between allegory and symbolism, arguing that both serve equally to imprint an ideology onto the mind. This lack of distinction between allegory and symbolism links Bercovitch with Karl Keller and Olaf Hansen, both of whom argue that the American romantics maintained the typological or allegorical mode practiced by the Puritans. In "Alephs, Zahirs, and the Triumph of Ambiguity: Typology in Nineteenth-Century American Literature," Keller argues that while "we cannot know what caused the nineteenth-century American imagination to find merit and satisfaction in the archaic technique of typologizing" (284), the American romantics employed typology with merely a "liberalizing effect" (284), an undercurrent of "skepticism, reservation, ambiguity" (295) caused by the loss of faith in the Puritan God and the fragmentation of American culture. In *Aesthetic Individualism and Practical Intellect*, Hansen discusses "the emergence of American allegory out of a Puritan tradition" (11) as if there were an unbroken continuity between Puritan and Transcendentalist modes.

While the distinction between allegory and symbolism may not be as sharp as some critics would claim, there are a number of reasons to maintain the distinction and offer an explanation for the shift in artistic modes. First, it is clear that the European Romantics, who influenced the Americans deeply, differentiated between allegory and symbolism, and they preferred symbolism for reasons rooted not simply in the loss of faith in Christianity nor in the desire to find a more effective mode of co-opting dissent, but in the epistemological quandaries that pressed thinkers in the aftermath of Hume and Kant.<sup>4</sup> The attitude of the romantics is epitomized in Coleridge's criticism of allegory as

but a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language which is itself nothing but an abstraction from the senses; the principle being more worthless even than its phantom proxy, both alike unsubstantial, and the former shapeless to boot. On the other hand a Symbol . . . always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that Unity, of which it is the representative ("The Statesman's Manual" 30).

As Coleridge's comments indicate, the problem of language was central to the romantics' preference for symbolism, and as Philip Gura has demonstrated in *The Wisdom of Words*, the American romantics' concern for language was stimulated not only by European theories, but also by contemporary theological debates in the United States over the nature of religious language. In opposition to the Unitarians and their reliance on Lockean epistemology and Scottish Common Sense philosophy, American theologians such as Moses Stuart, James Marsh, and Horace Bushnell transformed the typology of their Puritan ancestors in developing a theory of language which eschewed empiricism and advocated the necessity of symbolism, multiplicity of meaning, and ambiguity in religious discourse (Gura, *Wisdom of Words* 15-71).<sup>5</sup> Gura traces the influence of these theories in the development of Emerson's and Hawthorne's symbolic methodology (*Wisdom of Words* 75-105, 153-8).<sup>6</sup>

Gura's study is invaluable for demonstrating how allegory and symbolism carried contrasting meanings for the American Romantics and how these literary modes were related to conflicting visions of the nature of language and reality. However, focused only upon nineteenth century linguistic theories, this study touches the tip of the iceberg. While symbolism and allegory are related to certain theories of language, they are also related to the broader concern of human understanding. Consequently, they are connected to

hermeneutics, the problem of how humans come to an understanding of a text or of the world. As part of a larger hermeneutic project, then, the debate between symbolism and allegory is rooted not simply in the nineteenth century, but in the Reformation, the success of which depended largely on the capacity of believers to rightly interpret Scripture. And at the center of these hermeneutic concerns stands the titanic figure of John Calvin, who was renowned not only as the most systematic theologian of the Reformation but also as a scriptural exegete of the first order.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, having had a decisive influence on the Puritans, Calvin must be considered one of the most crucial figures in the development of American culture.

This study, then, approaches American symbolism by way of the hermeneutics of John Calvin. This approach yields a vision of the nature of symbolism markedly different from what most critics have perceived, a perspective which sees significant contrasting political and social implications in allegory and symbolism. While several studies have addressed the influence of Calvin on American literature, these have largely focused on the notorious five points of Calvinism: the total depravity of man, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints.<sup>8</sup> This narrow focus is unfortunate, for these doctrines are neither new to Calvin nor central to his program.<sup>9</sup> Rather, Calvin should be seen as the proponent of a certain brand of reform which is deeply contradictory. This reform and the unstable hermeneutic theories which buttress this reform are the topic of chapter one. Extolling a piety which was characterized by personal authenticity and complete dependence upon God, one side of Calvin was liberating, individualistic, and potentially anarchic. On the other hand, Calvin's reform necessitated a strict,

pure, transforming order. This authoritarian and worldly side of Calvin valued obedience and conformity. Calvin based his resolution to this conflict through an appeal to the Word of God. However, because the Word required interpretation, hermeneutics bore a tremendous weight in Calvin's system. Influenced by the same contradictions that pervade his entire system, Calvin's hermeneutics was fundamentally unstable, easily spinning off in contradictory directions—toward a dogmatic hermeneutics, akin to what Feidelson describes as an allegorical understanding, which saw Scripture as unequivocal and understandable and which served to bind the believer to the dictates of the Genevan authorities; and toward a more open-ended hermeneutics which saw human language as incapable of encapsulating God, with the result that Scriptural language was considered ostensive: symbolic representations which direct the believer toward a living experience with God. This latter hermeneutics, clearly akin to Feidelson's symbolic understanding, provided a grounds for resisting the dictates of the magistrate but also led potentially to a third hermeneutics which grounded interpretive authority in the heart of the believer and led potentially toward radicalism and anarchism.

Chapter two traces the attempt of American Puritans to resolve the contradictions of Calvinism through its own ecclesiastical-social structures and its own interpretive strategies. Through the church structure of non-separating congregationalism, the doctrine of the covenant, and the interpretive framework of typology, the Puritans demanded of themselves the most rigorous moral perfectionism within a fully voluntaristic framework. Social structure, doctrine, and hermeneutics collaborated to cement the relationship between self and state in a common mission—the building the Kingdom of God on earth—and acted

much as the authoritarian elements in Calvin's thought did. However, just as Calvin contended against dissent within his own camp, Puritan authorities struggled with competing models of Christian reform which rejected Puritan dogmatism on the basis of either a dissenting dogmatism, communal resistance or openness, humility and piety.

Chapters three and four address three common interpretive methodologies as they developed into the early nineteenth century. Chapter three briefly traces the development of Calvin's spirit of interpretive openness. A theological tradition developed through the liberal English Calvinists of the seventeenth century to Coleridge and liberal theologians in ante-bellum America. This tradition emphasized the limits of human reason and the importance of humility, subjectivity, and symbolic representation in interpretation. This form of interpretation is contrasted with that of contemporary Calvinists and Unitarians, who, influenced by Locke, understood doctrine as accurately describing religious truth and thus advocated a form of dogmatism. Chapter four addresses a secular interpretive methodology, a form of Puritan exceptionalism, which, by the time of the American Renaissance, had become the dominant, even dogmatically authoritarian, framework for viewing the meaning of American identity. Though the content of this myth had changed since the seventeenth century—the dominant value was now democracy rather than theocracy—the basic framework remained identical: America earned its identity, its right to exist, and its claim to the citizens' fealty because of its national mission: to uphold and spread the principles of democracy.

Chapters five through seven address how these interpretive traditions helped shape the writings of Emerson and Hawthorne. Both writers sought liberation from the strictures of their society, and both employed their particular forms of symbolism in that effort. Chapter five shows how Emerson employed concepts common to Calvin in his radical dissent. Emerson connected hermeneutics to social change by attempting to force individuals out of the strictures of dogmatism through an appeal to radical individualism. This hermeneutics sought to force the individual repeatedly into direct contact with an incommunicable ultimate reality. The result, however, was a form of relativism which undermined the resolute confrontation with society at the heart of self-reliance.

Chapters six and seven deal with Hawthorne's early short stories and *The Scarlet Letter* respectively. Through his early "rites of passage" stories, Hawthorne exposes the contradictions inherent in America's historical mission and, by implication, in the contemporary myth of America as herald of democracy. The pervasive theme of these stories is the dominance of society and its myths and the consequent paucity of individual integrity within American culture. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne suggests a solution to the dichotomy between the individual and the society. Returning to sources in Calvin's hermeneutics, Hawthorne posits the values of openness and community—as opposed to dogmatism, subjectivism, and radical individualism—as a source of meaning and a foundation for the integrity of the individual.

I believe that an understanding of the hermeneutical thought of Emerson and Hawthorne will enhance our understanding of the issues which shaped two of America's most important writers.



## Chapter 1

### John Calvin and the Contradictions of Reform

The complexity of American hermeneutic practice stems largely from divisions within John Calvin's program of reform. As a reformer, Calvin was torn by two conflicting values. On the one hand, in creating a *new* form, Calvin was concerned primarily with piety, a value which permeates his soteriology. On the other hand, in creating a new *form*, he was concerned primarily with a pure order, a value which predominates in his sociology and politics. While both of these values were necessary to drive Calvin's particular brand of reform, they often pulled in opposing directions. The result was a *concordia discors*, a dynamic tension which produced markedly differing visions of the nature of authority and knowledge. The result was two distinct hermeneutics—a tradition of dogmatism and a tradition of openness.

#### A Piety of Dependence and Authenticity

The most striking element of Calvin's piety is man's total dependence upon God. The classic Calvinist doctrines—depravity of man, the perfection and otherness of God, double predestination, faith by works, union with Christ, justification preceding sanctification—collaborate to shock man into understanding his complete helplessness. Though we should not assume with Torrance that, in Calvin's thought, God's image "is totally defaced from man" (*Calvin's Doctrine* 83), it is true that Calvin considered the results of original sin to have so pervaded all aspects of human nature that humans are hopelessly lost:

The mind of man has been so completely estranged from God's righteousness that it conceives, desires, and undertakes only that which is impious, perverted, foul, impure, and infamous. The heart is so steeped in the poison of sin, that it can breath out nothing but a loathsome stench. But even if some men can make a show of good, their minds nevertheless ever remain enveloped in hypocrisy and deceitful craft, and their hearts bound by inner perversity (*Institutes* II. v. 19).<sup>1</sup>

Our minds, finite and polluted, are incapable of reasoning clearly and adequately about God and salvation. Our wills are too debilitated to carry out God's law even if we knew it; thus, for man, ought does not imply can. Furthermore, this moral ineptitude is inherent in all of us through original sin: "And therefore infants themselves, as they bring their condemnation into the world with them, are rendered obnoxious to punishment by their own sinfulness, not by the sinfulness of another" (II. i. 8). Hence, man is by nature ignorant and evil, yet, in a typical Calvinist paradox, is still responsible for this wickedness: "While he sins necessarily, he nevertheless sins voluntarily" (II. iv. 1). In such circumstances, man is utterly and inherently incapable of saving himself, yet he is responsible for this incapacity. Man's only hope is through God's merciful conviction in the heart of the elect regarding the truths of Christianity. This personal conviction of the truth of the Bible and Christianity occurs when God's grace is freely given to an individual. At this point of belief in God, the Christian is not just mentally aware of a fact, but is remade from within. He is justified, the righteousness of Christ having been imputed to himself. Additionally, his very nature is transformed by actual union with Christ. This regeneration, granted, is incomplete, so the believer will not act perfectly, but he can now understand and obey God's will, capacities which the unregenerate can neither possess nor fully conceive of (Wendel 234-247). In a world where man's best efforts are futile, his

reason blind, and his will captive to evil, man cannot initiate such a transforming experience as union with Christ, but is completely dependent upon "the gratuitous mercy of God toward us" (III. xiv. 17). Only those who are chosen by God can receive this grace. In fact, God not only selects those who will be saved, but also appoints the others for damnation. Thus, Calvin believes in double predestination: "Eternal life is foreordained for some and eternal damnation for others" (III. xxi. 5). Though man cannot resist God's will, is predestined for either heaven or hell, and cannot take credit for being one of the elect, he is nevertheless responsible for his failure to turn to God.

This dark, pessimistic side of Calvin, while not a distortion, misses several crucial elements in Calvin's piety, most notably the importance of authenticity; that is, of what is most meaningful, genuine, and substantive in human life, involving the whole self, aimed toward ends in themselves rather than means, and dealing directly with reality rather than through some mediating agent. For instance, repudiating the value of good works and extolling in its place man's connection with Christ, Calvin privileged a state of being over moral action. This state of being, it is true, should result in good behavior, but that behavior flows more or less naturally from genuine appreciation for God's mercy rather than from conformity, anxiety, the manipulation of religious authority, or the desire to purchase heaven. Freed from guilt, the believer obeys from a free desire rather than from ulterior motives: "Consciences observe the law, not as if constrained by the necessity of law, but that freed from the law's yoke they willingly obey God's will" (III. xix. 4).

According to Calvin, this Christian liberty is in sharp contrast to the bondage of the Roman Catholic, who, forced to rise to the level of perfection

through his own effort, is perpetually plagued by guilt. Suffering under such a load, the Catholic is ensnared: to alleviate the dread of a guilty conscience, he torments himself to achieve an impossible perfection, follows superstitious practices in order to cleanse his soul, and ignorantly submits to the dictates of priests and bishops. Lacking true Christian liberty, the Catholic "will have no repose and there will be no end to superstition. . . . For when consciences once ensnare themselves, they enter a long and inextricable maze, not easy to get out of" (III. xix. 7). According to Calvin, this labyrinth has no exit within the Catholic system because that system itself is corrupt at its roots—privileging external behavior over a state of authentic devotion:

While it is incumbent on true worshippers to give heart and mind, men always want to invent a mode of serving God quite different from this, their object being to perform for him certain bodily observances, and keep the mind to themselves. Moreover, they imagine that when they thrust external pomps upon him, they have by this artifice evaded the necessity of giving themselves. This is the reason why they submit to innumerable observances which without measure and without end miserably exhaust them, and why they choose to wander in a perpetual labyrinth rather than worship God simply in spirit and in truth ("Necessity of Reforming" 193).

As this passage indicates, Calvin perceived an intimate connection between soteriology and ecclesiastical rituals and symbols. Through "external ceremonies like specious masks," we evade what we most need and most fear—union with and dependence upon Christ—and "interpose bodily observances like a wall of partition lest we be compelled to come to him with the heart" ("Necessity of Reforming" 193). Thus, while Calvin's soteriological doctrine was virtually identical with that of Luther and the other major reformers, he pushed the value of authenticity further and repudiated the "obsolete" traditions and symbols of the Catholic Church more completely

("Necessity of Reforming" 186).<sup>2</sup> In an iconoclastic manner, for instance, Calvin condemned "the fiction of transubstantiation" as "an idol" which aims to mediate between man and God ("Necessity of Reforming" 204-5). Likewise, he rejected the use of divine images and carried out what Forstman calls "a program of demythologization," criticizing literal interpretations of scriptural passages which depict God as having bodily form (113). To bring the whole man, not only his body but also his understanding, into the act of worship, Calvin rejected the Latin mass: "Whereas men generally prayed in an unknown tongue, we have taught them to pray with understanding" ("Necessity of Reforming" 196). Indeed, Calvin repudiated any "empty spectacle, unaccompanied with explanation of the mystery" ("Necessity of Reforming" 203).

The empty traditions of the Catholic Church, according to Calvin, not only pandered to the individual's desire to evade an encounter with God but also kept the individual dependent upon religious authority. The Catholic relied on priest and pope for forgiveness, connection with God, grace, and hope itself. Such crucial functions gave Catholic authorities immense and easily abused power over the hearts and minds of men. In contrast, Calvin's soteriology liberated the believer not only from guilt and superstition but also from conniving men. While it drew believers into obedience to God, it emancipated them from submitting the conscience to men: "The power of life and death is his who has jurisdiction over the soul. . . . Further, no man can take this to himself. We ought, therefore, to acknowledge God as the sole ruler of souls, with whom alone is the power to save and destroy" (IV. x. 7). The result of such inner freedom is autonomy: "We conclude that they are released from the power of all men" (III. xix. 14). Thus, Calvin's critique of Catholic traditions had a potent

political dimension: "The purpose of our effort is to restrain this unlimited and barbarous empire usurped over souls by those who wish to be counted pastors of the church but are actually its most savage butchers" (IV. x. 1). To this end, Calvin rejected the notion of ecclesiastical infallibility and advocated ecclesiastical elections so that "no man might be intruded on those unwilling or not consenting" (Necessity of Reforming" 207). Indeed, he renounced any form of coercive ecclesiastical power: "This spiritual power [must] be completely separated from the right of the sword" (IV. xi. 4). Striking a blow against authoritarian religion, Calvin complained of Catholic intolerance of the Reformation:

They would have our faith stand and fall on their decision: so that whatever they have determined on either side may be firmly established in our minds; and so that either what they have approved may be approved by us beyond question, or what they have condemned may also be regarded as condemned (IV. viii. 10).

In sum, Calvin's soteriology challenged the authority of the Catholic Church in order to demystify, bring the believer into authentic, unmediated relationship with God, and liberate the individual from guilt, illusion, and the machinations of men. In sweeping away the fetters of tradition, Calvin was essentially a harbinger of modernity, with its project of obliterating the past and establishing a world based on eternally true principles.<sup>3</sup>

### **Social Order: Purity and Power**

Embodying such doctrines within the social realm was problematic for all of the major reformers. Based on the rejection of corrupt authority obsolete tradition and on the authenticity and liberation of the individual, Reformation theology had trouble justifying social order, authority, and communal effort.

Because Calvin was perhaps the most worldly of reformers, this problem was particularly acute in his theology.

A number of factors impelled Calvin to his particular political theories. First, despite the primacy of Christian liberty and justification, Calvin ardently believed in the importance of sanctification—the regenerated Christian must still try to live a holy life. In fact, the doctrine of predestination could produce not only a sense of confidence, freedom, or even smug elitism but also anxiety-ridden effort. This anxiety stemmed from the Calvinists' difficulty in determining whether they were, in fact, saved. Because justification and regeneration change the state of the soul, often no "distinction can be made between God's children and the ungodly, between his own flock and wild beasts" (IV. i. 2). Nevertheless, because the process of regeneration was supposed to transform the individual, "good works were seen as the outward and visible sign of the presence and activity of grace within the believer" (McGrath 239). Hence, the only way to gain assurance of one's own salvation was to perform good works. This means, however, that sin portends one's condemnation, and the anxiety generated by such implications must have been considerable. Every sin, every spiritless day, every unholy thought could be a sign of a degenerate soul and of one's eternal condemnation. A sin was not simply an error or a mistreatment of another person, but a reflection of something far worse—a lost soul. Furthermore, by rejecting the concept of degrees of sins or levels of salvation, the believer held himself to the highest possible standard. In the individual's confrontation with his conscience, there were no allowances for frailty. Thus, predestination could impel restless, almost terror-stricken activity, not just complacency.

Driven to demonstrate their elect status, Calvinists might have retreated from the world and its temptations, living lives of extreme solitude, perfection, and asceticism. However, because of his peculiar view of the world, he created a decidedly world-affirming theology which advocated activity within society. On the one hand, as God's creation, the world is basically good. The sovereign God reflects his will through the natural, social, and political realms. Hence, the world is something to participate in, not separate from; to see God in, not repudiate. On the other hand, because human nature is depraved, it must be controlled, and this requires the activity of the elect within the world. While these two premises may seem contradictory, they stimulate social activism by contrasting an exalted norm or potentiality with a deeply fallen reality. Thus, God's election is not simply for the sake of a life in heaven, but for activity in the world. For instance, because God has identified a particular vocation for each individual, everyone has a calling, a duty to work for God in family, employment, and society (III. x. 6). Lending "new dignity and meaning to work," such doctrines made mundane labor "an integral part of Calvin's spirituality" (McGrath 232-3): "No task will be so sordid and base, provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God's sight" (III. x. 6). In addition to economic activity, such doctrines imply the need for political activity. Against Macchiavelli's theory of a state unfettered by religious strictures, Calvin advocated the transformation of the world through religious values—"to overturn the kingdom of Antichrist and set up again the true Kingdom of Christ" (IV. xi. 5).

Just as Calvin valued the world highly, so he esteemed power within the world. Indeed, power is necessary to control evil and allow God's character to



shine forth. Hence, of all God's callings, that of magistrate ranks most highly in Calvin's system: "No one ought to doubt that civil authority is a calling, not only holy and lawful before God, but also the most sacred and by far the most honorable of all callings in the whole life of mortal men" (IV. xx. 4). Furthermore, human power is valuable because it reflects divine omnipotence, which, for Calvin, was the most important attribute of God after His transcendence. In human history, for example, God is responsible for all changes of fortune and power so that humans pursue their own plans, but in this pursuit, they manage to bring about God's predetermined plan. God controls every natural event, and his sustained support is required for the universe simply to continue. Calvin's attitude toward power is obviously connected to his doctrine of predestination, but it is also connected to his concept of sin. Calvin often describes sin as powerlessness: lethargy, sloth, indolence, weakness, coldness, collapse of vitality, and death in life. Power, on the other hand, is associated with energy, creativity, life, warmth and virtue (Bouwsma *Sixteenth-Century Portrait* 162).

In addition to these basic premises of Calvin's thinking, two particular perils led Calvin to formulate his particular political theories—Catholicism and radical reform. In fact, much of the *Institutes* reads like an extended criticism of, on the one hand, the trenchant conservatism of the Catholics and, on the other hand, the extremism of the radicals. As we have seen, Calvin saw in Catholicism an intimate link between false doctrine, incorrect practice, abusive political power, and the death of the spirit. Because religious doctrine and practice are so important, the truth must be safeguarded, and this function must be entrusted to the reformed Church. While Calvin's criticism of Catholicism is well-known, his

criticism of radical reformers is even more important because the radicals extended the logic of Calvin's own soteriology into a criticism of the entire social order. For instance, Calvin and other reformers rejected meaningless religious ceremonies—those which the participants could not understand or accept voluntarily. The Anabaptists applied this principle in repudiating infant baptism. In rejecting such a baptism, however, they necessarily renounced the concept of a national church composed of all citizens regardless of their state of regeneration. In rejecting a national church and advocating sectarian congregations instead, Anabaptists undermined the ideological prop of the state—the state church—encouraged pluralism, and engendered potential anarchy. Other radical reformers rejected institutions which virtually all governments relied upon: coercion, non-Mosaic law, war, hierarchical social structure, or private property—many of these doctrines resulting in terrifying anarchy or rebellion, such as The Peasant's War and the rebellion at Münster.<sup>4</sup> In response to these threats and based on his basic commitments to the exercise of spiritual power in the world, Calvin developed a political theory dominated by the value of ordered purity; that is, to preserving a pure church, infusing spiritual values and practice into social relations, and maintaining strict order.

Calvin justified these aims by establishing and then obliterating key distinctions in the institutions of church and state. The first important distinction was between the invisible church—the mystical body which "is actually in God's presence, into which no persons are received but those who are children of God . . . and true members of Christ"—and the visible church—the body of those who profess to worship God and take the sacraments (IV. i. 7). While the invisible church deserves our obedience, love, and respect, the members of that church

can never be known: "Because a small and contemptible number are hidden in a huge multitude and a few grains of wheat are covered by a pile of chaff, we must leave to God alone the knowledge of his church, whose foundation is his secret election" (IV. i. 2). Thus, every visible local church undoubtedly is composed of numerous hypocrites and may contain none of the elect. Having established such a distinction, however, Calvin eroded the dividing wall by privileging the *true* visible church and claiming for that church an authority comparable to that of the mystical body of invisible believers. The true church is not to be discerned by its blameless purity, nor by evidence of spiritual awakening, nor by revivals, but by doctrine and ritual in accordance with the Bible: "Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments instituted according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists" (IV. i. 9). Similarly, while the status of the heart cannot be known, individuals can be recognized as members of the true church—and thus as among the elect—simply by declaring agreement with the precepts of the church: "Individual men who, by their profession of religion, are reckoned within such churches, even though they may actually be strangers to the church, still in a sense belong to it until they have been rejected by public judgment" (IV. i. 9).<sup>5</sup> For all intents and purposes, then, Calvin equates the most personal of experiences with the most external of measurements, and the most mystical of communities with a body bound primarily by common declarations. In this way, the true visible church has all the authority of the invisible church. Its ministers, who act as representatives of God, must be heeded, for "we hear his ministers speaking just as if [God] himself spoke" (IV. i. 5). Indeed, "those who spurn the spiritual food, divinely extended to them though the hand of the

church, deserve to perish in famine and hunger" (IV. i. 5). Thus, the true believer never severs himself from the church: "Separation from the church is the denial of God and Christ" (IV. i. 10). Furthermore, while the infallibility of the Catholic Church may be indefensible, that of the reformed Church is not:

Therefore, that no man may stubbornly despise the judgment of the church, or think it immaterial that he has been condemned by the vote of the believers, the Lord testifies that such judgment by believers is nothing but the proclamation of his own sentence, and that whatever they have done on earth is ratified in heaven. . . . They cannot err or disagree with God's judgment, for they judge solely according to God's law, which is no uncertain or earthly opinion but God's holy will and heavenly oracle (IV. xi. 2).

Calvin, then, was forced to distinguish and demolish the distinction between visible and invisible church because of his commitment to his mode of reform; that is, to separation from the Catholic church while still advocating a national church, to reform which appealed to both potentially anarchic values and a rigid social order. If Calvin had admitted that the elect can be known by outward signs of internal regeneration, he would have been forced to advocate the separatism of the radicals: only the truly elect would be admitted to churches, and since only the few are elect, the church would no longer be co-extensive with the entire nation but would be relegated to a sectarian role. On the other hand, if the elect cannot be known and if doctrine is not a valid distinguishing characteristic for determining the true church, Calvin would be forced to advocate tolerance and pluralism. Either way, the church would be relegated to a secondary role in society. By privileging the true church and basing knowledge of that church on the principle of conformity to scripture, Calvin could justify the reformers' separation from Catholicism while denying the radicals' right to separate from a national Protestant church.

While Calvin's ecclesiology warrants a national reformed church, it does not suffice in itself to justify the kind of role in society which Calvin envisioned. To accomplish this, Calvin again established and then destroyed a key distinction—this time between church and state. First, Calvin posited the concept of dual jurisdiction—the spiritual and the temporal: "Christ's spiritual Kingdom and the civil jurisdiction are things completely distinct" (IV. xx. 1). On the one hand, as we have seen, the church rules over the spiritual domain by means of admonition, excommunication, the sacraments, and the preaching of the word. Though the true church has the power of the keys of heaven, it enforces its decrees not through coercion, but through voluntary persuasion. The temporal domain, on the other hand, has power over the outward behavior of man and may employ coercion to achieve its end. Accordingly, in a well-regulated city, the civil authorities punish drunkenness with imprisonment, stripes, or a fine; meanwhile, the church admonishes, denies communion, or excommunicates the sinner until he has repented (IV. xi. 3).

Although, through union with Christ, all believers are free in spirit or conscience, our outward actions are almost entirely subject to temporal authority. Because God controls all political events, civil authorities are appointed by God: "They have a mandate from God, have been invested with divine authority, and are wholly God's representatives, in a manner, acting as his vice-regents (IV. xx. 4). Thus, to disobey a ruler is to disobey God: "The magistrate cannot be resisted without God being resisted at the same time. . . God is armed mightily to avenge this contempt toward himself" (IV. xx. 23). Indeed, private citizens should not even presume to intrude in public affairs unless specifically called upon by the magistrates. Because God is in complete

control of the political realm, even evil rulers must not be resisted, for they are God's punishment for our own misdeeds:

If we are cruelly tormented by a savage prince, if we are greedily despoiled by one who is avaricious or wanton, if we are neglected by a slothful one, if finally we are vexed for piety's sake by one who is impious and sacrilegious, let us first be mindful of our own misdeed, which without doubt are chastised by such whips of the Lord (IV. xx. 29).

There are only two exceptions to this principle of obedient non-resistance. First, authorities whose appointed duty is to restrain the power of the king—for instance, legislative assemblies—must resist a king in order to protect the people from the crimes of the king. Second, though believers may not rebel, they must passively disobey any laws which actually contravene God's law; that is, they must "suffer anything rather than turn aside from piety. . . . We should not enslave ourselves to the wicked desires of men—much less be subject to their impiety" (IV. xx. 32). By separating church and state and by advocating obedience except under carefully defined situations, Calvin allows for a certain realm of autonomy—that of conscience—within an overwhelmingly ordered state.

While Calvin demanded ecclesiastical autonomy, he also desired ecclesiastical influence, and he did not trust human volition to ensure this power. As a result, the second element of Calvin's political theory punctures the airtight dualism of the concept of dual jurisdiction. According to this second element, the magistrate has the duty of establishing and preserving the true church: "I now commit to civil government the duty of rightly establishing religion" (IV. xx. 3). Consequently, the distinction between church and state is blurred. For instance, The Ordinances for the Supervision of the Churches in Genevan-controlled

territory were drawn up not only by the Genevan ministers but also "as much at [the magistrates'] counsel and demand," and they were formally approved by both ecclesiastical and civil authorities ("Ordinances" 76). The Ordinances governed a wide range of behavior, including non-attendance, tardiness or inattention at church services, failure to send children to catechism, reversion to Catholic "superstitions," blasphemy, contradiction of the Word of God, drunkenness, gambling, fornication, dissolute songs, and excessive noise or disputes. These sins or crimes involved both "voluntary" and coercive punishments—admonitions, fines, imprisonment, the pillory, and corporal punishment—and these punishments were inflicted by both civil and religious authorities.

As a result of these ideas and practices, there were often battles between the disciplinary arm of the Church—the Consistory—and the magistrates for control over Genevan affairs. However, when the two arms worked together, the result was virtual authoritarianism. Conveying not human teaching, but the divine Word, the church had to be obeyed in both word and deed. If one resisted the voluntary persuasion of the minister, he would find himself hauled before the magistrates and compelled to submit. In addition to the above-mentioned crimes, such offenses as incorrect apparel, issuing unauthorized publications, and parents' choice of sinful names for their children were punished (Durant 474). Confessions were often extracted by torture, and judgments rendered without significant proof (Graham 163-173). Open criticism of Calvin or the *Institutes* resulted in public humiliation and punishment (Wendel 84-92). Rejection of core Christian doctrines, such as the Trinity, resulted in death. In

short, absolute submission of both mind and body was required of Genevan residents.<sup>6</sup>

Calvin's political theories may have been motivated by a desire to preserve the pure piety implied in God's Word, but the result was a social system which conflicted deeply with that very piety. For instance, while Calvin's soteriology implies human incapacity and God's control, his political ideas emphasize the ability of a group of individuals to transform and elevate both themselves and their society. His soteriology establishes the absolute autonomy of the conscience; it aims to liberate the individual from the abusive authority of man, to bring the whole man into direct, sincere relationship with God, to ground the life of man in a personal, meaningful, authentic spiritual experience. His politics, on the other hand, divides the conscience from the body, requiring absolute conformity in externals. Even the realm of the conscience is subjected to the dictates of a church defined essentially by outward profession and ritual and supported by the power of the sword. How, then, could one distinguish between Calvinist and Catholic rule? To many of Calvin's critics, the reproaches which Calvin had leveled against intolerant Catholics seemed equally applicable to Calvin himself: "They treat us as persons guilty of schism and heresy because we preach a doctrine unlike theirs, do not obey their laws, and hold our separate assemblies for prayers, baptism and the celebration of the Supper, and other holy activities" (IV. ii. 5). Indeed, to radical reformers, who saw Calvin's theology as not simply oppressive but as actually incorrect on some key points, Calvin's complaints about Catholic persecution must have seemed apropos:

Here are persons who persecute the doctrine of Christ with fire and sword, who permit no man with impunity to speak sincerely of Christ, who in every possible way impede the course of truth,



who strenuously resist our attempts to raise the Church from the distressed condition into which they have brought her, who suspect all those who take a deep and pious interest in the welfare of the Church, and either keep them out of the ministry, or, if they have been admitted, thrust them out ("Necessity of Reforming" 208-9).<sup>7</sup>

### **The Ground of Knowledge: *Sola Scriptura***

Calvin's defense against such accusations appealed ultimately to a neutral authority—God. Genevan authorities were advocating not just conformity, but conformity to the will of God. Genevan magistrates were defending not simply a state church, but the true church which preached the true doctrine. No *man* has a right to impose upon another's conscience, but God, speaking through his representatives, does. No man is infallible, but the true church, preaching the true Word of God, cannot err. One must not separate from the true church, but one should separate from the false church. In this way, Calvin's entire system ultimately devolves into the problem of knowledge and especially of hermeneutics. If God's will is to be the basis of distinguishing valid from invalid political-ecclesiastical doctrine and practice, how can we know that will? If we can find an objective source for such knowledge, how can we rightly interpret that source?

Calvin's sociology is based on a straightforward dogmatism; that is, on a theory of Scripture as the infallible and unambiguous Word of God, from which doctrinal truths may be known with certainty and applied directly to the human situation. Many of Calvin's statements regarding the Bible—for instance, in his commentary on 2 Timothy 3:16—support such a view:

We know that God has spoken to us and are fully convinced that the prophets did not speak of themselves, but as organs of the Holy Spirit uttered only that which they had been commissioned

from heaven to declare. . . . The Law and the prophets are not teachings handed on at the pleasure of men or produced by men's minds as their source, but are dictated by the Holy Spirit. . . . Moses and the prophets did not utter rashly and at random what we received from them, but, speaking by God's impulse, they boldly and fearlessly testified the truth that it was the mouth of the Lord that spoke through them. . . . We owe to the Scripture the same reverence as we owe to God, since it has its only source in Him and has nothing of human origin mixed with it (330).

Not only did the Holy Spirit mechanically dictate the Bible to the prophets, but He did so with perfect clarity: "For by his Word, God rendered faith unambiguous forever, a faith that should be superior to all human opinion" (I. vi. 2). Indeed, such clarity is a necessary condition for saving faith: "As faith is not content with a doubtful and changeable opinion, so it is not content with an obscure and confused conception; but requires full and fixed certainty" (III. ii. 15). Furthermore, Calvin's exegetical motto—*brevitas et facilitas*—is based, as Gamble observes, on the "clear brevity of the Scriptures. The Word of God is in its meanings concise—there are no pluralities of interpretations" ("*Brevitas*" 15). Based on this view of Scripture, Calvin is justified in arguing that the true doctrine can be clearly known and employed as an authoritative basis for distinguishing the true from the false church.<sup>8</sup>

While such dogmatism is one of the most important legacies of Calvinism, this view of Scriptural certainty is undercut by the same force which conflicted with Calvin's authoritarian social theories—Calvinist piety. In essence, Calvin sees epistemological problems as rooted in man's finite and fallen nature. Because of this deficient standpoint, humans can gain no clear and certain apprehension of God based on their own efforts. Human reason and tradition are of little help, for they are based on human pre-understandings divorced from God's truth. If men could know themselves truly, they could then gain some

understanding of God, but they can only know themselves if they first come to some true knowledge of God. Trapped within this circle of ignorance, lacking any principles grounded in ultimate reality, conceiving of God only through the distorted lenses of our own pre-understandings, we can only spin out "dreams and specters of our own brains" in place of the true God (I. v. 15):

In seeking God, miserable men do not rise above themselves as they should, but measure him by the yardstick of their own carnal stupidity, and neglect sound investigation; thus out of curiosity they fly off into empty speculations. They do not therefore apprehend God as he offers himself, but imagine him as they have fashioned him in their own presumption. When this gulf opens, in whatever direction they move their feet, they cannot but plunge headlong into ruin. . . . They are worshipping not God but a figment and dream of their own heart (I. iv. 1).

In order to practice true religion, humans must ground their epistemology in a transcendent standard, God: "True religion ought to be conformed to God's will as to a universal rule; that God ever remains like himself, and is not a specter or phantasm to be transformed according to anyone's whim" (I. iv. 3). This standard is provided to us through the Scriptures, which function as a touchstone that cuts through human finitude and grounds human knowledge in an eternal standpoint. Consistent with his conviction of human finitude and depravity, Calvin refuses to follow the traditional route of apologetics; that is, to present rational reasons in support of the inspiration of the Bible. Rather, Scripture evinces "its own truth as white and black do of their color, or sweet and bitter things do of their taste" (I. vii. 2). Finite and fallen, humans lack the ability to sense such colors or tastes, just as blind men lack the ability to see the sunlight which shines upon us all (II. ii. 21). Only through the inward "testimony of the Spirit" can the Bible possess the "certainty it deserves with us":

For even if it wins reverence for itself by its own majesty, it seriously affects us only when it is sealed upon our hearts through the Spirit. Therefore, illumined by his power, we believe neither by our own nor by anyone else's judgment that Scripture is from God; but above human judgment we affirm with utter certainty (just as if we were gazing upon the majesty of God himself) that it has flowed to us from the very mouth of God by the ministry of men (I. vii. 5).

While the Scripture may form the superstructure for Calvinist doctrine, then, the testimony of the Holy Spirit forms the foundation of the entire edifice. Thus, as R. Davies has shown, Calvin's epistemology ultimately rests on personal, mystical inspiration (147-151).

Unfortunately for Calvin, the personal testimony of the Spirit was the very basis upon which radical reformers rejected social authority. If the promptings of the Spirit validate the Scriptures, why not be ruled directly in all matters by the greater authority, the Holy Spirit, rather than heed the "dead and killing letter" (I. ix. 1)? To Calvin, these people were fanatics—caught within their own finitude but convinced of their own eternal standpoint and thus deluded by projections of their own minds. Determined to maintain both the piety of his soteriology and the ordered purity of his sociology, Calvin countered the radicals by arguing that the Word and Spirit are inseparably bound:

By a kind of mutual bond the Lord has joined together the certainty of his Word and of his Spirit so that the perfect religion of the Word may abide in our minds when the Spirit, who causes us to contemplate God's face, shines; and that we in turn embrace the Spirit with no fear of being deceived when we recognize him in his own image, namely, in the Word (I. ix. 3).

Because the Word and Spirit are inseparable, the inner prompting must conform to the Word of God, or else they are not from above. As Floor succinctly states, "The Holy Spirit, to which all things are subjected, is itself subjected to the Scriptures" (184).

### Calvin's Hermeneutics: The Search for a Grounding Principle

While this last formulation seems to contain the anarchic subjectivism of the radicals by confining the Spirit within the Word, a further problem remained for Calvin—interpreting the Word. As we shall see, Calvin's hermeneutics reveal most clearly the problematic divisions within his thought. Like the other elements of his epistemology, Calvin's hermeneutical principles are based on his piety; that is, on the problem of a finite, fallen creature trying to understand the perfect transcendent deity. In many respects, this problem stems from the inadequacy of human language and thought: "Plainly neither the mind is able to conceive nor the tongue express" the mysteries of God, whose essence is incomprehensible (IV. xvii. 7). To deal with such limitations, God adapts his revelation to suit our linguistic and cognitive frameworks: "Because our weakness does not attain to his exalted state, the description of him that is given to us must be accommodated to our capacity so that we may understand it. Now the mode of accommodation is for him to represent himself not as he is in himself, but as he seems to us " (I. xvii. 13). In fact, God communicates in an accommodated fashion not only through the Scriptures, but also through Christ, nature and the institutions of church and state (Battles 32-37). Because divine communication is accommodated to our finite comprehension, there is an inherent uncertainty in drawing inferences from or understanding the "true" or "objective" meaning of Scripture, which should not be interpreted literally.

Such interpretative problems are compounded by the historically bound nature of human understanding. The understanding of finite humans is conditioned and distorted by historical circumstances. The limitation of finitude

extends even to the holy prophets themselves—despite their being described by Calvin as scribes and organs of the Holy Spirit: "However remarkable the knowledge in which they excelled, inasmuch as they had, of necessity, to submit to the common tutelage of the people, they are also to be classified as children. Finally, no one then possessed discernment so clear as to be unaffected by the obscurity of the time" (II. xi. 6). Such distorting influences not only erode the clarity of inspired Scripture, but also place a burden on the interpreter, who, from the perspective of the present, must strive to understand the originally intended meaning of a text written amidst an alien culture. Because God has taught his people in diverse ways "according to the diversity of the times" and because "the present order differs very much from what existed in former times," it is obvious that the interpreter may have to bridge a huge historical chasm to step outside of his own assumptions and discover the originally intended meaning of the Scriptures (IV. viii. 5). Because of such distorting influences, our understanding of divine truth is fundamentally clouded: we "see in a mirror dimly" (I Cor. 13:12), and our "ignorance is an obstacle and a hindrance," forever preventing us "from coming as near as was to be desired" (III. ii. 20).

Indeed, it would be inaccurate even to view theological knowledge as a series of propositions, however symbolic in nature, regarding the deity. Theology is more precisely an interpersonal relationship. On the receiving end of this personal communication, humans are interested less in objective facts than in meaning, in how God appears *to us*, in an experience of God which transforms the soul. For instance, Calvin criticizes those who assent to the existence of God and the inspiration of the Bible merely as objective data. These

people are "no better than the devils" because their assent "does not at all penetrate to the heart itself, there to remain fixed" (III. ii. 10). Rather, "we are called to a knowledge of God" which transforms the subject and "takes root in the heart"; therefore, we must seek to discover God not in "his essence"—that is, as he objectively is outside of the human realm of meaning—but rather "in his works whereby he renders himself near and familiar" (I. v. 9). On the sending end of the communication, God does not transmit facts *about* himself, but "in some manner communicates himself" (I. v. 9). Consequently, the believer's "recognition of [God] consists more in living experience than in vain and high-flown speculation" (I. x. 2). Doctrine, as Richard Prust observes, "is not a rational (i.e. verbal) comprehension of divine matters," and revelation is not "an object for our cognisance"; rather, revelation "must itself be lived through, felt directly, felt pre-linguistically. Revelation of the true doctrine is the awareness of being-acted-upon by God" (321).

Furthermore, as the medium of this person-to-person communication, the Scriptures cannot be precisely identified with "the living words of God" (I. vii. 1). Indeed, though Calvin frequently equates the Scriptures with the Word of God, there is an important distinction between the two, for the Word is more accurately the person of Christ:

Certainly, when God's word is set before us in Scripture it would be the height of absurdity to imagine a merely fleeting and vanishing utterance, which, cast forth into the air, projects itself outside of God; and both the oracles announced to the patriarchs and all prophecies were of this sort. Rather, "Word" means the everlasting Wisdom, residing with God, from which all oracles and all prophecies go forth (I. xiii. 7).

When used in reference to Scriptures, the Word "is the order or mandate of the Son, who is himself the eternal and essential Word of the Father" (I. xiii. 7).

Thus, the Scriptures are not themselves the Word, but provide an image or "mirror" which may lead us to contemplate God or the essential Word, just as nature reflects God's majesty and as Christ was the most perfect representation of the Father (III. ii. 6, IV. viii. 7)). The most important element of this reflection is not the doctrinal propositions contained in the Scriptures, but the person behind the propositions—the essential Word, Christ. As Torrance summarizes,

Images in our thought and speech of God, therefore, do not have a mimetic but only a signitive relation to the Truth of God; somehow as they direct us to look at God or rather listen to him, the Divine Truth breaks through to us in such a way that we can distinguish him from the forms of thought and speech we use of him. Their function is ostensive and persuasive, not descriptive (*Hermeneutics* 92).

Scripture, nature, Christ, church, and state—all these modes of God's manifestation function, like a minister's preaching, to put the individual "into the centre of things where the force that induced conviction arose directly and immediately" out of the truth of God (Torrance, *Hermeneutics* 125).

Given the problem of human finitude—the distorting influence of language and history—and given the fact that theological knowledge is not, properly speaking, a series of propositions, how can the Bible be properly interpreted to provide accurate knowledge—knowledge which functions as a touchstone, enabling the believer to evaluate the inner testimony of the Spirit, to know the true church from the false, and to reject the subjectivism of the radicals? Calvin offers several methodological suggestions to guide believers. As Kraus outlines, interpreters should understand the intentions of the author; take into account the historical circumstances under which the text was composed; focus on the apparent meaning, also called the "original meaning,



true meaning, simple meaning, or grammatical meaning"; understand the context of the passage within the given book of the Bible and within the Bible as a whole; reject both slavishly literal interpretations and fancifully allegorical interpretations;<sup>9</sup> recognize metaphorical expression and other rhetorical figures; and seek the person of Christ in the Scriptures (13-17). Ultimately, however, there are no methodological guarantees of correct interpretation. Rather, the believer must approach the Scriptures with humility and openness, relying finally upon the Holy Spirit as a guide. Indeed, as Calvin argues in his commentary on I Corinthians 2:14, "the Spirit of God, from whom the teaching of the Gospel comes, is the *only* true interpreter for opening it up to us" (italics mine):

In the mysteries of the faith common sense is not our advisor, but with quiet teachableness and the spirit of gentleness. . . we receive the doctrine given from heaven. . . . After diligently meditating upon [Scripture], we embrace the meaning which the Spirit of God offers (IV. xvii. 25).

In bringing an openness to the study of Scripture, we must not "bring our own native shrewdness to the understanding of it" (Commentary II Peter 1: 20), but must allow the Spirit to break through the prison wall of our preconceptions.<sup>10</sup> Thus, in contrast to the simple dogmatism—the idea that the Scriptures are unambiguous, certain, and unproblematic for the sake of deriving correct propositions and application—which he often espoused and employed to support an authoritarian church-state, Calvin also advocated what we shall dub an open hermeneutics—the idea that the Word cannot be equated with propositions, taken literally, or employed to stake a claim to ultimate reality, but must be approached with humility and openness, used as a means to seek a

living experience with a communicating deity, and understood through both intellectual resources and the conviction of the Holy Spirit.<sup>11</sup>

Like other elements of his piety, Calvin's hermeneutics can be taken in a radical direction, a route which he strenuously attempted to blockade. If the Scriptures are essentially opaque and if believers have private access to a higher authority, one which can cut through human finitude and render those Scriptures apparent, then the individual has tremendous potential. This hermeneutics could go so far as to question the interpretative authority of the state church and privilege in its stead the private vision, to justify the believer in advocating with divine confidence the most extreme of political positions based on this inspired interpretation. From this celestial viewpoint, stripped of the presuppositions which blind his fellow man, the elect individual can stand independent of his society and pronounce prophetic judgment upon that society, proclamations which call into question all conventional arrangements, wisdom, and doctrine. For Calvin, such subjective dogmatism threatens not only the disruption of social order but also nihilism, for then the Scriptures—the divine Word which should lift us out of our prison of finitude—could come to mean whatever fanatics may fabricate in their own brains; that is, what we consider to be the conviction of the Spirit may actually be the confirming voice of our own most cherished biases and delusions.

One of Calvin's most detailed responses to this problem can be found in his Commentary on I John 4:1. Here Calvin reiterates his mantra that ministers and their doctrine must be evaluated according to God's Word. Admitting the difficulty of correctly interpreting the Word, Calvin appeals to the Holy Spirit as the interpretive authority: "But unless the Spirit of wisdom is present, there is

little or no profit in having God's Word in our hands, for its meaning will not be certain to us." However, Calvin is uncomfortable with such an open-ended proposition, so he ties the whole argument back into a circle, making the Word the authority for interpreting the prompting of the Spirit: "But the Spirit will only guide us to true discrimination if we subject all our thoughts to the Word." Here Calvin appears to be offering a dialectic, a balance between Word and Spirit, or a precarious kind of circular authority.

Aware of the unsettled nature of such a formulation, Calvin develops his hermeneutics in a more conservative direction, one involving dialogue as a moderating principle. If humans are fundamentally limited in their ability to rise above their milieu or to understand and communicate divine truth; if the Scriptures consist not in a series of objective propositions regarding ultimate reality but in a sometimes dim reflection leading us to an incommunicable experience of the living God; if humans must seek the truth through humility and reliance upon the potentially vague testimony of the Holy Spirit—if, in short, we can never fully rise above our finitude and fallenness—then interpretations of the Scripture are inherently subject to doubt and should be confirmed through dialogue within a community of interpreters, a brotherhood of spiritual seekers. Thus, Calvin continues his commentary on I John 4:1 by admitting that the Word-Spirit circle is an unstable foundation: "Nothing will ever be settled as certain and the whole of religion will waver." Furthermore, reliance upon the Spirit presents the "danger of fanatical men arising and presumptuously claiming that they are endued with the Spirit of God." Consequently, Calvin advocates first a private test of doctrine, in which "each one settles his own faith and safely rests in that doctrine which he knows has come from God." Next, doctrine

should be given a public trial, which "relates to the common consent and *politeia* of the Church. . . . It is a necessary remedy that believers shall meet together and seek a way of godly and pure agreement." As a corollary to this communitarian methodology—and despite the modernism of his entire project—Calvin advocates a dialogue with traditional interpretations in order to "distinguish the objective reality of the Truth from the subjective conditions of the present generation" (Torrance, *Hermeneutics* 71).

Like the other elements of Calvin's piety, this humble, progressive communitarianism was easily transformed into authoritarianism within the politically charged atmosphere of the Reformation and by Calvin's deep fear of disorder. For instance, in his commentary on Acts 8:31, Calvin advocates not dialogue but monologue—with ecclesiastical authorities in control of exegesis:

We must make use of all the aids which the Lord sets before us for the understanding of Scripture. Fanatics seek inspiration from heaven, and at the same time despise the minister of God, by whose hand they ought to have been ruled. Others, relying on their own penetrating insight, do not deign to hear anybody or to read any commentaries. But God does not wish the aids, which He appointed for us, to be despised, and does not allow contempt of them to go unpunished. And we must keep in mind here, that not only is Scripture given to us, but interpreters and teachers are also added to help us.

In the daily life of Geneva, this meant that God would punish those who deviate from Calvin's orthodoxy, and it was the responsibility of the church-state to enforce that punishment.

Of course, like Calvin's other attempts to imprison subjectivism, radicalism, and individualism, this last formulation leads to either circular reasoning or an open door for the Spirit. God's true ministers must be obeyed, but, in accordance with the very basis of the Reformation, believers must also

evaluate the doctrine and spirit of that minister. The basis for such an evaluation is the Word, and our authority in interpreting the Word is the Spirit. If we end this chain with the Spirit, we are left with the threat of subjectivism; if we submit our interpretation to the authority of the church, we beg the question and end in the potential for legalism and authoritarianism. Clearly, though Calvin desired "to tread a fine line, balancing the objective and the subjective" (Muller 22), his theology easily slid to one extreme or the other.

Calvin's hermeneutics, then, led in a number of potential directions: toward an objectivist dogmatism, which asserts that the Scriptures are objectively unambiguous and valid for deriving correct propositions about God, dogmas which must be upheld by the power of the sword; toward a subjectivist dogmatism, which asserts that one can arrive at a similar certainty through the self-authenticating touch of the Spirit within the individual; and an open hermeneutics, which denies a direct correlation between a theological proposition and a living reality, advocates openness to unforeseen meaning in the Scripture, and relies heavily on the guidance of the Spirit and possibly a community of equals to arrive at conditional truths which lead the individual into direct relationship with God.

## Chapter 2

### The Puritan Synthesis: Calvin Americanized

Calvin's theology was one of great possibility and peril. In holding out the human potential to rise (via grace) above our limitations of history, language, and depravity, Calvinism was greatly empowering. Deeply rent by contradictory impulses, however, it was not entirely clear whom Calvinism would empower. The double-edged sword of the Word and Spirit could strengthen the individual against society or vice versa. For example, in Geneva, Christopher Goodman, a Calvinist exile from the reign of Catholic Queen Mary, argued that the king is subject to God's will and that the people have the right to depose the ungodly ruler in order to establish a righteous government. Other writers developed Calvinism—and in the process broke with Calvin—in the direction of the concept of natural rights, Constitutionalism, or radical individualism.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, as the history of Calvinism in Scotland illustrates, the sword could be used both ways—as a basis not only for courageous resistance to the Queen Regent of Scotland but also for theocratic intolerance of dissent within Presbyterian Scotland.<sup>2</sup> Most Calvinist-inspired thought and practice tended to follow the Westminster Confession in minimizing Calvin's individualistic side and privileging conformity and social order: "They, who upon pretense of Christian liberty, shall oppose any lawful power, or the lawful exercise of it, whether it be civil or ecclesiastical, resist the ordinance of God. . . . They may lawfully be called to account and proceeded against by the censures of the Church, and by the power of the civil magistrate" (qtd. in Mosse 14-15). One exception to this generalization were the Anglo-American Puritans, who

carefully tried to balance piety with a pure social order through the structure of non-separating congregationalism. In New England, Puritans employed this ecclesiastical structure but also cemented the bond between the individual and the church-state and stifled divergence through the doctrine of the covenant and by a hermeneutics and rhetoric which linked the redemption of the self, the church, and the state in a common mission. The result was something which astounded contemporaries—a powerfully authoritarian church-state which thrived within a voluntaristic framework.

### **Calvinism and the Puritan Synthesis: Non-separating Congregationalism**

As I indicate in chapter 1, Calvin's thought is deeply rent between the ideals of purity and authenticity. If the church is to remain pure, it must discipline its members. However, since many of these members would undoubtedly be unregenerate, they would merely conform to social pressure and would not experience the sincere faith that lay at the heart of the Reformation. The Puritans who eventually fled to America contrived, in parallel with the English Independents, an effective solution to this problem—the church structure called congregationalism. According to this scheme, churches formed self-contained units, not subject to the authority of what to them seemed the corrupt, Catholicized Anglican hierarchy. Furthermore, these churches were composed solely of the elect. No one was forced to join; only the proven elect were allowed in, and any reprobate who had slipped past the watchful eyes of the elders and ministers was excommunicated once he had demonstrated his true status. To avoid corrupting influences, the regenerate laymen—not the ecclesiastical elite—were empowered to elect ministers, make financial decisions,

set policy, and even determine doctrinal orthodoxy. Thus, rejecting a national church in favor of a sect, a voluntary combination of like-minded believers, the Puritans could maintain strict discipline which stemmed not from hypocritical conformity to society, but from sincere love of God.

Though congregationalism consistently affirmed the central Calvinist values of purity and piety, it involved several assumptions which Calvin had rejected. First, it implied that one could know who is saved and who is damned. Second, it vested immense power with laymen, a level of democratic control which disturbed Calvin. Third, congregationalism involved separation from the national church. During the Reformation, such a divorce was tantamount to open rebellion, which the order-loving Calvin repudiated. Finally, while Calvin believed that no social organization was the absolutely correct one, the Puritans believed they could and should imitate the purity of the primitive, New Testament church.<sup>3</sup>

Forming a pure, exclusive community, striving for direct communion with God, rejecting historical forces in order to recreate the New Testament community, the Puritans were a classic sect and might, like many a sect, have played a minor role in history had they not inherited one key value from Calvin—a commitment to the world. For while many sects are indifferent or antagonistic to the world, the Puritans sought to redeem it, to establish the City of God on earth. This ideal, however, placed the Puritans in an awkward position. On the one hand, they were purists and separatists, deriving energy from opposition to a corrupt authority. Combined with their commitment to conquer the world for Christ, these attitudes were a recipe for a bloodbath, with God's soldiers lined up against the "corrupt" Anglicans in a holy war to cleanse



England. On the other hand, the Puritans also inherited Calvin's commitment to orderly obedience to civil authorities, who were installed by the Sovereign God (see pages 22-27 above).

With such incompatible and uncompromising values, many Puritans discovered the perfect resolution—escape to America. By fleeing to the New World, the Puritans could establish a city upon a hill, a pure, separate community of the elect, but claim to be obedient to both the established government and the established church. Though this claim of a *nonseparating* congregationalism was largely false—the Puritans were not simply separating from the Anglican authorities but physically separating themselves from virtually all royal control—they could still espouse absolute obedience to authority, absolute purity of ecclesiastical doctrine and practice, and absolute respect for the authentic piety of the individual.

### **The Radical Answer**

Built upon a contradictory foundation and set in an unforgiving wilderness, Puritan New England was in constant need of self-reflection to determine if it was being true to itself and its founding ideals.<sup>4</sup> This self-interpretation involved a hermeneutic and political challenge of the first order, and in working through this challenge, the Puritans employed and transformed modes of understanding which they had inherited from Calvin.

If the most pressing question for the Puritans was whether they were going in the right direction, they answered that question in several different ways. The answer and the supporting hermeneutic which eventually came to direct New England can best be understood in light of the answers which failed

to dominate—the radical critique of the separatists, Baptists, Fifth Monarchists, spiritists, and Quakers, all of whom employed Puritan assumptions to criticize Puritan institutions.<sup>5</sup>

Assuming that the Scriptures were unambiguous and valid for deriving correct propositions and ecclesiastical practice, the separatists, Baptists, and Fifth Monarchists were united with mainstream Puritans in their acceptance of Calvin's objective, dogmatic hermeneutics, their goal of a pure social order directed by God himself, and their willingness to separate from or even battle against the society that refused to conform to this pure order. Aiming for absolute purity of worship, the separatists, like the original Puritans, sought to recreate the New Testament church and refused to attend or even associate with those Puritan churches which were not absolutely pure, an act of defiance toward the community. The Baptists rejected the Puritans' use of infant baptism, a practice which served to bind the community but which contradicted the primacy of conscious volition in the process of justification. The Fifth Monarchists agreed with mainstream Puritans that Christ's return was imminent and advocated the precipitation of His kingdom through strict adherence to the Mosaic code and, if necessary, violent revolt. Individualistic and counter-cultural, each of these groups critiqued Puritan society by appealing to the very assumptions upon which the colony had been founded—purity of worship, authenticity in the religious experience, and millenarianism—and by contrasting those goals with actual practice.

These above-mentioned radical groups were based on Calvin's objective dogmatism and on sectarian ideals of purity on which Puritanism had been founded. Other, more pervasive radical groups sprang from the ambiguous

nature of Calvinist justification, regeneration, and sanctification, and appealed to the subjective basis of Calvin's hermeneutics. Concerned essentially with the believer's state of being, Calvin had asserted that regeneration transformed the individual radically, that the believer was somehow united with Christ through the indwelling Holy Spirit, and that God could arbitrarily overrule the natural order in touching the believer with grace (see pages 10-12 above). The fundamental basis of Calvin's epistemology was a self-authenticating experience in the heart (see pages 28 above). Furthermore, the Puritans claimed that one could know who is saved. Fired by these various notions, the radical spiritists, or antinomians as they were labeled by orthodox Puritans, pushed the Puritan soteriology to its conclusion. Exemplified by Ann Hutchinson, the radical spiritists "garnered strong lay support" (Gura, *A Glimpse* 67) and "pervaded many different aspects of Massachusetts society, everywhere undermining communal solidarity, everywhere disrupting ostensible colony harmony" (Ronald D. Cohen 485). At the heart of spiritism were various doctrines revolving around primacy of justification over sanctification and around the believer's mystical connection with the divine. At the point of regeneration, the convert is infused with grace in a virtual violation of the natural order of the universe. Neither learning, nor diligent effort, nor pure intentions caused this transformation—it was all the result of the arbitrary and mysterious will of God. Thus, a believer should be judged not by his learning or efforts, but by his own subjective experience. Good works should never be employed to evaluate one's status as a saint, for any requirement for good works was considered a legalistic reversion to Catholicism. In fact, social norms were seen not simply as void of spirituality, but as possibly contrary to God's spirit:

Many New England spiritists were convinced that, once a person was justified, the Son of God dictated his every action. Thus assured of their salvation, such radical Puritans acknowledged no law but Christ within them because the Holy Spirit dwells inside of each believer. . . . Unerring obedience to the Spirit put a divine perfection within man's reach (Gura, *A Glimpse* 60, 83).

In short, asserting a kind of direct revelation from God, the spiritists believed that following social norms instead of one's impulses is a form of disobedience to God, and some even held to pantheistic notions of God dwelling in all creatures. Applying the democratic assumptions on which Puritanism was founded, the spiritists asserted the equality of all believers, criticizing the ministers' claim of authority over others based solely on education, a criterion indicating reliance on human effort, not divine spark. They argued that this "reliance on a book learning. . . masked a deeper spiritual emptiness" (Gura, *A Glimpse* 71). Pushing these conclusions even further, many spiritists rejected all forms of outward worship and all unions of church and state, for no state could possibly claim authority in religious matters. This social egalitarianism was applied to domestic relations—husbands and wives, parents and children, slaves and masters were all equal in spirit and should be equal socially. Some of the most radical of spiritists threatened the foundations of traditional morality by rejecting a literal heaven and hell, the existence of sin and the immortality of the soul (Gura, *A Glimpse* 85-90). Furthermore, by allegorizing sin and hell as states of alienation, righteousness and heaven as states of union with God, the spiritists

implicitly challenged the eschatological premise on which the New England experiment was based. If there was to be no literal Last Judgment, that is, if Christ already had come in the hearts of his saints, why should Cotton, Shepard, Hooker, and their ministerial colleagues struggle to establish and maintain a Bible Commonwealth? This sobering question exposed the full challenge of the radical spiritists in Puritan New England (Gura, *A Glimpse* 91-92).

The most dangerous aspect of these spiritists was their use of Puritan assumptions to attack Puritan society. In the trial preceding her banishment, Ann Hutchinson argued from texts such as 2 Corinthian 3: 6—"The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life"—to justify the primacy of subjective impulses over Scriptural literalism, personal revelation over the teachings of the church. When asked how she knew that her impulses were of the Spirit, she responded powerfully:

- Mrs. H.        How did Abraham know that it was God that bid him offer his son, being a breach of the sixth commandment?  
 Dep. Gov.     By an immediate voice.  
 Mrs. H.        So to me by an immediate revelation.  
 Dep. Gov.     How! an immediate revelation.  
 Mrs. H.        By the voice of his own spirit to my soul ("The Examination of Mrs. Ann Hutchinson" 337).

In appealing to the self-authenticating experience of God, Hutchinson grounded her subjectivist dogmatism in the same assumption as Calvin had grounded his objectivist dogmatism.

Puritan radicalism culminated in the Quakers, who combined the subjectivism of the spiritists, the millennial fervor of the Fifth Monarchists, and the intense concern for purity of the separatists and Baptists. Gura summarizes the Quaker threat:

Unlike other Protestants, who believed that God's revelation to mankind was closed, the Quakers claimed that divine revelation was not yet complete and that they themselves, who could know God's will through their acknowledgment of the Inner Light, were divinely ordained messengers who bore witness to the unfolding truth. Aflame with a desire to convert all people to their beliefs, the Quakers marched on new England as they had on old, unafraid to challenge those who questioned the testimony of their faith. Willing, and often seemingly eager, to become martyrs for their cause, more than any other radicals of the 1650s they threaten to

undo three decades of foundation work for the New English Sion (*A Glimpse* 144).

Critical of either the Massachusetts authorities or of all authority, seeking an unearthly level purity or rejecting all socially-imposed categories, these sects posed a peculiar problem for the orthodox Puritans. They clearly threatened the Puritan order, but they were also based on Puritan assumptions, thus exposing the contradictions within the system. The orthodox system, while contradicting the radical elements, relied on them in significant ways. If man were not totally depraved, if the standards of purity were not so high, there would be no need for such draconian measures to keep him in line. But these very assumptions about depravity and purity led to the dangers of separatism. Similarly, if man were depraved but not open to the touch of grace, no amount of social pressure could possibly keep him in line. Thus, the hope of regeneration was necessary to the system, yet this very doctrine of grace led to the dangers of antinomianism. In other words, "the revolutionary dynamic within Puritanism unraveled by an internal logic of its own, whether extended against English bishops or Massachusetts theocrats" (Gura, *A Glimpse* 29).<sup>6</sup> It is not surprising, then, that New Englanders felt a considerable amount of sympathy and even support for the radicals (Gura, *A Glimpse* 24). Consequently, while the Puritan leaders had to reject the radicals' conclusions, they had to maintain their assumptions. They needed the fervor of the radicals, but had to control and channel those energies into acceptable directions.

## Containing Radicalism: The New England Covenant

There was a deep tension, then, between the various elements of Puritan power, but also deep interdependence. Because of such conflicts, Puritan New England might have splintered early had it not enjoyed certain advantages—ample economic opportunity, plenty of land for new settlers or for disgruntled emigrants banished from the colony, determined leaders, independence from outside powers, and a well-educated clergy. To this last group fell the formidable task of resolving these tensions within Puritanism, of channeling the anarchic potential of Puritanism into acceptable currents.

The linchpin of Puritan theology was the concept of the covenant, an idea applied with impressive dexterity to soteriology, ecclesiology, and politics.<sup>7</sup> A covenant, of course, is an agreement between two free parties. Neither party is forced into the agreement, but once they have covenanted, neither party is free to act as he pleases. A way of achieving reliability in a potentially chaotic world, the covenant is the only way in which omnipotence and impotence may meet on a basis of right rather than power. As a part of God's creation, man has no rights before the arbitrary will of God, but as a rational being, he may covenant with God. In this case, God gives up his position of raw power in favor of a legal standing, limiting himself to certain rules and granting certain rights to man (Perry Miller, *New England Mind* 376-377). John Winthrop, the dominant politician of first generation New England, stated the basic tenants of this doctrine in "A Model of Christian Charity," his dramatic sermon aboard the *Arabella* as the group approached their uncertain shores:

Thus stands the case between God and us. We are entered into covenant with Him for this work. We have taken out a commission. The lord has given us leave to draw our own articles;

we have promised to base our actions on these ends, and we have asked him for favor and blessing. Now if the Lord shall please to hear us, and bring us in peace to the place we desire, then he has ratified this covenant and sealed our commission, and will expect strict performance of the articles contained in it. But if we neglect to observe these articles, which are the ends we have propounded, and—dissembling with our God—shall embrace this present world and prosecute our carnal intentions, seeking great things for ourselves and our posterity, the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us and be revenged of such a perjured people, and He will make us know the price of the breach of such a covenant (115).

As this passage indicates, the human side of the bargain involves not simply mental assent to some propositions nor an experience of spiritual ecstasy, but a commitment toward sanctification, or a belief which produces the effort toward a moral life. The regenerate man is no longer free to pursue his own designs, but is committed to following God's law, and if he lacks this commitment, he never reaches a true covenant with God. Thus, while maintaining the primacy of faith over works, the Puritans countered the irrational and antinomian tendencies of the spiritists: man has an active responsibility to take in salvation; he does not simply wait for a bolt of grace. While man may be connected with God after justification, this union does not imply annihilation of the individual's ego; rather, man stands as an independent agent in the contract; and man may be assured of his salvation by both faith and an improved life. The Puritan thinkers, then, managed to maintain the Calvinist assumptions without being forced into radical conclusions.<sup>8</sup>

As the "A Model of Christian Charity" indicates, the theory of the covenant also had important implications for the state and the congregation. Just as men reach an agreement individually with God for the sake of salvation, so the Puritans had covenanted corporately to fulfill God's purposes socially. The church was the outlet for man's social duties, and since God commands us to



perform such duties, saints in covenant with God must form congregations. The key point here is that people cannot perform their duties outside of an organized community of believers. Thus, if a radical separatist refuses to join any church, he is not obeying God, and therefore he is probably not in covenant with Him. Through the theory of the church covenant, the Puritans managed to defend their brand of separatism while condemning the separatism which led to the individual rejecting the Puritan churches as impure. Through this theory, the Puritans also managed to combine three diverse values: "a desire to realize on earth the perfect church order, cleansed of corruption and purified of all unregeneracy. . . a desire to intensify the social bond. . . [and] the powerful sense of the individual" (Perry Miller, *New England Mind* 440).

As applied to New England society, the covenant was a powerful theory for disciplining the individualistic elements within Puritanism. Consistent with their voluntaristic assumptions, Puritan government was seen as a voluntary contract between the governed and the rulers. Any gross violation of the covenant, such as the ruler claiming to be above the law, would be a basis for canceling the contract. These limits to governmental power, however, were not ends in themselves and did not imply a free New England, for New England formed a special commonwealth, a community whose members had covenanted with each other for the sake of God's glory. Thus, not the liberty of the individual, but the glorification of God was the end of government. The inhabitants, then, freely joined the state and freely elected the magistrates, but having done so, they were not free to act in any way they chose, to question the prerogatives of the magistrates, or to attempt to limit the government's power. Since the end of government was God's glory, laws must be framed to achieve

righteousness more completely, not to protect the liberties of its inhabitants. Any attempt to increase these personal liberties stemmed not from a desire to obey God more fully, but from libertinism. When Puritan communities criticized the excess of governmental authority and demanded traditional English liberties, Governor Winthrop, in his "Speech to the General Court," defended himself and advocated complete submission to authorities by appealing to this covenant. Criticizing natural liberty—that is, the "liberty to evil as well as to good"—Winthrop advocated "civil or federal" liberty, which is constrained by "the covenant between God and man." The latter is maintained not by vigilant concern for one's rights or watchfulness over elected officials, but by "subjection to authority" (206-7). Equating liberty with obedience, Puritan political theory employed the power of the inhabitants' voluntary involvement in the commonwealth but was designed to keep this dynamism well under control.

### **Hermeneutics, Rhetoric and the National Mission**

The Puritans combined the doctrine of the covenant with a hermeneutic practice designed to maintain intense social cohesion within a voluntaristic framework. Puritans employed contradictory practices to achieve this end. On the one hand, they insisted on a single, clear meaning of Scripture, which enabled the believer to know the Truth clearly and certainly. As Puritan minister William Ames explained: "Hence there is only one meaning for every place in Scripture. Otherwise the meaning of Scripture would not only be unclear and uncertain, but there would be no meaning at all—for anything which does not mean one thing surely means nothing" (*Marrow of Theology* 188). In this way, Puritan authorities could, in clear conscience, enforce orthodoxy.

In addition to this dogmatic hermeneutic, however, the Puritans employed typological interpretation which multiplied the meanings of the Scripture and provided a potent means of achieving unity in the New World. Though Calvin had rejected allegorical interpretation (see pages 32-3 above), he did allow typological interpretation, in which a given Old Testament character or event—the type—was seen as an analogy or foreshadowing of Christ, who was the antitype, the center of history, the fulfillment of the initial promise. Among the reformers, this mode of interpretation was a means of reconciling the Old and New Testaments, a necessary deviation from an otherwise historical-grammatical interpretation of Scripture.<sup>9</sup> Among the New England Puritans, however, typology took on the added duty of channeling individualism into socially acceptable currents. For instance, Old Testament saints were regularly employed as models of the pilgrim's progress toward salvation, a crucial role in a society in which one's state of salvation determined status and rights. Furthermore, given the subjective nature of the touch of grace, such typological readings provided a pattern or boundary with which to bind "the subject to the fixed pattern of scripture" (Bercovitch, *Puritan Origins* 27) and thus to check the subjectivist tendencies of Puritan soteriology.

Typology was employed most powerfully—and far beyond the bounds established by Calvin—in combination with the doctrine of the covenant. Because the national church was also a Congregationalist church, all citizens of the colony were church members and therefore saints. New Englanders as a group—not just as individuals—had covenanted with each other and with God for the sake of furthering God's will. This personal-ecclesiastical-political covenant placed New England in a special status akin to Israel but distinct from

every other nation in history. While every other nation, except ancient Israel, is subject to the inevitable cycles of providential or secular history—birth, growth, pinnacle, decline and death—New England was subject to redemptive or sacred history, which was normally reserved only for the invisible church and which was characterized by progress toward its end—the Kingdom of God. Imparting a “sacred telos on secular events,” New England Puritans identified New England history with redemptive history (Bercovitch, *Puritan Origins* 52). In this framework, the Old Testament pre-figured not only Christ or the individual Christian but also New England—the New Israel, God’s elect nation, chosen to rise above the finite limits imposed on other nations and to fulfill his redemptive plan, the creation of the earthly kingdom of God. As Harvard President Urian Oakes succinctly states: “This little Commonwealth seems to exhibit to us a specimen, or a little model of the Kingdome of Christ upon Earth” (qtd. in Bercovitch, *Puritan Origins* 52).

Through such doctrine and interpretive practice, Puritans shifted the locus of spiritual meaning from the individual to the society, or rather fused not only personal and social meaning but also sacred and secular meaning. As Bercovitch points out, “Having raised the country into the realm of sacred history, they proceeded one step further and imposed upon it the norms of spiritual biography. As the saints represented the entire church of the elect, so conversely America was seen to reflect the calling and temptation of each of its elect settlers” (*Puritan Origins* 106). Storms and plague, bumper crop and victory in war—such temporal events were scrutinized for transcendent meaning of both the colony and, by implication, the individual saints who composed the elect colony. In this way, New England displaced both Christ and the redemption of individual saint

as focal point of typology—*its* history and mission became the antitype, fulfillment of both Old and New Testament types, making New England itself the subject of exegetical analysis in “what amounted to a private typology of current affairs” (Bercovitch, *Puritan Origins* 113). Reflecting such overwhelming sense of self-importance, preacher Peter Bulkeley argued that New England was center stage in the great cosmic-temporal drama:

We are a city set upon a hill, in the open view of all the earth, the eyes of the world are upon us, because we profess ourselves to be a people in covenant with God, and therefore not only the Lord our God, with whom we have made covenant, but heaven and earth, angels and men, that are witnesses of our profession, will cry shame upon us if we walk contrary to the covenant which we have professed and promised to walk in (“The Gospel-Covenant” 212).

As Bulkeley’s sermon indicates, the rhetorical end of such a hermeneutics was to focus the individual saints upon the colony’s redemptive mission. As the type necessarily pales in comparison with the antitype, past history comes short of the great destiny awaiting New England—the vanguard of the millennial rule of the saints. Individuals should therefore remain focused on precipitating the glorious future awaiting the colony. The primary means of stimulating such focus was the jeremiad, the ritual speech given during times of distress berating the community for failing to achieve its vision. Unlike the radical critique of the separatists and spiritists, the jeremiad aimed not to repudiate the community, its authorities, or its goals, nor to encourage separation or individualism, but to “direct an imperiled people of God toward the fulfillment of their destiny, to guide them individually toward salvation, and collectively toward the American city of God” (Bercovitch, *American Jeremiad* 9). Thriving on the discrepancy between fact and ideal, the jeremiad aimed not to question the foundations of the colony, but to spur disparate individuals toward the communal mission.

While the language employed was pessimistic and dire, the spirit of the invective did “not bespeak a despairing frame of mind” (Perry Miller, “Errand into the Wilderness” 8); rather, the jeremiad was essentially optimistic, for the calamities which occasioned the speech were seen not as portending God’s destruction of a wayward secular nation, but as his correction of his own prodigal children. As expounded by Jonathan Mitchell, the intellectual leader of New England in the second generation, the jeremiad exhorted Puritans to emulate the Israelites, who, despite all the calamities which befell them,

went on their in their work [of rebuilding the temple] with *Courage*, and *Constancy*, and *Confidence* in God. . . and he did prosper them, not by preventing difficulties, but by carrying on the Work in their hands through all difficulties, and in the midst of all their infirmities. And it is observable, That every *Tragedy* they passed through, had a glad *Catastrophe*; every stress had a comfortable issue: God still helped them in the last conclusion and upshot of every business, that they came off well at last, though with much tugging and wrestling, much exercise of Faith and Patience (Mitchell, “Nehemiah” 241-2).

God never gives up on his elect, so the jeremiad did not simply criticize the colony for failing to reach its goal, but affirmed that “fact and ideal would be made to correspond” (Bercovitch, *American Jeremiad* 61). Thus, the jeremiad—along with its ideological and hermeneutic underpinnings—transformed crisis and anxiety into a form of power. It transfigured the Calvinist conscience from a source of dissent into a means of consolidating communal unity and resolve, from a critique of society into a critique of the self.

### Vestiges of the Open Hermeneutic

The conflict between radical and conservative Puritans was so dramatic that it has captivated critical attention.<sup>10</sup> As a result, not only have the elements of Calvin's open hermeneutic been largely ignored in studies of Puritan New England, but the subsequent influence of the Puritans upon the American romantics has been viewed through this polar scheme of antinomian radical against conservative jeremiad, subjective dogmatist against dogmatic conservative.<sup>11</sup> In reality, the two central elements of Calvin's open hermeneutics—a humble openness to new meaning leading to a living experience with God and the priority of communal consensus over both centralized authority and individualism—were nurtured throughout New England's history, influencing the American romantics in vital ways.

If, as Michael Walzer observes, Puritan discipline aimed "at a vigorous control and a narrowing of energies—a bold effort to shape a personality amidst 'chaos'" ("Puritanism" 32), then the communal institutions of family, township and church, as the primary vehicles for discipline, were central to the Puritan experience. As Morgan points out, "Even a multitude of petty officers would not have provided the close supervision of every individual that an effective enforcement of such prohibitions required," but the family, not to mention the township and local congregation, could provide it (*Puritan Family* 143). As the first line of watchfulness and admonition, the Puritan family was the medium of regular home worship, prayer, Bible reading, and education.<sup>12</sup> Like the family, the township was central to the Puritan scheme of discipline and was carefully controlled by the central government to ensure that only orthodox settlers,

committed to the New England way, would be admitted. To ensure a common sense of purpose and a shared feeling of connection, the townships were settled in groups, with members of the same English city, county, or parish moving to the same area in New England together. Furthermore, the towns allotted land in such a way that all houses were close enough together for some level of scrutiny, that no house was built very far from the central meeting place, and that much of the grazing and farmland was communal.<sup>13</sup> The most crucial institution, however, was the congregation, which could influence not simply the behavior, but the world view of each inhabitant. Various religious customs helped cement the solidarity and commitment to the colony's ideals—the sermon, by which ministers indoctrinated the residents in theology and practice; the private journal, through which the believer scoured his conscience for evidence of regeneration and prodded himself on toward godliness; and house visits, during which elders could ensure that the family's spiritual life was in order. Furthermore, every congregation was formed through the covenant, in which each member promised to obey God and to assist the others in obeying God:

In carrying out their duty of supervising personal conduct, the elders were aided initially by the members of the congregation, who exercised mutual inspection, or 'holy watching' over one another's lives, and reported delinquencies that came to their attention. By his covenant vows, each of the faithful bound himself to watch over his neighbor's soul as his own, in order to promote the spiritual and moral welfare of his fellow members, as well as to keep untainted the household of God by preventing 'scandalous persons' from defiling holy things (Haskins 91).

Though Puritan communities were frequently controlled by central authority and though they occasionally were the source of great abuse, they also provided a genuine alternative to both authoritarian dominance and radical individualism, and were one of the few checks to the authoritarian tendencies of



Puritan New England.<sup>14</sup> This role is evident not only in the Puritan communities' criticism of John Winthrop's power (cited above), but also in the controversy of the Half-Way Covenant. From the 1640's, most Puritan churches required evidence of salvation for a person to become a church member. This evidence included acceptance of orthodox creeds, good behavior, and a conversion experience. This latter requirement posed a problem for second and third generation New Englanders because "the high faith of the first generation was unique, too intense to last forever and not immune to the shift in man's attitude toward God which had been progressing since before the Reformation" (Lockridge 106). Despite the ministers' jeremiads, church membership continued to plummet as decreasing numbers of Puritans enjoyed the intense experience of conversion. Consequently, as Pope points out, "The Congregational churches faced an unpleasant dilemma: they could either bring themselves more fully into the community, or they ran the risk of losing control completely" ("New England" 105). They could either embrace their wider social mission, become less elitist, and accept a certain impurity in their churches, or maintain their purity but lose their influence, as the Quakers eventually did in Pennsylvania. The Puritan leaders followed the former path and passed the non-binding Half-Way Covenant in a synod of 1662, allowing all those who accepted Puritan doctrine and promised obedience to be allowed into the church—regardless of the absence of any conversion experience (McNeill *History and Character* 341). Furthermore, though they denied communion to such half-way members, they granted baptism to all their children. Privileging social power over religious purity, the Puritan leadership rejected the sectarian ideal at the heart of Puritanism in favor of the national mission. But while the church leaders rejected

the sectarian ideal, many congregations continued to embrace it: It took decades for ministers to convince most congregations to accept the Covenant.<sup>15</sup> This incident illustrates the fidelity with which Puritan congregations adhered to the primacy of personal piety over the corporate mission, their unwillingness to falsify a conversion experience in order to satisfy a social requirement, and their determination to resist their leaders in order to maintain their original principles—in short, the power of the Calvinist conscience to privilege the individual and local community over the state.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to this communitarian emphasis, Calvin's openness to new meaning also survived and checked the dominance of Puritan dogmatism, typology, nationalism, and covenant theology. This is evident in the transformation of Roger Williams from separatist ideologue to humble dissenter. Roger Williams began his disagreement with New England authorities because of the supposed impurities within Puritan churches, the Puritans' misappropriation of Indian lands, and the magistrates' usurpation of the authority of the local congregation. His trial and exile to Rhode Island, however, pushed him to reconsider and repudiate the fundamental structure of Puritan society. Appealing to certain elements in Calvin, Williams argued that the civil government represents the natural, fallen world and includes both the elect and the damned; the church, on the other hand, represents only the elect and the spiritual realm. The Kingdom of Christ was totally distinct from the secular world, so church and state must be separate (Polishook 23). Consequently, the Puritan doctrines of the covenant and the mission to precipitate the Kingdom of God on earth were heretical. Similarly, Williams appealed to the Calvinist emphasis on the authenticity of the believer's assent to criticize any coercion in

the realm of religion. Just as Williams turned Puritan assumptions against New England theocracy, he employed typology to undermine the Puritan appropriation of Israel as a national model. By reminding the Puritans of the original use of typology—as a way to see Christ, not current events, in the Old Testament—Williams denied the relevance of Old Testament types to the secular concerns of contemporary New England (Morgan, *Roger Williams* 90-95). If Williams could appeal to contradictions within Puritanism, the Puritans could likewise employ Williams' assumptions against him. For instance, Williams' separatism was based on Calvinist dogmatism; Puritans employed the same dogmatism just as Calvin had—to argue that they knew God's will and had a duty to enforce it upon a recalcitrant people. Thus, Williams was finally pushed toward a hermeneutic resolution of his conflict with the Puritans, to question whether "any man could determine the precise nature of Scripture with such dreadful certainty as the New England clergy claimed to possess" (Perry Miller, "Puritan State" 146). Appealing to Calvin's sense of human finitude and to the value of openness to the spirit, Roger Williams urged the fiery Endecott to practice a less dogmatic hermeneutics, to make "a deep and cordial resolution (in these wonderful, searching, disputing, and dissenting times) to search, to listen, to pray, to fast, and more fearfully, more tremblingly to inquire what the holy pleasure and the holy mysteries of the Most Holy are" (120). Thus, Roger Williams highlighted what was often overlooked in Calvin's thought, a hermeneutics of openness; and in his emphasis on the need for humble inquiry in a time of unprecedented challenges, he provided an important bridge to the American romantics and their concern for a flexible perspective in the face of constantly new experiences.<sup>17</sup>

In the cases of Roger Williams' exile and the Half-Way Covenant, Puritan leaders won for two reasons—they controlled the mechanism of power—grants of land, establishment of new towns and congregations, admission of new residents, ordination of ministers—and were in a privileged position rhetorically, from which they could try to dominate through sheer repetition of themes. However, when New England lost its charter in 1684, the Puritans lost control of their government, religious toleration was imposed, and democratic institutions were abolished—all resulting in the diminution of the power of Puritanism, its authorities, and its sense of mission: "The revocation of the old charter in 1684 and the enforced religious toleration after that date all but destroyed any lingering sense among the colonists that they formed a special, divinely chosen community" (Breen and Foster 20). After the revocation of the charter, religious deviants, who previously had fled to tolerant colonies such as Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, or Maryland, now set up congregations in Boston and other New England towns. Baptists, who had long been hounded out of New England and had poured into Rhode Island and the Middle Colonies, founded a congregation in Boston in 1685. Anglicans—common in the Southern colonies and now theologically distant from Calvinism—established a church in Boston in 1688. The persecution of Quakers—who earlier in the century had been hung or forced out of New England and into Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and the Middle and Southern Colonies—was now forbidden. Presbyterians, rooted in Calvinism but opposed to Puritan congregationalism and rationalism, filtered into New England and other colonies through Scottish and Irish immigrants. Furthermore, religious minorities in other colonies offered alternatives to traditional Puritan Congregationalism—Lutherans in New York, Catholics in

Maryland, and Moravians, Mennonites, Dunkers and Schwenkfelders in Pennsylvania. This flood of immigrants—along with the failure of successive generations of Puritans to experience the religious intensity of their forefathers—watered down the purity of New England, attenuated communal solidarity, and accelerated the movement toward religious pluralism.

Under such circumstances, Puritan leaders could maintain no hope of control in the face of popular resistance. Already weakened by the loss of the charter, the New England Way was finally destroyed through the Great Awakening of the 1740's. This wave of revivalism split New England into two camps: the Old Lights, supporters of the rational, orthodox theology outlined above; and the New Lights, supporters of a revived piety, emphasizing emotional conversions and the mystery of God's stroke of grace. Itinerant preachers swept through the New England colonies, reviving the doctrine of man's utter dependence upon an arbitrary and omnipotent deity. The ministers of revivalism—among them many uneducated lay preachers who sprouted up in response to their inward impulses—questioned or flatly denied the elect status not only of congregations, but also of respected ministers, bringing turbulence to every church (Ahlstrom 286-287). Renewing the primacy of faith, minimizing the value of human effort, appealing to hermeneutic subjectivism in Calvinism, claiming special inspiration from God—the advocates of the Awakening revived the specter of antinomianism for many Puritans, but restored spirituality for others (Gaustad 77-79). The inevitable eruption ensued, and when the ash settled, New England was divided into two religious parties—the rationalists, who flocked toward Anglicanism, Unitarianism, or deism; and the enthusiasts, who were drawn toward Baptist or Presbyterian churches.<sup>18</sup>

Given the right conditions, then, it was possible for New Englanders to resist their rulers, to offer dissent which would not simply be co-opted into a national mission and social solidarity. While the Puritans refined Calvin's authoritarian dogmatism, their opponents likewise developed a variety of strategies—the subjectivist dogmatism of Ann Hutchinson, the non-dogmatic openness of Roger Williams, and the communal solidarity of the Puritan townships. All of these political and hermeneutic strategies were later developed as America matured from colony to province to nation.

## Chapter 3

### Diverging Traditions in Calvinism

In their use of typology, their concept of representative selfhood, their emphasis on institutionalized progress, their increasing scholasticism and rationalism, and their separatism, the American Puritans veered from Calvin's teachings in important ways and thus reflected what happened to Calvin's teachings wherever they spread—the stretching of boundaries to adapt to specific needs. For our particular purposes, we should note two adaptations of Calvin's teachings which developed into important movements in nineteenth century America. I will call these adaptations conservative and liberal Calvinism and will briefly address their development in this chapter. A secularized version of Puritan typology will be treated in the next chapter.

#### Calvin vs. Calvinism

One line of development—what we have come to call "Calvinism"—was defined primarily by adherence to five central doctrines: total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints. This stream of Calvinism, which I will call conservative Calvinism in this chapter, should not be identified with the thought of Calvin. Although Calvin can certainly be found to advocate these doctrines, they fail to capture the spirit of his program. They were included in neither the Genevan confession of faith, which Calvin helped draft, nor in the Lausanne articles, which Calvin advocated. Such doctrines account for roughly ten percent of the *Institutes* and even less of the voluminous commentaries. Espousing a soteriology akin to

Luther and Zwingli, Calvin distinguished himself from the other reformers not by his teaching on predestination, but on the Eucharist. While conservative Calvinists such as the Puritans agreed with Calvin regarding the five points listed above, they differed from him in significant ways, perhaps more central to Calvin's thought than the five defining qualities of what we have come to identify as Calvinistic. As Perry Miller has demonstrated in *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*, one of the most important changes was the Puritans' willingness to pontificate in detail upon God and his plan, resulting in a rational, scholastic Protestantism which Calvin can be found to advocate at times but which differed markedly from the dominant, humanistic side of Calvin, with his emphasis on humility and the limits of human understanding. Consequently, Anglicans could frequently use Calvin in support of their positions against the supposedly Calvinistic Puritans (Bernard Hall 32-36). It is for this reason that scholar Alan C. Clifford speaks for many critics when he claims, "Calvin was no Calvinist" (73).<sup>1</sup>

All this is not to say that other developments of Calvinism more purely reflect the real John Calvin. On the contrary, considering the contradictory thought of the reformer and how circumstances had changed since his death, the preceding discussion is intended to warn against oversimplification of Calvin and his legacy. Following the death of Calvin and his successor Beza, Calvinists were forced to define themselves when the Dutch theologian Arminius claimed an important role for the human will in the process of redemption. As a heterodox Calvinist—he was trained in Geneva under Beza, was praised by Beza, and was impressed by Calvin's works—Arminius pushed the boundaries of Calvinism too far for conservatives, forcing them to tie Calvinism to the five points, and



with conservative victories at the Synod of Dort (1618-19) and the Westminster Assembly (1643-9), conservatives proceeded to develop a form of scholasticism at odds with Calvin's humanism.<sup>2</sup> The result was a confusing conflict among Calvinists: Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius, for example, was considered heretical and imprisoned by Dutch Calvinists because of his support for Arminius; fleeing to France, he was denied a professorship—because the French considered him a Calvinist!

### Liberal Calvinism

The complexity of Calvinist thought is evident in early seventeenth century England, where, according to Collinson, "'Orthodox' meant Calvinist" (82).<sup>3</sup> There was a great deal of diversity in early English Calvinism, with conservative Calvinists battling those who embraced Calvin's open hermeneutics. These latter ministers—whom Louisa Simoutti has dubbed "the liberal Calvinists of England" (201-2)—include such liminal figures as Henry More (1614-1687), a Cambridge Platonist who came from a Calvinist background but criticized conservative Calvinists; Richard Baxter (1615-1691), a Puritan minister who tried to reconcile conflicting groups of Protestants, advocated tolerance, and helped bring about the restoration of the monarchy but who was persecuted for advocating tolerance during the restoration;<sup>4</sup> and Robert Leighton (1611-1684), a Scottish Presbyterian minister who accepted two Anglican bishoprics in an attempt to bridge the gap between Presbyterians and Anglicans. The borderline status of these theologians was noted by Coleridge in *Aids to Reflection*: Like Leighton, More was held "in suspicion by the Calvinists of that time as a Latitudinarian and Platonizing Divine, and . . . arraigned as a Calvinist by the

Latitudinarians" (142). Coleridge describes Leighton as "proscribed . . . as a Calvinist" even though he was "opposed to *modern Calvinism*" (115). What united these theologians—and resulted in a confusing vagueness in their status and party affiliation—was their embrace of Calvin's open hermeneutics and their resulting tolerance. Tyacke cites numerous instances of Calvinist tolerance of non-conformists in seventeenth-century England (17-19, 21, 116, 171, 185-6, 213, 230, 232).

While the sources of this tolerance were varied and complex, a crucial influence was the set of assumptions annunciated by Calvin in his more humanistic moments.<sup>5</sup> For instance, Robert Leighton repeatedly appeals to the key assumptions of Calvin's open hermeneutics throughout his works. One such postulate is that language and thought fail to capture the essence of God, who is best described by negation or silence (2:129). According to Leighton, all we can say of God is "mere stammering or babbling: for here not only words fail us, but even thought itself is at a stand. . . He dwells in Light that is inaccessible, and round about is a thick darkness, shutting out the eyes of weak men" (2:89-90). In describing God, the Bible "descends to the weakness of our capacities," accommodating the infinite to the linguistic and conceptual limitations of the finite mind (2:82). The accommodating language of Scriptures is not intended to provide a scientific or systematic knowledge of God. Rather, "the Divine teaching is characterised by utility not subtilty" (2:79). Leighton thus calls his audience to an "*experiential understanding*" of God (1:278) which has practical results upon the heart: "All knowledge of mysteries is in vain and of no value, unless it have an influence upon the affections, and thereby upon the whole conduct of life" (2:231). This practical understanding results in obedience which

comes from the heart rather than coercion, and it involves love and adoration of God. It entails a direct experience with God rather than mental assent to objective propositions. Leighton contrasts the "BEATIFIC VISION" of God—an intuitive knowledge which gives enjoyment, embraces both body and soul, and unites us to Him—with scholastic "bare *speculation*," which involves the mind only (2: 114-115). True believers know "not the dead letter of the Law," but "the Lawgiver Himself" (1: 338). This primary experience with God—pastors are encouraged to be "seers" who observe God (1: 254)—entails a subjective element which Leighton does not shy away from: "All that they know of God shall not be by mere report and by the voice of others, but they shall inwardly read and know Him within themselves" (1: 338-9). Leighton urges his readers to "explore the world within" (2:80), to know themselves as concomitant with knowledge of God: "commune oftener with yourselves and with God, be less abroad, and more within, and more above" (1: 276). This subjective element implies reliance upon the indwelling Holy Spirit as the source of a self-authenticating trust in the Scriptures and as interpreter of the Scriptures (2: 229). It is essential that the individual be humble and open to instruction from the Holy Spirit, for "we know nothing of the things of God" (1: 273). Even those who are learned in correct doctrine are "ignorants, strangers to this heavenly wisdom. . . Therefore, men must first know this, that they must go anew to school again and *become as little children*" (1: 273). Indeed, one of the true signs of spiritual vigor is a lack of pride and rigidity (1: 249-51).

## Into the Nineteenth Century

The key text which introduced Calvin's open hermeneutics to nineteenth century America was Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection*. Critics have noted Coleridge's indebtedness to Calvin via the seventeenth century liberal Calvinists. According to David Pym, Coleridge had "drunk deeply at Luther's and Calvin's wells" (49) and had "great respect for Calvinism" (49). However, it was esteem for a certain brand of Calvinism only. Thus, when Ronald Wendling notes Coleridge's important similarities to Calvin, he highlights their similar views of language and hermeneutics and their similar resistance to legalism and dogmatism (183-7), elements of an open hermeneutics. Toward contemporary Calvinism, or conservative Calvinism, Coleridge was decidedly hostile, calling it pseudo-Calvinism (*Aids* 159) and claiming that it misappropriated Calvin (*Aids* 140n).

*Aids to Reflection* was a compendium of aphorisms with commentaries. Most of the aphorisms come from such seventeenth century liberal Calvinists as More, Baxter, and especially Leighton, who is cited profusely throughout the text. The book defends Christianity by appealing to Kant and to a theory of language and understanding. A central assumption of this work is that spiritual truths are "*unutterable or incommunicable*" (*Aids* 79). Divine truths are expressed in an accommodated fashion, "neither metaphysically, as they are known by superior intelligences; nor theoretically, as they would be seen by us were we placed in the Sun; but as they are represented by our human senses in our present relative position" (*Aids* 93-4). The language of revelation is analogical, metaphorical, or symbolic, useful to guide the believer to a personal experience rather than clearly to describe the character and plans of the Divine. Rather than

studying doctrine "itself *in relation to God*," one should see how it relates to oneself (*Aids* 172). Theological knowledge is thus very personal, centered around a self-authenticating or immediate experience (*Aids* 158) and resulting in activity or personal growth rather than the mere accretion of knowledge (*Aids* 105-6): "Christianity is not a Theory, or a Speculation; but a *Life*. Not a *Philosophy of Life*, but a *Life* and a living Process" (*Aids* 202). Like Calvin's *Institutes*, Coleridge's *Aids* seek a middle ground between fanaticism and scholasticism: Coleridge laments how "the Mysteries of Religion, and Truths supersensual, are either cut and squared for the comprehension of the understanding, . . . or desperately torn asunder from the Reason" (*Aids* 297). In order to combat these threats, Coleridge, like Calvin, appeals to a circular or precariously balanced dialectic of the Word and the Spirit. On the one hand, the Holy Spirit is the standard for interpreting the Word, which expresses "spiritual things that must be spiritually discerned" (*Aids* 324). On the other hand, the Word is the standard for judging whether one possess the Spirit: "If any pretend they have the Spirit, and so turn away from the straight rule of the Holy Scriptures, they have a spirit indeed, but it is a fanatical spirit, the spirit of delusion and giddiness" (*Aids* 73).

In 1829, James Marsh, President of the University of Vermont, published the American edition of *Aids* and included a preface. Both the preface and the text had an enormous impact on the transcendentalists. It was read by Hawthorne and most of the transcendentalists; according to Richardson, it had "an electric effect on Emerson" (93); and according to Perry Miller, it was "of the greatest single importance" in the development of transcendentalism (*Transcendentalists* 34).<sup>6</sup> Like the liberal Calvinists of the seventeenth century, Marsh inhabits a vague, borderline status. According to Perry Miller, Marsh had

converted to orthodox Calvinism (*Transcendentalists* 34), but Wells treats Marsh as a "Christian Transcendentalist" (1-48). In his preface, Marsh praises Moses Stuart, his mentor at Andover Seminary, a bastion of strict Calvinist orthodoxy. However, Marsh also warns against unbiblical assumptions creeping into Stuart's works (503). The reason for this borderline status is Marsh's insistence on the limits of human understanding and the consequent need for an open hermeneutics, which motivated Marsh to publish *Aids to Reflection*. Essential truths, he claims, are "not contained in the systems of doctrine usually taught" (495). As "speculative knowledge" cannot communicate spiritual life, religious growth does not depend upon such knowledge for its sustenance, so "a true and living faith is not incompatible with some degree of speculative error" (504). Rather than having any intimate connection with true spirituality, theological systems "are usually little more than schemes resulting from the strivings of the finite understanding" (505). They are the "idols of our own understanding" (493), serving to shield us from direct exposure to the almighty. Rather than seek mere speculative knowledge, the Christian must seek spiritual life through the dialectic of the Word and the Spirit (504) and through a humble openness in order to "free his mind from the idols of preconceived opinion" (494).

One way to gauge the effect of the American edition of *Aids to Reflection* is to note the theory of language espoused by Horace Bushnell, a theologian and preacher who inhabits a similarly vague status. Ahlstrom describes him as an advocate of "Progressive Orthodoxy" (610-613), while Glenn Hewitt describes him as deeply "influenced by the theological heritage of Calvin, Edwards, and New England Reformed Theology" (128).<sup>7</sup> Bushnell frequently claimed that he was "more indebted to Coleridge than to any extra-Scriptural author" (Cheney

499), and he seems to have had *Aids to Reflection* uppermost in his mind.<sup>8</sup> This influence is evident in Bushnell's theory of language. According to Bushnell, language used to describe physical things employs propositions which literally refer to their objects, but language used to describe things of the mind, feeling, or spirit must employ symbols. Natural phenomena are symbols of spiritual states, and our words to describe such states are rooted in a similarly symbolic relationship. To understand expressions related to the mind is not to comprehend a proposition, but to re-experience sympathetically the mental state expressed. This implies that religious statements function instrumentally, not as facts from which inferences can be drawn and laws rationally analyzed. Furthermore, such a view means that a certain degree of subjectivity is essential in interpretation. There are no laws or rules to hermeneutics. Rather, the exegete needs imagination, sympathy, love, and, most importantly, faith, which Bushnell defines not as assent to a proposition but as receptivity to the transforming power of communication. Bushnell's perspective also implies the necessity of mutuality in communication: interlocutors must have sufficiently common ground for sympathetic re-experience to occur; a transcendent God must accommodate himself to human limitations in order to be understood. While symbols can evoke a spiritual state, the individual must not only be receptive to a new message but also incorporate his previous experience in order to interpret the message and thus be put into the transformed state. Such subjectivism means that doctrines are rightly understood based on one's own experience, resulting in a different understanding for each interpreter (David L. Smith 42-9, 97-129).<sup>9</sup>

## John Locke and Conservative Calvinism

While liberal Calvinists and their descendents developed Calvin's open hermeneutics and minimized a legalistic rendition of original sin and predestination, conservative Calvinists adhered strictly to the five points of Calvinism as announced at the Synod of Dort and re-affirmed at the Westminster Assembly, and this form of Calvinism developed along its own lines. In America, hermeneutic practice among these Calvinists was shaped by John Locke, but this influence differed greatly among various theologians. Antebellum Calvinists emphasized Locke as the foundation of scientific inquiry, and they developed a rational mode of interpretation modeled after the scientific method and resembling that of their rivals, the Unitarians. However, the theologian who incorporated Locke into American Calvinism in the eighteenth century, Jonathan Edwards, emphasized Locke as an advocate of first hand, personal experience. Though he kept firmly within orthodox Calvinist strictures, Edwards developed a hermeneutics akin to the liberal Calvinists and open to heterodox implications.

The underpinnings of Edwards' hermeneutics was a metaphysics verging on pantheism. Pushing Locke's notions of primary and secondary qualities to their logical conclusion, Edwards argued that neither secondary qualities such as sound and color, nor primary qualities such as solidity and extension are in the body themselves, but in the mind, either divine or human: "What then is become of the universe? Certainly, it exists nowhere but in the divine mind" (12). In more pantheistic terms, God is the "latent substance . . . that is altogether hid, that upholds the properties of bodies" (34). Essentially communicative, God emanates continuously through his creation, this "great and remarkable analogy



in God's works" (16), making the world a vast source of information about the divine.<sup>10</sup> As Knight observes, "Edwards' fundamental conviction of God's effulgence underwrote his theory of divine communications. . . . The first and essential attribute—the impetus in God's self-generation and his generation of the world—is being and communication" (543-4). Thus, Nature functions typologically, as an alternative source of revelation, serving "not only to *illustrate* spiritual truths, but to *establish* them" (Wainwright 526). Furthermore, this revelation is progressive: with the supposed coming of the millennium, God would produce an "acceleration of communication, an explosion of knowledge of divine things" (Knight 549).<sup>11</sup>

Edwards combined Calvin and Locke in the other half of his typology, the receiving end, human perception. Edwards followed the British empiricists in asserting that our source of knowledge of the world—and, indeed, any motive to action—must be empirically perceived, or "extant in the view or apprehension of the understanding, or perceiving faculty" (196). However, while Locke limited our sense faculties to that of taste, touch, smell, hearing and sight, Edwards asserted that, through the Holy Spirit, humans can have a kind of sixth sense, "a new simple idea," or "a new kind of perception or spiritual sensation, which is in its whole nature different from any former kinds of sensation of the mind, as tasting is diverse from any of the other senses" (160-161). Evoking Calvin's argument for the self-authenticating nature of the Bible (see pages 27-28 above), Edwards drew a comparison with the sweetness of honey: "There is a difference between having a rational judgment that honey is sweet, and having a sense of its sweetness. A man may have the former, that knows not how honey tastes; but a man can't have the latter, unless he has an idea of the taste of honey in his

mind" (112). Likewise, the non-believer, lacking an authentic, first-hand experience of the divine or even the faculty for such an experience, is blind to divine beauty, banished from any sense of the celestial sweetness, and has only an "indirect, detached, impersonal relationship" with reality (Elwood 128). The believer, on the other hand, "consents to being"—is connected directly with it, is in harmony with it, responds to it from the heart.

While Edwards maintained the elitism of Calvinism, his epistemology broke typology out of its limited, controllable, allegorical role, and, as Conrad Cherry observes, produced a "*symbolic* approach to the Bible and to the world about us" ("Symbols" 266). Emphasizing the mystical union of the believer with God and of the individual's direct access to the deity, Edwards opened the door to the radical elements in the Great Awakening—the enthusiasm, the rejection of authority, the questioning of conventional reality.<sup>12</sup>

Even though Edwards' thought identified the universe as essentially symbolic—pregnant with meaning—Edwards never developed a thorough theory of how meaning is achieved. Indeed, while his epistemology and metaphysics developed Calvinism in unique and profound directions, his concept of interpretation reiterated the problems inherent in Calvin's hermeneutics—the tension between, on one hand, a closed meaning enforced by religious and secular authority and, on the other hand, an open interpretation potentially subject to the spirit-inspired whim of the individual. Edwards clearly intended to restore the balance of the Word and Spirit which was not always evident in Puritan exegesis. As Logan observes, for Edwards, "the meaning of any event or of any passage of Scripture is *both* its objective content *and* its significance for the personal life of the interpreter" ("The Hermeneutics of Jonathan Edwards"

92). Thus, Edwards directed much of his intellectual energy toward the proclamation of the true doctrine, especially in his critique of the supposed delusions of the Arminians and secular philosophers and also the anti-intellectual enthusiasm of the revivalists. He also aimed—through his preaching and his doctrines of the spiritual sense and the sense of the heart—to bring individuals into direct experience with the divine. In fact, it was the very process of interpreting which led one through the proposition to the ultimate reality behind it. Thus, Cherry observes, “To be carried to the antitype by the type, to the spiritual by the concrete, was to participate experientially in the truth conveyed by the type” (“Symbols” 266).

Edwards also revived Calvin's notions of love and communitarianism as crucial elements in interpretation. For Calvin, the isolated individual lacks “sufficient” wisdom, power, and other gifts and is thus “constrained to borrow from others,” a situation which forces the individual into “the bond of mutual communication,” of which Christ is the “connection” (*Commentary on Romans* 12:4). Consequently, Calvin privileges love, with Christ as the focal point, as “the only rule of our actions, and the only means of regulating the right use of the gifts of God. . . . For where it is wanting, the beauty of all virtues is mere tinsel—is empty sound—is not worth a straw—nay more, is offensive and disgusting” (*Commentary on 1 Corinthians* 13:3). Edwards embodies such ideals in his central concept of “consent to being,” which indicates the relational nature of all knowledge. As Nagy points out, for Edwards, the meaning of an entity is to be found not in its isolated autonomy, but in its relation to both spiritual reality, or the consciousness of God, and human consciousness—in the consent or agreement between an object, its divine meaning, and perception of such

meaning by the individual human (435-42). Consent also involves the harmony of the human with other humans in the common glorification of God, in particular, communication with other humans as a response to the beauty or value of Being. In this way, Edwards revives Calvin's notion of the crucial importance of a community of brothers in interpreting divine discourse (see pages 34-36 above): "Just as the dialectic was the instrument of truth for Socrates, discourse is the medium for the emergence of value for Edwards. Conversation means experiential commerce between a person and his social context and God" (Nagy 443).

In many of Edwards' specific exegetical and scientific works, it is apparent that his interpretation of types is allegorical, rather than symbolic in nature; that is, the meaning clearly and unquestionable conforms to a pre-established orthodoxy. This is apparent, for instance, in his famous "Spider Letter," in which Edwards scientifically details the behavior of spiders who instinctively use their webs to fly but who frequently float out to sea, where they die. While the meaning of such facts may be open to a wide range of interpretation for moderns, Edwards drew this orthodox Calvinist conclusion: "I am assured that the chief end of this faculty that is given them is not their recreation but their destruction, because their destruction is unavoidably the constant effect of it" (5). Moreover, this self-destructive drive is implanted in the spiders to balance their population and rid the world of multitudes of spiders, which are the "corruption and nauseousness of the air" (7). Thus, nature reflects not simply God, but the harsh and wise God of Calvinism.

Alongside such dogmatic hermeneutics, Edwards also interpreted in a more open fashion. Indeed, several of Edwards' doctrines, at least potentially,

pushed the meaning of nature and even the Bible beyond orthodox strictures. His doctrines of progressive revelation, continuous creation, and the self-communication of God implied that meanings in nature could not be limited to those found in the Bible. In fact, as Stephen Stein notes, Edwards, convinced of the unlimited effulgence of God, “underscored the multiplicity of levels of meaning in the text,” a practice which provided interpretive “freedom and creative possibilities” which he pursued “with abandon” (“The Quest for the Spiritual Sense” 101, 113). While he was concerned with both the Word and the Spirit—or objective propositions and personal experience—Edwards was interested primarily in “the spiritual sense of Scripture. . . that which is the product of the indwelling presence of the divine in the exegete” (Stephen Stein, “The Spirit and the Word” 123).

If Edwards’ epistemology implied “a world speaking to man, an evocative world which draws him into meaningful commerce with itself” (Nagy 445), there was a tension in how that meaning was to be understood. While Edwards’ actual interpretations conformed to the strictest dogmas of Calvinism, the underlying structure of his thought implied boundless, uncontrollable, unorthodox meanings, which could not be encased within linguistic propositions.

### **Theology and the Scientific Method**

The tensions in Edwards’ epistemology and hermeneutics—based on Locke but verging on pantheism, advocating multiplicity of meaning but staying firmly within orthodox strictures—were resolved by later Calvinists in favor of a rational theology that emphasized Locke’s empiricism as the foundation of modern science. For example, Charles Hodge, who taught at Princeton from

1822 to 1877 and was a chief defender of "Princeton Theology," advocated a form of Calvinism modeled after the scientific method. According to Hodge, Biblical teachings are not symbols, but facts, from which the theologian forms generalizations, analyzes causes and effects, and draws inferences; that is, he identifies the laws or "internal relations of those facts" (1). Although Hodge denies the possibility of arriving at knowledge of God via the facts of nature, he espouses an empirical methodology, with Scriptures substituting for nature in the "science" of theology: the theologian must employ a strictly inductive method, allowing principles to be "derived from facts, not impressed upon them" (13); these principles cannot contradict themselves (187) and must be consistent with self-evident first truths (10-11). Moreover, these laws must be intelligible to the human mind. Even God, whose essence is incomprehensible, can be accurately known in a limited fashion: "we know [God] very imperfectly; nevertheless our knowledge, as far as it goes, is true knowledge. God really is what we believe Him to be, so far as our idea of Him is determined by the revelation. . . . In this sense God is an object of Knowledge" (338). In Hodge's system, the Spirit plays a limited role, functioning as a means to assist in the discovery and reception of these principles, not as a standard for judging their veracity or as a partner in the creation of meaning (15-6, 187-8). Rather, "the inward teaching of the Spirit is confined to truths objectively revealed in the Scriptures" (15). Like a scientific statement, theological generalizations are true for all time and all people—not relative to the experience of each individual—and can be proved or disproved based on a rational analysis of Biblical facts. In contrast, an open hermeneutics, according to Hodge, is truly a mystical method

that results in subjectivism, the degradation of the Bible, and the dissolution of the Christian system (8-9).

Hodge's scientific methodology was logically prior to actual interpretation of Scripture and thus impressed upon rather than inferred from the Bible, but it reflected a common pattern among a wide range of antebellum theologians. This is true even among the Calvinists' rivals, the Unitarians, whose liberal Christianity rejected Calvinist doctrines of human depravity, pre-destination, and the Trinity. While the Unitarians allowed a greater role for common sense to judge the validity of interpretation, both they and the Calvinists approached interpretation from a Lockean framework, in which Scriptures functioned as facts to support a system of generalizations (*Gura Wisdom of Words* 15-31). For instance, in advocating Unitarian Christianity, Andrews Norton identifies the primary challenge in interpretation as the resolution of ambiguity, "to distinguish among *possible* meanings, the *actual* meaning of the sentence" in order to arrive at accurate religious statements (148). This activity involves mainly historical and biographical considerations—the character of the author and his audience, the historical period, and the original language of the text—and the application of common sense and the law of non-contradiction. Interpretations, according to Norton, must be rationally intelligible, or else they are meaningless nonsense: "Words are only human instruments for the expression of human ideas; and it is impossible that they should express anything else. . . . They have no other meaning than what is given them by men; and this meaning must always be such as the human understanding is capable of conceiving" (162-3). Even propositions about God have a "perfectly intelligible meaning" to the understanding although the "*imagination* cannot form distinct conceptions" (167).

While Unitarians and conservative Calvinists differed greatly in the inferences they drew from Scripture, they both adhered to a similar interpretive methodology, in which theological investigation was seen as the formation of accurate, objective propositions whose truth was arbitrated by Scripture and by the principles of rationality and intelligibility. This methodology differed greatly from that of those theologians in the tradition of liberal Calvinism, who emphasized the symbolic nature of religious discourse, a living experience with God, and openness to new meaning. Before these contrasting views are related to the works of Hawthorne and Emerson, it is important to see how another interpretive strategy, *typology*, shaped antebellum America.



## Chapter 4

### Secularized Puritanism: America's Divine Mission

#### Troubles in New Israel

One feature which bound Jonathan Edwards and the Puritans was the attempt to achieve social unity and direction within a voluntary framework, to channel a deeply individualistic ethic into socially cohesive currents. By the early part of the nineteenth century, such concerns were of even greater importance in the United States. Conscious of their country as essentially democratic, American leaders were deeply concerned with two interrelated problems, predicaments which had long been recognized as potentially destructive for a democracy. One of their most important solutions to these problems was to appropriate Puritan ideology for the sake of a dogmatic hermeneutics of nationalism.

First, American leaders worried about the breakup of the union. Previous social theorists, such as Montesquieu, had argued that a large republic is not feasible because "the public good is sacrificed to a thousand private views; it is subordinate to exceptions, and depends on accidents. In a small one, the interest of the republic is more obvious, better understood, and more within the reach of every citizen; abuses have less extent, and of course are less protected" (56). In America, this problem seemed especially disconcerting. Composed of mobile and diverse immigrants, lacking an established or common tradition, the American people had little to hold themselves together except a common fear of the great powers of Europe. Assembled out of thirteen independent nation-states to which most Americans lent their primary loyalty, the United States was

initially a plural noun; in fact, the Union was purely a utilitarian arrangement as the states united primarily to defend themselves against foreign encroachment. Formed as a political unit before any national identity had been established, the country was inherently heterogeneous and centrifugal. With the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, America nearly doubled its size, and by the 1840s, its size nearly doubled again, thus accelerating the diffusion. Furthermore, the various sections of the nation were evolving different sets of socio-economic conditions, values, institutions, and interests—the slave-holding, plantation-dominated South; the industrial Northeast; and the booming West dominated by family farms. Thus, in virtually every political battle, American leaders saw potential dissolution of the Union on the near horizon. In arguing against the acquisition of the Louisiana Territory from France, for instance, one senator applied Montesquieu's principles:

Our citizens will be removed to the immense distance of two or three thousand miles from the capital of the Union, where they will scarcely ever feel the rays of the General Government; their affections will become alienated; they will gradually begin to view us as strangers; they will form other commercial connexions, and our interests will become distinct. These, with other causes that human wisdom may now foresee, will in time effect a separation, and I fear our bounds will be fixed nearer to our houses than the waters of the Mississippi (Samuel White 163).

In other situations, leaders from virtually every section of the country could see some imminent threat of disunion.<sup>1</sup>

A second fear which plagued Americans of this age was the threat of moral decline stemming from universal leveling. This concern had been voiced by Plato, who argued that, in affirming the primacy of liberty and equality, democracies lack a clear moral hierarchy. Unable to judge between noble and base pleasures, democratic man indulges "the appetite of the hour. . . . His life has

neither law nor order" (411). Such relativism, self-indulgence, and moral anarchy also infect social relations so that fathers are equal to sons, women to men, slaves to freemen, and even teachers to students. The masses elect drones who will then indulge the electorate, financing such appeasement through high taxes, maintaining power through a standing army. Eventually a demagogue comes to dominate the state and institute a tyranny which is maintained through high taxes, body guards and wars. In this way does "tyranny spring from democracy" (411). Such arguments were renewed and revised throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and even notoriously optimistic, pro-democratic leaders such as Thomas Jefferson worried that people's tendency toward irrationality, petty selfishness and vice would eventually destroy the United States.<sup>2</sup> These concerns were expressed most frequently by the aristocratic elements in the country, and especially in New England, with its tradition of social and governmental control over human behavior. These concerns were heightened as the suffrage broadened to include all white males through the first two decades of the nineteenth century,<sup>3</sup> and as mob violence seemed to pervade the nation's cities in "the free exercise of the spirit of mobocracy" (Green 402), the nation's elite, like their Calvinist forebears, feared a loss of influence.<sup>4</sup>

### **American Nationalism: To Unify and Uplift**

Though they were proud of their victory against Britain, most American leaders also worried about the future of the nation. Those who were most vocal in their concerns about democracy—especially the conservatives from New England—soon found they could not fight democracy directly, for, as de Tocqueville pointed out, the trend toward democratic equality was as inevitable

as fate: "It is universal, it is lasting, it constantly eludes all human interference, and all events as well as all men contribute to its progress" (6). Instead, Americans developed institutions, drawn from a variety of sources, to maintain unity and moral elevation, such as a system of constitutional checks and balances, an array of voluntary associations, and the practice of revivalism. While voluntary associations and revivals could trace their roots at least partially to the Puritans, there was an even more important Puritan contribution to the unifying and elevating trends in American culture in this period—a nationalistic ideology with a strong missionary component.<sup>5</sup>

The importance of a nationalistic ideology for social unity and morality had long been recognized. Again, Montesquieu was an authority for America's founding fathers: "The love of our country is conducive to a purity of morals, and the latter is again conducive to the former" (*Spirit of Laws* 19).<sup>6</sup> In a democracy, this meant that the love of freedom and equality would foster a sense of national unity, pride, and moral purpose, all of which would counter the destructive effects of excessive concern for private material interests. Thus, during the first fifty years of the nation's existence, Americans fostered nationalism and a national identity as means of elevating and unifying the United States.

By the era of Jackson, morality and national unity were inextricably bound with a sense of national pride. This is apparent in the finale of the most famous peroration of the age, Daniel Webster's 1830 argument that the Federal government must take precedence over all state governments:

When my eyes shall be turned to behold for the last time the sun in heaven, may I not see him shining on the broken and dishonored fragments of a once glorious Union; on states dissevered, discordant,

belligerent; on a land rent with civil feuds, or drenched, it may be, in fraternal blood! Let their last feeble and lingering glance rather behold the gorgeous ensign of the republic, now known and honored throughout the earth, still full high in advance, its arms and trophies streaming in their original luster, not a stripe erased or polluted, nor a single star obscured, bearing for its motto, no such miserable interrogatory as "What is all this worth?" nor those other words of delusion and folly, "Liberty first and Union afterwards"; but everywhere, spread all over in characters of living light, blazing on all its ample folds, as they float over the sea and over the land, and in every wind under the whole heavens, that other sentiment, dear to every true American heart—Liberty *and* Union, now and forever, one and inseparable (355)!

Morality, unity and nationalism were cultivated not only in the speeches and pamphlets of the day but also in a whole range of activities designed to foster a national identity.<sup>7</sup>

### **America: Beacon of Democracy**

Of course, there was not pure unanimity in Jacksonian America. This era was characterized by intense political warfare between the two major parties, the Democrats and the Whigs. These parties wrangled fiercely over such issues as unions and banking, industrial and land policy, immigration and tariffs, and government support for roads, canals, and railways. Despite such conflicts, there was broad consensus in the United States. The major parties were not divided primarily upon ideological or class lines. As Pessen observes, each party "was capable of appealing to all manner of men, standing for diverse things to its different constituencies and organized and led by men united above all in behalf of no loftier principle than winning office for themselves" (211). While differing in rhetoric and means, they were fundamentally similar in their ends. As Van Deusen notes, both parties advocated freedom and economic progress, including a sound financial system, universal suffrage, improved educational opportunity,

the facilitation of economic enterprises, and the use of the spoils system to solidify their grip on power: "Both sought the prosperity of the people as a whole, and both parties oriented. . . around a middle-class norm" (157).<sup>8</sup>

This underlying consensus is apparent in the value attached to the idea of democracy, which was the basis of American nationalism and the source of greatness to which Americans owed their homage, their common identity, and their right to exist as a nation. One extended example—from an 1839 editorial by John L. O'Sullivan, who later coined the term *manifest destiny* and was publisher of the influential *Democratic Review*—captures the spirit and crucial features of this nationalism. O'Sullivan argued, "Our nation is destined to be *the great nation of futurity*" (509) because of America's democratic institutions:

We are the nation of progress, of individual freedom, of universal enfranchisement. Equality of rights is the cyosure of our Union of states, the grand exemplar of the correlative equality of individuals. . . . We must onward to the fulfillment of our mission, to entire development of the principle of our organization—freedom of conscience, freedom of person, freedom of trade and business pursuits, universality of freedom and equality (511).

To Americans, democracy revolved around the concepts of liberty, individualism, and equality. Americans considered themselves free—free to govern themselves, exercise their rights, and increase their wealth. They considered themselves possessed of political equality and of social and economic equality of opportunity. By limiting the power of government, Americans believed they had created a system purified of the aristocratic vices of privilege, patronage, and chartered monopolies, a system where the individual could soar, unfettered by a corrupt gentry or an oppressive government.

While such content was not at all puritanical, its missionary zeal was. From the Puritans, America inherited a nationalism which was at once national

and universal. Because America was conscious of itself as the first firmly established democracy of the modern world, its institutions were a source of national pride and were considered the American Way, essential to the American identity, expressions of the American self. According to Bercovitch, the democratic content of this nationalism implied that it was essentially pluralistic, a point which he then develops to argue that Hawthorne was complicit in the dominant ideology because he advocates hermeneutic openness (*Rites* 194-245). However, American nationalism was not pluralistic, a concept which did not appear in dominant American discourse until the mid-twentieth century. Rather, in affirming the universal truth and value of democracy, the American Way also had a moral claim upon the rest of the world. Thus, at the core of American nationalism was a missionary impulse, the desire to see its institutions and identity universalized, the drive to be an example for the world to emulate. For instance, O'Sullivan, in the same article quoted above from the *Democratic Review*, expounded upon America's "high destiny": "For this blessed mission to the nations of the world which are shut out from the life-giving light of truth has America been chosen" (511). Like countless speeches and tracts of the day, O'Sullivan's prophecy of America's great destiny reflects the dogmatism stemming from America's white, Anglo-Saxon Puritan heritage—the sense of divine providence, the belief in God's people chosen to lead the world toward the millennium, and the scrutinizing of events for the meaning of America's special place.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to this forward-looking aspect, American perceptions of the past helped shape the national identity of the Jacksonian era. As Benedict Anderson observes in *Imagined Communities*, the writing of history was a means

by which post-revolutionary generations of the early to mid-eighteenth centuries throughout the Old and New World incorporated their respective nationalistic revolutions into a stable national identity. While the revolutionary generation saw their acts as a radical break from the past—or a “forgetting”—the following generation sought meaning through continuity—or “remembering.” Historians “learned to speak ‘for’ dead people,” asserting the meanings and intentions of the past by reference to current needs of national unity (198).

In addition to employing this general pattern, American historians—most of them New Englanders, such as Francis Parkman, Richard Hildreth and George Bancroft—employed a typological approach, with past events both causing and symbolically prefiguring the present and future fulfillment. For instance, the most respected and popular American historian of the nineteenth century, George Bancroft, viewed history as the progress of mankind toward greater liberty. This progress involved the unfolding of God's plan for all of mankind. This side of the equation was universal in implication; the other side was national: In a secularized version of the Puritan national covenant, God had ordained America to be the beacon upon a hill to lead the world toward its destiny. The seeds of this destiny were laid, according to Bancroft, in the founding of the Massachusetts Bay colony. In his *History of the United States*, Bancroft divined the meaning of a colonial insurrection, protest, or revolt in terms of the great revolution—the War of Independence. In this way, Bancroft argued that the American Revolution was neither rebellion against just authority nor a radical repudiation of the past, but a decisive step toward the unfolding of its initial promise, the fulfillment of its obligation. For Bancroft as for Burke, the



Revolution was deeply conservative. However, aimed toward a final fulfillment in the future, the Revolution was also progressive—one of many steps toward a goal which can be reached only in the future through the daily effort of every American to realize the promise of divine destiny. Balancing the tensions inherent in Calvin's program of reform—between the forces of liberation and those of order—Bancroft employed a progressive framework for interpreting the meaning of America. As Bercovitch notes, "If the condition of progress for him is continuing revolution, the condition of continuity is control of the revolutionary impulse" (*Rites of Assent* 180).

While historians such as Bancroft employed Puritanism in remembering their past, they also selectively forgot their past so that it could conform to the pattern of national election. Thus, historians, salesmen, and charlatans of the period cooperated in the creation of a national past which would be cleansed of greed, excessive localism, brutality, selfishness, and other traits inconsistent with an elect nation. O'Sullivan writes:

It is our unparalleled glory that we have no reminiscences of battlefields, but in defense of humanity, of the oppressed of all nations, of the rights of conscience, the rights of personal enfranchisement. . . . The expansive future is our arena and for our history. We are entering on its untrodden space, with the truths of God in our minds, beneficent objects in our hearts, and with a clear conscience unsullied by the past (509-510).

### **The Constraints of the Dogma of Liberty**

American nationalism, then, had its full share of irony and illusion. It was intended to unify the nation, but it extolled the virtue of diversity and individualism. While it preached a doctrine of unfettered economic freedom and individualism, it insisted that the nation was founded on pure ideals unmixed

with any sordid materialism. It celebrated the equality of a people who, in reality, were already stratified. It optimistically taught that America's destiny was manifestly glorious in order to mask or combat the fearful uncertainty of the future, and it mythologized the past in order to help America reach the mythic promised land.

Regardless of such problems, the concepts revolving around nationalism—democracy, individualism, equality, and America's transcendent purpose in the propagation of these values—became *de rigueur* for the public figure of the age. At its foundation, “the United States was the embodiment of an idea” (Kohn 13). To question that idea was to question the very identity of the nation, its very right to exist, and exposed the questioner to the calumny of the masses. One of the few American writers of the time to broach such a subject openly was James Fenimore Cooper, who warned Americans of the tyranny of the majority, the dangers of public opinion run amuck, and the diminished power of the individual in favor of public power, admonitions which led to his being censured in the press and to diminished revenue from his novels.<sup>10</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville offered the most incisive analysis of American cultural life. In a passage which Foucault later echoed in *Discipline and Punish*, de Tocqueville bemoaned the lack of freedom in the nation of liberty:

I know of no country in which there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion as in America. . . . Monarchs had, so to speak, materialized oppression; the democratic republics of the present day have rendered it as entirely an affair of the mind as the will which it is intended to coerce. . . . [In democratic republics] the body is left free, and the soul is enslaved. The master no longer says: “You shall think as I do or you shall die”; but he says: “You are free to think differently from me and to retain your life, your property, and all that you possess; but you are henceforth a stranger among your people. . . . You will remain among men, but you will be deprived of the rights of mankind. Your fellow creatures will shun you like an impure being; and even those who believe in your innocence

will abandon you, lest they should be shunned in their turn. Go in peace! I have given you your life, but it is an existence worse than death" (263-4).

As Cooper discovered, writers of the day were particularly burdened by such a tyranny of the majority, which "raises formidable barriers around the liberty of opinion; within these barriers an author may write what he pleases, but woe to him if he goes beyond them" (de Tocqueville 263). For Alexis de Tocqueville, this herd mentality, rather than a slavish dependence upon European mores, explained the lack of great American literature: "If America has not as yet had any great writers, the reason is given in these facts; there can be no literary genius without freedom of opinion, and freedom of opinion does not exist in America" (265).<sup>11</sup> Thus, though Americans lacked the Puritan modes of discipline—national church, limited suffrage, house visits, strict regulation of settlements—they found in Puritan exceptionalism a ready substitute. In the ideology of the American Way, Americans managed to channel human thought and activity as effectively as had Puritan theology and institutions. This interpretive framework was essentially a revival of the Calvinist and Puritan traditions of dogmatic, authoritarian hermeneutics, and it was the repudiation of this tradition toward which Emerson and Hawthorne directed much of their creative energies.

## Chapter 5

### Outrunning Finitude: Emerson, Hermeneutics, and Social Change

One of the most contentious issues in contemporary Emerson criticism involves understanding his theory of social change in the context of his radical individualism. Though several attempts have been made to excavate such a coherent theory out of Emersonian self-reliance, these have generally failed to bridge the gap between radical individualism and social commitment. Rao, for example, tries to argue for a socially and politically important Emerson but is forced to admit Emerson's minimal and belated involvement in the burning issues of his day, such as the abolition movement, the women's movement, or Indian rights. This lack of commitment, Rao observes, stems from Emerson's self-reliant separatism (39-43, 53-56). More recently, George Kateb tries to fuse self-reliance and social action by arguing for a Franklinesque Emerson, whose primary virtues are self-help, the pursuit of wealth and vocational commitment (139-151, 164-172). While Emerson can be found advocating these values in such essays as "Wealth," he also detested certain elements of Franklin's legacy—the materialism of American culture, the meaninglessness of most forms of employment, and America's dominant capitalistic ethic, which defers "to the base estimate of the market of what constitutes manly success" (CW 2: 56).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, such a theory, in accepting the dominant virtues of American social and political life, fails to account for Emerson's radical criticism of American culture, his call, in "The Divinity School Address," for the transformation of the world—"to resist evil; to subdue the world; and to Be" (CW 1: 83).

Such failures have led several recent scholars to deny the validity of either individualism or social action in Emerson. For instance, Christopher Newfield argues that there is no true autonomy in Emerson's thought. Newfield takes Emerson's call for submission to the "other" or higher Self within the individual and redefines it as "corporate individualism" because the self has "its being as part of a system of laws and forces" (667); that is, the laws of the Soul or Spirit. Newfield then claims that because Emerson's individualism is "corporate," it "covertly and systematically replaced autonomy with more communal and consensual modes" (658). "Corporate" now means submission not to the laws of Being, but to society and, as Newfield finally makes plain, to the association, private collective, or especially the business corporation. Thus propping up capitalism, "corporate liberalism proposes that the more a person is corporate, the more that person is individual" (663) and masks the loss of self under a façade of personal sovereignty. In a more informed and less procrustean approach, Cary Wolfe denies the possibility of social action for the Emersonian individual, for "it is difficult to see how such a self could ever engage in social and political praxis—that is, in the directed and collective transformation of the social and material conditions of freedom" (142).

While Emerson's social and political ideas may be open to both theoretical and practical criticism or praise, attacks such as Wolfe's are as misguided as Rao's and Kateb's acclamations. Assuming that social action necessarily involves corporate action, these writers miss the significance and meaning of Emersonian self-reliance within a democratic society. To understand the real problems and challenges in Emersonian political thought, it is necessary to see how Emerson perceived the social and political problems and solutions of his day, how he

combined the divided commitments to both personal authenticity and social justice, and how he supported his theory of social action by means of his hermeneutics. Only from such a perspective can we truly appreciate a crucial issue which underlies and bedevils Emerson's thinking; that is, his hermeneutics.

### **Two Models of "Reform"**

In one of his earliest extended discussions of social action, "Man the Reformer" (1841), Emerson praises the motivating principle behind reform while failing to advocate the specific corporate reform efforts which were challenging the social order of the United States. According to Emerson, political and social reform is rooted in the spiritual nature of man, in the attitude of the "prophets and poets" and "beautiful and perfect men," in the human desire for "ecstasy or a divine illumination," resulting in what Emerson assumes of his audience—the aspiration to "cast aside all evil customs, timidities, and limitations, and to be . . . a reformer, a benefactor" (CW 1: 145). Having a religious basis, reform has a "secret door into the heart of every lawmaker, of every inhabitant of every city" and is linked with the Reformation, which Emerson calls a more limited, conservative version of contemporary reform (CW 1: 146). The spirit of reform is universal to all men, a central part of the Western tradition, and a dynamic aspect of contemporary American society. Emerson redefines reform by offering two models of social change which privilege individual over group action: the individual's transformation of his mode of living and the transforming power of ideas.

First, Emerson addresses specific changes or "reforms" which the individual can carry out to rectify his relationship with men and nature. In this

section, the crucial aspect of life which needs correcting is commerce, which Emerson denounces not simply for particular abuses; instead, he argues that "the general system of our trade . . . is a system of selfishness, . . . of distrust, of concealment, of superior keenness, not of giving but of taking advantage" (CW 1: 148). Being systemic, the "sins" of commerce "belong to no class, to no individual," but to everyone, forcing the individual to ignore vice, disclaim responsibility, and deny personal accountability for his life (CW 1: 148). Simply detaching oneself from the system is not an option, for the "tendrils of this evil" are embroiled in every aspect of one's life (CW 1: 149). Despite the systemic nature of this evil, Emerson does not suggest or even mention any plan involving corporate effort, such as socialism or communitarianism, to transform the political and social order. Rather, he offers practical improvements which the individual can carry out to regain "dominion" over his world (CW 1: 152). Paramount among these is to place oneself in "primary relations with the soil and nature" by means of taking up agricultural or one of the manual arts rather than industrial or business pursuits (CW 1: 149). According to Emerson, these former activities give physical expression to our to our ideals, providing a "basis for our higher accomplishments," and also educate us through the "antagonism in the tough world for all the variety of our spiritual faculties" (CW 1: 150). The individual can similarly regain self-determination by renovating his domestic economy, paring it down to its bare essentials. Emerson concludes this section of "Man the Reformer" by defining economic probity using standards of progressivism: I should not demand such perfection as to "compel me to suicide" (CW 1: 155); rather I should ensure that I have earned my living by benefiting others and that I mend some evil each day.

Though based upon the self-reliant individual, this meliorist view of social change is at odds with Emerson's repeated calls for the transformation of the world. After all, the ascetic, self-reliant farmer must still sell his goods in a market which remains basically corrupt. Emerson admits the limitations of this mild reform and suggests a more radical model of reform based neither on individual effort nor on corporate action, but on the power of ideals. First, Emerson indicates sympathy for the broader social movements which were sweeping the nation:

We are to revise the whole of our social structure, the state, the school, religion, marriage, trade, science, and explore their foundations in our own nature. . . . What is a man born for but to be a Reformer, a Re-maker of what man has made; a renouncer of lies; a restorer of truth and good . . . . Let him renounce everything which is not true to him, and put all his practices back on their first thoughts, and do nothing for which he has not the whole world for his reason (CW 1: 156).

Though supporting the motivating principle behind reform, Emerson refuses to advocate any of the popular reform movements of the time. Instead, he suggests that radical transformation of the *polis* can be accomplished through mental action, or the power of ideas. Through the ideals of faith, hope, and love, Emerson claims that society can be transfigured, and the agency of this reformation is the regenerated individual:

The believer not only beholds his heaven to be possible, but already to exist,—not by the men or material the statesman uses, but by men transfigured and raised above themselves by the power of principles. To principles something else is possible that transcends all the power of expedients (CW 1: 157).

Society can be completely transformed, rather than partially meddled with, by means of idealism: "One day all men will be lovers; and every calamity will be dissolved in the universal sunshine" (CW 1: 159).



This millenarian vision is not completely incompatible with Emerson's more pragmatic vision. In fact, both models can be seen to reflect what John L. Thomas, in "Romantic Reform in America, 1815-1865," has observed to be the hallmark of ante-bellum reform:

As the sum of individual sins, social wrong would disappear when enough people had been converted and rededicated to right conduct. . . . When a sufficient number of Americans had seen the light, they would automatically solve the country's social problems. . . . In the opinion of the romantic reformers the regeneration of American society began not in legislative enactments or political manipulation, but in a calculated appeal to the American urge for individual self-improvement (157).

Thus, a flood of Americans returning to the fields could generate a spirit of revival, or a widespread revival of principles could lead to changes in the economic order via mass migration to the fields. However, in tone and aim, the two models of social change are quite distinct. The pragmatic vision emphasizes practical, physical action, is limited in its aims, has a secular flavor to it, and employs less drastic rhetoric in its defense. The idealistic vision, in contrast, emphasizes the power of thought, sets extravagant goals, has a strong religious tone, and utilizes extreme rhetoric in its defense. I would suggest that while Emerson toyed with both models at this time and sometimes failed to distinguish between them, he emphasized the latter, more radical model, in his early career but, for various reasons, came to accept the former, more progressive model as he aged. Before we can address why he changed from radical to pragmatist, it would be helpful for us to note why he initially rejected both corporate reform efforts and traditional political action. After all, Emerson could conceivably have advocated either the pragmatic or radically idealistic visions of social change employing the methods of the reformer or the politician. However, he

consistently favored individualistic over group reform efforts. Why did he reject group action and how did idealism link individualism with social change?

### **Emerson against the Reformers**

Emerson's most extensive critique of group reform efforts is found in his lecture "New England Reformers" (1844). Like "Man the Reformer," this lecture evinces some sympathy for the reform movement, especially in its tendency to replace needless convention with self-reliance: "I conceive this gradual casting off of material aids, and the growing trust in the private, self-supplied powers of the individual, to be the affirmative principle of the recent philosophy" (CW 3: 154). Unlike the earlier lecture, "New England Reformers" more explicitly develops Emerson's deep opposition to what Anne C. Rose has identified as a central element of Transcendentalism, their "interest in social reform by collective means" (93). Emerson's objections are twofold: the partiality of reform and the reliance on association. First, each reform effort makes "a sally against some single improvement, without supporting it by a total regeneration" (CW 3: 154). Because of its partiality, reform fails to accomplish anything significant in a world where "the wave of evil washes all our institutions alike" (CW 3: 154). Rather than transforming society, incomplete reform merely palliates one's conscience, making the reformer self-righteous and irascible; furthermore, it places too much importance on institutions by assigning to them the sole cause of all our evil. This partiality should not be confused with Emerson's pragmatism in "Man the Reformer," where he adjures his readers to "*tend* to the correction of these flagrant wrongs, by laying one stone aright every day" (CW 1: 155). While this pragmatic vision is limited, it does not assign

the essence of all evil to one single source—abuse of alcohol or the conditions of women or slavery—as the reformer does. Second, Emerson objects to the basic power behind reform: association. Such a structure depletes the power of the individual and involves the banding together of weak, faithless followers. In privileging the association over the individual, the reformers undercut the basis of reform—the regeneration of the individual.

In contrast to the partiality and group-mindedness of reform associations, Emerson posits individualism as the key to the transformation of society. In this second half of “New England Reformers,” Emerson develops not the mild pragmatism, but the radical idealism of “Man the Reformer.” While elements of this idealistic reform will be analyzed later in this chapter, certain key themes are manifest in “New England Reformers.” First, Emerson considers social problems to be rooted in the loss of meaningful religious experiences: “The disease with which the human mind now labors, is want of faith” (CW 3: 158). Lacking faith, institutions such as education become debased and cynical, co-opted toward materialistic ends or merely an opiate to palliate our soul sickness. The cure for such a disease is transcendence: “What remedy? Life must be lived on a higher plane” (CW 3: 159). One of the crucial aspects of this ascension is radical idealism, which impels us to reject the past in striving for ever greater perfection. The avatar of such idealism is the heroic, completely independent individual who paradoxically is united at the deepest level with all mankind. Through obedience to one’s inner genius and trust in the laws of the universe, the individual is able to effect the transformation of the world in a way that all the reform efforts could never approach.

## Inconsequential Politics

Like "New England Reformers," Emerson's "Politics" (1844) serves to debunk a commonly accepted means of social action—in this case politics—by demonstrating its insignificance. Central to Emerson's argument is his notion that "every government is an impure theocracy" (CW 3: 124); that is, all political parties and forms are founded on the "common conscience" (CW 3: 124), or aim toward the Good, but they inevitably misrepresent that ideal of goodness, distorting one aspect and creating an imbalance which is righted only by "beneficent necessity," which we should "trust infinitely" (CW 3: 124). This balancing act, a kind of naturalized Providence, implies that the commotion and solicitude surrounding hot political issues are unwarranted, causing "all public ends" to appear "vague and quixotic beside private ones" (CW 3: 125). Emerson analyzes this ineffectual effort to achieve a just political order from several perspectives. First, he addresses the political theory that "has possessed the mind of men" (CW 3: 118)—that political rights and duties are based on the conflicting claims of humans as persons versus humans as property owners. Related to practical problems of Emerson's day—most immediately the breadth of suffrage, slavery, and the distribution of power in the government, but also influencing issues such as debt relief, land policy, banking, and charters—this conflict pits the aristocratic against the democratic elements in society. Emerson refuses to take sides in this debate. Instead, he argues that the agitation which this issue creates is pointless, for under any form of government, both "persons and property must and will have their just sway" (CW 3: 120); both sides "exert their power, as steadily as matter its attraction" by what he calls "necessity" (CW 3: 120). Employed throughout the essay, the term *necessity* refers to the laws or

principles of the universe—physical, social and economic, moral and spiritual—which function regardless of human meddling. If, for example, the democratic element controls the power of the state, property owners will wield counter-pressure through "the necessities of the animal man" (CW 3: 121). What is considered politically significant is thus unimportant because the ideal toward which the democratic and aristocratic interests strive, human rights, is safeguarded "against the malignity or folly of the magistrate" not by laws and institutions, but by natural laws (CW 3: 121). Likewise, debates over the relative merits of monarchy versus democracy are irrelevant because "necessity" also brings about "the form and method of governing," a given system ultimately determined not by the conscious will of the founders but by the "habits of thought" of a given society (CW 3: 121). According to Emerson, the ado surrounding Whigs, Democrats, and other political parties is also overblown, for "the same benign necessity and . . . practical abuse" underlie the formation of political parties (CW 3: 122). Having "nothing perverse" in its intent or origin, each party aims to defend some valid right or promote some valid cause (CW 3: 122). However, in the practical realization of that goal, every party is "perpetually corrupted by personality"; that is, by the distorted interests of the leader (CW 3: 122). Thus, whether we vote for the Democrats, who have the "best cause," or the Whigs, who have the "best men," (CW 3: 122-3), it matters very little, for from neither party can we expect any significant benefit (CW 3: 123). Emerson similarly criticizes our anxious search for a secure foundation in a certain form of government because each excess or instability is counteracted through necessity, or the "laws of things," a kind of polarity that achieves balance (CW 3: 124).

While reformers and politicians place parties, associations, and institutions at the center of political life, Emerson argues that the true focal point should be the wise man, the hero or great individual whose praises Emerson sings in extravagant language: "To educate the wise man, the State exists; and with the appearance of the wise man, the State expires. The appearance of character makes the State unnecessary. The wise man is the State" (CW 3: 126). While pundits and scholars focus their attention on economics and the speeches of the President, the real transforming power in the state is the great individual, whose every utterance "alters the world" (CW 3: 126). Though advocating individualism, Emerson resists the libertarian implications of that philosophy, arguing instead that self-reliance precludes party affiliation or a specific party's platform and that it safeguards rights higher "than those of personal freedom, or the security of property" (CW 3: 128). Rather than allowing individualism to be co-opted by a political party, Emerson seeks to transform the party mentality by means of individualism.

How is individualism supposed to renovate the state? Emerson offers suggestions from two different directions. On the one hand, it is the lack of self-reliance that necessitates government. Defining self-reliance in terms of the ability to maintain self-control, Emerson argues that those who lack this virtue compensate by attempting to control others, causing the imposing individual to "overstep the truth, and come into false relations to" the oppressed (CW 3: 125). Not only does the leader's absence of self-reliance impel him to impose upon others, but the lack of the people's self-reliance makes a government of force necessary: "There will always be a government of force, where men are selfish" (CW 3: 128). Thus, in a society composed of self-reliant individuals, no

government is necessary, all public ends being accomplished by the agreement of a virtuous populace. This prospect of social change through self-reliant individuals is akin to Emerson's hope for economic change through a return to agricultural labor as suggested in "Man the Reformer," for it implies only minor social change unless the whole nation gets behind such a philosophy, an unlikely prospect at best. Thus, Emerson approaches social change from a second, though not necessarily contradictory, direction akin to his idealistic reform—that of the heroic individual. Because the "State must follow, and not lead the character and progress of its citizens," the transformation of culture is the key to political change. While a politician may alter society and politics temporarily, "every man of truth, like Plato or Paul," transforms it forever (CW 3: 117). This is because the philosopher, poet, and prophet sway a people's character and "the form of government" which predominates is merely "the expression of what cultivation exists in the population which permits it" (CW 3: 117-8). The individual transforms society, then, not by collective action with other individuals, but by building on "Ideas" (CW 3: 117).

While the early Emerson emphasized his idealistic over his pragmatic model of social change, both of these models supplant group reform efforts and political activity with individualism. While the works addressed above touch upon how the idealistic individual transforms society, I believe a more thorough treatment is to be found in such works as the "American Scholar," which offers specific advice regarding the social role of the self-reliant individual.

## Prophetic Duties of the American Scholar

Like "The New England Reformers," "The American Scholar" exposes the spiritual roots of social problems: the finitude and fallenness of man—characterized by a loss of meaning, a lack of values, and despair—a problem exacerbated by democratic mass society, the solution for which is self-reliance. The address begins and ends with descriptions of the social malady which plagues contemporary society—nihilism. Though Americans are "too busy to give to letters any more," they nevertheless demand meaning and "refuse to live on the sere remains of foreign harvests" (CW 1: 52). The failure to find such meaning results in "tragic consequences": weakness, malleability, disgust, servility, and suicide (CW 1: 69). Such complaints must be read within the setting of Calvin's concern for human finitude and Tocqueville's concern about the tyranny of the majority. For Calvin, the basic human problem was finitude and fallenness, the inability of man to rise to any true understanding because of his rootedness in a deficient and limited viewpoint (see pages 10-12, 26-28 above). Emerson saw this problem as basic to the human condition, a belief which many readers of Emerson miss. Indeed, one of the most persistent myths of Emerson criticism is the idea of Emerson as a cosmic optimist, a man unaware of evil. For instance, critics such as Parkes maintain that Emerson was "himself innocent of evil" (122), blind to the ugly reality of life because all evil impulses had been trained out of him by his Puritan upbringing. However, it is apparent that Emerson believed in a kind of fallenness in humanity, or as he observes in "Compensation," a "disease . . . in the will of rebellion and separation," with the result that "the intellect is at once infected" (CW 2: 62). This fall results in epistemological problems—a "fatal dislocation in our relation to



nature, distorting our modes of living, and making every law our enemy," a state of alienation which causes us to "stand amidst ruins" (CW 2: 36 "Prudence"). As Emerson notes in "Heroism," this fall also results in universal moral degradation, which amounts to a kind of original sin:

The disease and deformity around us certify the infraction of natural, intellectual, and moral laws, and often violation on violation to breed such compound misery. . . . Unhappily, no man exists who has not in his own person become, to some amount, a stockholder in the sin, and so made himself liable to a share in the expiation (CW 2: 147-8).

As these passages indicate, for Emerson, as for Calvin, such a state resulted not only in moral turpitude but also in an fragmented understanding of and alienated relationship with the world.<sup>2</sup>

While Emerson clearly believed that all societies are subject to such problems, these anxieties are compounded in a land where the voice of the majority circumscribes reality for all and stifles all dissenting voices. As we have seen (see pages 89-91 above) Tocqueville had argued in the first volume of *Democracy in America* (1835)—only two years previous to "The American Scholar"—that America was a land without freedom of opinion. Such control over thought, combined with the ugly reality of human finitude and fallenness, could produce, for Emerson, the nightmare society which he depicts in "Self-Reliance," a society dominated by a tyrannously a-religious majority, where pervasive materialism and nihilism are concealed underneath superficial adherence to empty forms, where independence of conscience, or "the manhood of every one of its members" (CW 2: 29), is quashed beneath "the unintelligent brute force that lies at the bottom of society" (CW 2: 33); that is, the weight of public opinion. Such a society demands conformity and the "surrender" of

"liberty and culture" (CW 2: 29); it "whips you with its displeasure" for any independence and produces a mass of weaklings, "timorous, desponding whimperers" who are "afraid of truth, afraid of fortune, afraid of death, afraid of each other" (CW 2: 43). As "The American Scholar" makes clear, this fear was a reality for Emerson: "Men are become of no account. Men in history, men in the world to-day are bugs, are spawn, and are called 'the mass' and 'the herd'" (CW 1: 65). Thus, according to Emerson, contemporary democratic man lives in what Heidegger calls the state of "being fallen"; that is, "curtailed within fixed culturally-derived modes of being, which inhibit its possibilities and constrict the manner in which the world and others will be understood" (DiCenso 670).

In this case, self-reliance is not only consistent with but also necessary for social change. The scholar must challenge men's thoughts, pushing them outside of the complacency of their limited perspectives: The scholar's duty "may all be comprised in self-trust. The office of the scholar is to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances" (CW 1: 62). In order to perform this function, the scholar must first understand the truth, and this requires him to rise above "private considerations," the finite limits and prejudices of his environment; the scholar must, like the Puritans, separate himself, standing apparently in a "state of virtual hostility" to society, making his own norms, religion and fashions (CW 1: 62). This drive to rise above finitude underlies Emerson's radical anti-historicism in such essays as "Self-Reliance," in which Emerson urges us to detach ourselves from "communities of opinion," those parties, churches, associations, and schools of thought which condition our thinking (CW 2: 32); to utter opinions which are not "private"—that is, conditioned, limited, or partial—but "necessary" (CW 2: 29). Because "the

centuries are conspirators against the sanity and authority of the soul" (CW 2: 38), "Self-Reliance" urges the individual discard the "corpse" of memory (CW 2: 33). Rather than accepting the rules imposed by society, the individual must "be doctrine, society, law, to himself" (CW 2: 43).

Once the scholar has achieved such a separate, super-finite state and received "the oracles of the human heart," Emerson claims in "The American Scholar," he must "impart" that commentary to those who are still clouded in ignorance: "Whatsoever new verdict Reason from her inviolable seat pronounces on the passing men and events of to-day, this he shall hear and promulgate" (CW 1: 62-3). Like that of prophets, heroes or great works of art, the scholar's function is to "inspire" (CW 1: 56). Speaking the authentic utterances of his private Self, he becomes the most powerful of social actors, great not because he "can alter matter," but because he "can alter my state of mind" (CW 1: 64). Approaching men in their sordid search for money and power, the scholar must "wake them, and they shall quit the false good, and leap to the true, and leave governments to clerks and desks," a "revolution" which will be accomplished not through institutions, associations, or the redistribution of wealth and power, but through "the upbuilding of a man" (CW 1: 65-6).

In *Transcendentalism as a Social Movement, 1830-1850*, Anne C. Rose traces the origins of transcendentalism to the attempt to transform society through collective means. While Rose's analysis provides a valuable antidote to Arthur Schlesinger's assertion that the transcendentalists had an "immunity" to Jacksonian democracy and its impulses for social reform (380), Rose privileges the corporate activism of the transcendentalists, thus finding it difficult to place Emerson within the scheme of that important movement. In identifying social

change with corporate activism, Rose is forced to marginalize Emerson because he allegedly rejects the “classic concept of a calling by absolving the intellectual of any immediate social responsibility. At least for Emerson, the Puritan balance of self and society was no longer possible. . . . he had to choose between extremes” (116). I would argue, however, that this argument assumes that social responsibility necessarily involves corporate action. On the contrary, for Emerson, it is through idealistic self-reliance that the conflicting claims within the Puritan tradition—the autonomy of the individual and a pure social order—are to be reconciled. In pursuing and speaking the honest truth, the scholar most benefits society. As Cavell explains, Emerson’s aversion—that is, his opposition to or criticism of society—“provides for the democratic aspiration the only internal measure of its truth to itself—a voice only this aspiration could have inspired, and if it is lucky, must inspire. Since his aversion is a *continual turning away* from society, it is thereby a *continual turning toward* it” (“Aversive Thinking” 155). This perspective explains Emerson’s conception of himself as an important actor in his society, for although he avoided corporate action early in his career, as the most renowned public speaker, he was in a position to educate the masses, “to tame, drill, divide, and break them up, and draw individuals out of them” (W 6: 249).<sup>3</sup> As his faith in this form of social change began to waver, Emerson could still see great value in the scholar’s prophetic duties:

I waked at night, & bemoaned myself, because I had not thrown myself into this deplorable question of Slavery, which seems to want nothing so much as a few assured voices. But then, in hours of sanity, I recover myself, & say, God must govern his own world, & knows his way out of this pit, without my desertion of my post which has none to guard it but me. I have quite other slaves to free than negroes, to wit, imprisoned spirits, imprisoned thoughts, far back in the brain of man,—far retired in the heaven of invention, &

which, important to the republic of Man, have no watchman, no lover, or defender, but I (*JMN* 13: 80).

Redefining America's libertarian freedom as autonomy or self-law, and democratic equality as the potential of all men to rise above their degraded states of being, Emerson aimed to speak to Americans in their own terms but to elevate the national dialect and its aims.

Emerson's method can be seen in the way that he redefines perhaps *the* dominant American value—individualism, one of the cornerstones of his thought. To many of Emerson's contemporaries, individualism was tantamount to selfishness, pride, and arrogant independence.<sup>4</sup> Emerson redefines this "possessive" individualism, as Wolfe terms it, to mean the precise opposite, humble piety, a point easily missed in a cursory reading. For example, in "The Over-Soul," Emerson expresses great confidence in man's connection with the transcendent: "As there is no screen or ceiling between our heads and the infinite heavens, so there is no bar or wall in the soul where man, the effect, ceases, and God, the cause, begins" (*CW* 2: 161); thus, there is an "ineffable. . . union between man and God in every act of soul. The simplest person, who in his integrity worships God, becomes God" (*CW* 2: 172-3). However, as Emerson's analysis of the self unfolds in "The Over-Soul," it becomes clear that such a divine connection means not human pride and confidence, but humility and obedience, for there are two aspects to the self—the normal state of consciousness, or *understanding*, and the aspect behind these faculties—the Soul, or God, often called *Reason*. In terms of which Calvinist antinomians might have approved, Emerson describes this Soul as that which must be relied upon, the source of all greatness and ideals, while the conscious ego is distorted, blind, empty, and futile:

From within or from behind, a light shines through us upon things, and makes us aware that we are nothing, but the light is all. A man is the façade of a temple wherein all wisdom and all good abide. What we commonly call man, the eating, drinking, planting, counting man, does not, as we know him, represent himself, but misrepresents himself. Him we do not respect, but the soul, whose organ he is, would he let it appear through his actions, would make our knees bend. . . . And the blindness of the intellect begins, when it would be something of itself. The weakness of the will begins, when the individual would be something of himself. All reform aims, in some one particular, to let the soul have its way through us; in other words, to engage us to obey (CW 2: 161).

A similar dualism underlies other apparently anti-Christian works, such as Emerson's lecture "Holiness" (1838), which criticizes the Christian doctrines of a personal God, the Bible as the sole source of divine knowledge, and Christ as the sole incarnation of God. While Emerson rejects atheism for its alienation and meaninglessness, he is just as critical of traditional Christianity for its superstitious encouragement of "a mean, cowering, and dependent attitude," its "external and alien" God, and its fixation upon particular men, actions, places, and rituals (EL 2: 341). Teaching tradition, rituals, and dogmas over a primary faith experience, Christianity serves only the "indolent," quits the "substance for the shadow," and results in the loss of vitality, creativity, and beauty (EL 2: 342). Emerson argues instead for the individual's "reliance on the Divine in himself" (EL 2: 343). However, though he brings the divine into the human heart, Emerson establishes an important "Dualism" between "the superior and inferior nature" (EL 2: 343). This dualism pervades our entire psychology: a higher nature "rules and tyrannises" over our wills so that we are directed by fate: "I am constrained in every moment to own a higher origin for events than the will I call mine"(EL 2: 343); intellectually, I am only "a surprised spectator" of my thoughts, which come from some "alien energy" (EL 2: 343); this higher nature

condemns our lower nature in any violation of the moral law, inspires a "keen resentment" in any profanation of the divinity, and engenders a natural love of worship in humans. This superior nature, called the moral sentiment, is the source of all human self-respect. This self-respect is not to be confused with pride, the virtue of the hero; rather, self-respect involves holiness; that is, the "self-surrender" to and "adoration" of the moral sentiment, the "acceptance of its dominion throughout our constitution" (*EL* 2: 346). This state, the highest possible in human experience, is based on the contrast between human "lowliness" and the exalted heights to which we aspire (*EL* 2: 346). A central element of this piety, then, is moral perfectionism—the yearning toward a theoretically possible yet never fulfilled ethical supremacy, the demand to achieve an "inexhaustible advancement" compared to which one's actual state necessarily engenders a sense of abasement:

Holiness is the undervaluing of all actual attainment. . . . In the glorified spirit, supreme victor over the temptations of this world, the eye is never retrospective; but always it dwells in a rapture of contemplation on the excellences of spiritual nature; and forever comparing what it has, with that which is unattained, is lowly and prostrate. (*EL* 2: 351).

Although Emerson criticizes Christians' "dependent attitude" upon an "external and alien" God (*EL* 2: 341), though he preaches a "divine unity" (*EL* 2: 346), his "Holiness" is expressed in language reminiscent of the dualism, guilt, and piety of the Calvinist tradition. Emerson similarly redefines the American values of freedom, equality, and democracy to revive piety in an increasingly impious age.<sup>5</sup>

Like ancient prophets, then, Emerson and his protege Thoreau were, in Cavell's words, "philosophers of direction, orienters, tirelessly prompting us to

be on our way, endlessly asking us where we stand, what it is we face" ("An Emerson Mood" 141-2). This conception of social action underlies Emerson's exaltation of the hero, the poet, and the idealist.<sup>6</sup> For instance, in "The Transcendentalist," Emerson argues for the social importance not of those radicals involved in corporate reform efforts, but of those idealists who practice extreme individualism. Emerson admits that these individuals seem ineffectual because they separate themselves from society: "They are lonely. . . . they repel influences; they shun general society" (CW 1: 208). Because this detachment bears "no solid fruit" (CW 1: 207), they seem to be "not good citizens" who fail to perform their share of the common burden (CW 1: 210). Like children, they do "nothing" but complain, "making immense demands" on those who act (CW 1: 209). Surprisingly, this failure to serve society stems not from an unwillingness to be active or connected. Emerson argues that the transcendentalists desire both intimate love and meaningful involvement in society: They cry "out for something worthy to do" (CW 1: 207), and they "wish to find society for their hope and religion" (CW 1: 210). Indeed, this conflict between the wish to act significantly in society and their inability to do so causes anguish: the transcendentalists are full of frustration and self-doubt, "miserable with inaction" and perishing "of rust and rest" (CW 1: 212).

Despite their desire to act in the world, the transcendentalists find worldly activities empty of meaning, a situation resulting from people's idolatrous reliance upon empty form over substance:

What you call your fundamental institutions, your great and holy causes, seem to them great abuses, and, when nearly seen, paltry matters. Each 'Cause,' as it is called,—say Abolition, Temperance, say, Calvinism, or Unitarianism,—becomes speedily a little shop, where the article, let it have been at first never so subtle and



ethereal, is now made up into portable and convenient cakes, and made into small quantities to suit purchasers (CW 1: 211).

Because each cause is void of meaning, the modes of maintaining these institutions are also "parts of this vicious cycle" and thus empty of meaning (CW 1: 211): "There is a spirit of cowardly compromise and seeming, which intimates a frightful skepticism, a life without love, an activity without an aim" (CW 1: 211). Instead of performing actions in support of these shams, the transcendentalists make their mark by speaking out against the sham. As the "most exacting and extortionate critics" (CW 1: 209), the transcendentalists serve society by awakening us to our idolatry: "By their unconcealed dissatisfaction, they expose our poverty, and the insignificance of man to man" (CW 1: 210). While Emerson is somewhat critical of the transcendentalists—their "strength and spirits are wasted in rejection" rather than in exerting power (CW 1: 215), and they must learn to "carry salvation" or communicate more effectively to the people (CW 1: 211)—he considers their role to be essential in modern society: "Amidst the downward tendency and proneness of things," it is essential that some people act as "gauges and meters of character"; such individualists are "rare and gifted men, enabling us "to compare the points of our spiritual compass, and verify our bearings from superior chronometers" (CW 1: 216). Though these lonely souls may lack an audience, the thoughts of these "hermits" will transform society in due time (CW 1: 216).

### **A Line of Continuity**

The preceding discussion involves two interrelated implications which must be addressed at this point: the problem of dogmatism and the problem of

Calvin. First, the metaphors of measurement, like that of Reason making pronouncements from her inviolable seat, are rather deceptive, for they imply a fixed standard against which reality can be measured. Such tropes lead toward the double-edged sword of Calvinist dogmatism (see pages 43-44 above), the idea that one rises above finitude to possess the Truth which others need but do not possess, the Truth which enables one not only to resist "incorrect" but also to institute "correct" authoritarianism. However, while Emerson's language often lends itself to a subjectivist dogmatism like that of Ann Hutchinson, Emerson consistently rejects such dogmatism along with other forms of rigidity, advocating instead a flexible view of truth and life. As he argues in "Self-Reliance," "Life only avails, not the having lived. Power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of a gulf, in the darting to an aim. This one fact the world hates, that the soul *becomes*" (CW 2: 40). This rejection of dogmatism is a part of his concern with human finitude. If humans, in their finitude, have a propensity to mistake a limited, partial, or metaphorical truth for ultimate reality, to buffer themselves from reality by means of rituals and dogmas, then the solution to this problem is not simply to assert another set of creeds to replace incorrect doctrine, for those dogmas themselves can become idols. Rather, the answer, for Emerson, involves formulating a theory which could both evade authoritarian dogmatism and empower the critique of society. It is on these terms, rather than the Marxist categories which Wolfe employs, that Emerson must be confronted, for his agenda for social change rests on this foundation. Discussed in greater detail below, Emerson's radicalism with flexibility—his attempt to create a mode of understanding which avoids both the dogmatism and the conformity which

plagued Calvinism—is, as Dilthey observed, one of his major contributions to the practice of American hermeneutics (*Essence of Philosophy* 31).

Second, the discussion above implies a resonance between the thought of Emerson and Calvin. There is a long critical pedigree which considers Emerson to be an heir of the Puritans.<sup>7</sup> Many of these critics would, by extension, recognize the influence of Calvin. Nevertheless, the implication of a Calvin-Emerson connection can be questioned on two bases. First, there is Emerson's conviction that man is God. According to this line of argument, not only did Emerson reject the Calvinist and Puritan sense of human depravity, but he broke with the optimistic Unitarians because they did not go far enough in identifying man and God. Holding doctrines so radically contrary to the core Calvinist doctrine of the depravity of man, Emerson can by no stretch of the imagination be considered a spiritual heir of Calvin. Certainly this argument finds support in many of the comments in Emerson's *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, where contemporary Calvinism is described as "fatuous" (JMN 4:309) and "mordant" (JMN 9: 349) and Calvinist sermons as "ludicrous" (JMN 5: 380); it is a "sulphurous," distorting creed (JMN 7: 234) that "destroys religion of character" (JMN 9: 132) and served as "chains" to bind "down Europe" (JMN 2: 251).

Such an argument, however, involves two questionable assumptions. First, it assumes that the thought of Calvin can be equated with ante-bellum Calvinism, especially the five key doctrines of Calvinism: total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints. As we have seen, however, these five doctrines comprise a very small portion of Calvin's thought, and while they find support in Calvin's writings, are more a distortion than a development of his thought. It is certainly possible to

agree with one aspect of a writer while vehemently rejecting others. Furthermore, this argument assumes that specific doctrines—whether human depravity or man as God—literally describe spiritual realities; that is, this argument accepts the dogmatic hermeneutics which lay at the heart of both contemporary Calvinism and Unitarianism. However, in privileging the primary vision over petrified institutions and linguistic representations, Emerson rejected such hermeneutics. While this point should become clearer below, for now we should note more closely Emerson's opinion regarding Calvin, Calvinism, and Unitarianism. Though Emerson could be critical of Calvin's thought and expression, repudiating the "barbarous indigestion of Calvin and the Middle Ages" (*JMN* 9: 314), he also praises Calvin, listing him with Socrates, Aristotle, Luther, and Abelard as great men who thought for themselves (*JMN* 3: 259). Calvin, then, had a valid, original vision, which, expressed perhaps poorly, grew formulaic in the scholasticism and legalism that became contemporary Calvinism. In its "idolatry" to Calvin's "past shining," Calvinism thus denies the light of God's revelation today (*JMN* 8: 380). As legalistic formulae of an original vision of the truth, "the errors of Calvinism are exaggerations only & may be traced directly to some spiritual truth from which they spring" (*JMN* 3: 225). Because there is some truth behind Calvinism, there is something positive to its legacy: it helped to break human bondage in placing reason above authority (*JMN* 2: 17); it showed how "peasants, paddies & old country crones" could be "liberalized and beatified" (*JMN* 9: 53); it contains "majestic power" (*JMN* 16: 44) and it has proven successful because it "organizes the best known facts of the world's history into a convenient mythus &, what is best, applied to the individual" (*JMN* 5: 212-3). Unfortunately, Calvinism embraces petrified dogmas

and institutions, and *any* form of dogmatism or second-hand religion is idolatry: "Every nation is degraded by the hobgoblins it worships instead of the eternal gods," whether that be Calvinism, popery or any of the vast numbers of intellectual and religious systems (*JMN* 15: 186).

This perspective helps explain Emerson's rejection of Unitarianism. While there are undoubtedly many complex reasons for Emerson's repudiation of Unitarianism, his comments in his journals indicates a criticism not of particular Unitarian doctrines, but of the way their doctrines were understood and expressed; that is, it was a problem with shallowness of their hermeneutics. Though he repeatedly praises Channing and his preaching, Emerson is vitriolic in his condemnation of Unitarianism, which he describes as "boyish" (*JMN* 5: 416); "cold, barren & odious" (*JMN* 7: 40); and "corpse-cold" (*JMN* 9: 381). It is "charlatanism" (*JMN* 10: 20), an "icehouse" composed of "all externals" (*JMN* 8: 182) and "empty negations" (*JMN* 5: 145), signifying an era of "triviality & verbiage" (*JMN* 11: 110). If Emerson objected primarily to the dogmas of Unitarians, he should neither have judged them so harshly nor praised Channing so highly, for the two were fundamentally in agreement over doctrine. Nor should he have identified Calvinism and Unitarianism as committing the same errors, for the doctrines which Channing and his fellow Unitarians preached contradicted that of the Calvinists. However, both Calvinists and Unitarians adhered to a straightforward dogmatism which was grounded in the epistemology and theory of language espoused by Locke, and it was against these theories that James Marsh published his edition of Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* and Horace Bushnell developed his theory of language (*Gura, The Wisdom of Words* 15-71). Emerson considered Calvinism and Unitarianism as

similar in this more fundamental respect: He describes both religions as espousing “cold crudities” (*JMN* 7: 322) and as preaching in a “carnal” manner (*JMN* 7: 183); he describes both Calvinism and Unitarianism as empty forms: “They were the heart’s work, but the fervent generation that built them passed away, things went downward & the form remains but the soul is well nigh gone (*JMN* 3: 301). Most importantly, Emerson describes Calvinists and Unitarians as committing the same hermeneutic error, essentially idolatry, which plagues all institutional religions: “They are clinging to little, positive, verbal formal versions of the moral law & very imperfect versions too, while the infinite laws, the laws of the Law. . . are all unobserved” (*JMN* 4: 83-4). For this reason, Emerson argues that contemporary liberation from Calvinism does not mean that we have “broken any idols. It is but a transfer in the object not a redemption from the sin, that we have got” (*JMN* 7: 396). While Emerson broke with Calvinism, then, we cannot assume that he rejected the influence of Calvin’s open hermeneutic; indeed, in his very rejection of both Calvinism and Unitarianism, Emerson employs arguments and language which parallel Calvin’s in his attacks upon the scholasticism of the Catholic Church.

A second argument against the influence of Calvin on Emerson is based on Emerson’s demand that we see for ourselves, relying completely upon ourselves, taking no one’s ideas as guides to the truth: “Never need we ask Calvin or Swedenborg, never need we ask Moses or the prophets, if we are in danger or what God will do. There is God in you” (*JMN* 5: 230). Of course, ever since Hume’s critique of empiricism, positing any causal connection is fraught with problems, and it is true that Emerson sought unmediated experience of the transcendent; however, two responses are in order: first, because of the split

between everyday and transcendent realities (see below), one is not always capable of seeing God directly. Thus, if Emerson writes, “When I rest in perfect humility, when I burn with pure love, what can Calvin or Swedenborg say to me?” (*JMN* 4: 382), we must ask, “What happens when I am not burning?” As we will see below, in such a case, it is perfectly valid to seek stimulation via others’ ideas to put oneself back into a state of perfect humility. Second, the real question is not whether Emerson recognized or admitted any influences, for historicism seeks to uncover the historical conditions, horizons, or frames of reference which shape meaning—regardless of whether the author was aware of those conditions. Unless we deny causality, we must admit the possibility of influence, a possibility implicit in all studies which recognize the shaping hand of Puritanism, Platonism, German Idealism, Romanticism, or Eastern mysticism. Where there is a historical horizon and a number of similarities, it is certainly valid to suggest, if not an influence, at the very least a line of continuity.

Such a horizon clearly existed for Emerson, who was steeped in both the conservative and more heterodox sides of Calvinism and Christianity. Contiguous with a line of ministers stretching back to the days of the Puritans, Emerson was connected by social and family ties to the Puritan tradition, whose history he studied at great length through the *Massachusetts Historical Society Collections*, Peter Oliver’s *History of the Puritans*, the historical writings of Thomas Hutchinson and George Bancroft, and works by Puritans Oliver Cromwell and Peter Bulkeley. He read not only classics within the conservative Calvinist tradition, such as works by Augustine, John Bunyan, and Jonathan Edwards, but also hundreds of contemporary expository and polemical articles from a wide range of perspectives—from conservative Calvinist to Unitarian to mystical,

spiritualist, and Hindu—in such magazines as *Christian Examiner*, *New Jerusalem Magazine*, *Biblical Repertory*, *Biblical Repository*, *Christian Disciple and Theological Review*, *Christian Observer*, *Christian Register*, *Quarterly Christian Spectator*, and *Unitarian Advocate*. Emerson read deeply from the devotional writers of the seventeenth century who, according to J. Russell Roberts, placed “worship above dogma” (309) and became for Emerson “a powerful liberating force freeing him from the narrow limits of dogma” (299). These included writers within the liberal Calvinist tradition, such as Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius, whom Emerson read at Harvard, the Puritan non-conformist Richard Baxter, the Quaker Robert Barclay and especially the Presbyterian Robert Leighton—who was perhaps the most influential theologian for Coleridge and Marsh, and whom Emerson both praises (*JMN* 5: 145) and quotes profusely (see, for example, *JMN* 5: 127, 140, 142, 158, 163, 178, 181, 187, 206, 207, 220). Emerson was also sparked by contemporaries who owed a debt to the liberal tradition of Calvinist thought, such as his Aunt Mary Moody Emerson whose eccentric Calvinism impressed Emerson; Thomas Carlyle and Samuel Taylor Coleridge; James Marsh, whose obituary Emerson clipped and included in his journal (VII, 517), whom he met in 1831 (Richardson 115), and whose edition of Coleridge’s *Aids* had, according to Richardson, “an electric effect on Emerson” (*Emerson: Mind on Fire* 93); and Horace Bushnell, whose books Emerson read and considered to be among the best works published in the United States (*Journal* XI: 20) and whom Emerson listed with Channing as a great contemporary preacher (*Journal* XVI:71). All of this was in addition to the 36 editions of the Bible that Emerson owned.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to noting such a horizon hued with many colors from the Calvinist tradition, we can interpret numerous aspects of Emerson’s thoughts—if



not in his evaluation of human potentiality, then at least in key aspects of his metaphysics, hermeneutics, and linguistics—as akin to Calvin’s, a sufficient number, I would argue, to suggest a line of continuity between the two thinkers. Of course, many of the points of similarity between Emerson and Calvin can be seen from other perspectives, for instance, as similarities between Emerson and Oriental thought, British Romanticism, Platonism, and German Romanticism. It is certainly not reasonable to argue for an exclusive influence; indeed, in most cases, influences upon Emerson can be seen as complementary, a certain aspect of Calvin being similar to certain aspects of Platonism, Hinduism, and Romanticism. Emerson tended to see such similarities, arguing that "the eminent men of each church. . . think and say the same thing" (*JMN* 4: 84). For instance, Emerson's theory of correspondence was almost certainly influenced by both Swedenborg and the British romantics; however, it behooves the critic to discover what made Emerson receptive to such influences and how he understood this theory of symbols; that is, the critic should try to understand Emerson's horizon; in this case, the centuries-old tradition of typology evolving from Calvin to the Puritans and Edwards. As Arthur Christy, arguing for the influence of Eastern thought upon Emerson, observes in *The Orient in American Transcendentalism*, the Christian tradition of mysticism "emphatically did influence Emerson. But it also paved the way to Hinduism, making him receptive to it" (84). The result was a "curious synthesis of Christian beatitude and Oriental monism" (77). A similar pattern can be noted regarding other influences upon Emerson: a horizon that fosters receptivity and a synthesis of different traditions. In this study, the indication of similarities between Calvin and Emerson does not imply exclusive influence; rather, it helps clarify the

context or horizon in which Emerson wrote and thus facilitates our understanding of his meaning.

### **The Function of Hermeneutics: Experiencing Reality**

The basic structure of Emerson's hermeneutic thought is deeply hued with concepts akin to Calvin's. At the heart of Emerson's view of truth is the concept of the Over-soul, or Being, or Reason, which expresses itself in infinite variety. Although it is impersonal, the Over-Soul is, like the God of Calvin (see pages 28-33 above), incomprehensible to finite humans and is known only in an accommodated fashion through its effects or symbols, which comprise the material world. As Emerson notes in "Circles," "These manifold tenacious qualities, this chemistry and vegetation, these metals and animals, which seem to stand there for their own sake, are means and methods only,—are the words of God, and as fugitive as other words" (CW 2: 186). Just as the God of Calvinism constantly expresses himself through the world which he constantly upholds or continuously creates, the Over-Soul continuously produces symbols to express itself out of its inexhaustible essence. Thus, as commentators have pointed out, Emerson employs the typological mode of thinking which had developed through three centuries of Calvinist thought.<sup>9</sup>

In the attempt to understand this ineffable essence, Emerson's hermeneutic practice begins, like Calvin's (see pages 30-33 above), with a mirror which reflects the transcendent and guides man to the living Truth, a reference point which man is incapable of fully appreciating because of his limited and alienated state. Replacing Calvin's Word of God with Nature, however, Emerson continues the moves initiated by Calvin and augmented by Jonathan

Edwards (see pages 76-77 above), broadens out the divine text to include everything, and refuses to privilege the Bible over other texts and text-analogues. Like Calvin, Emerson aimed in his hermeneutics to put the individual back into direct relationship with transcendent reality. As Emerson explains in "Self-Reliance," "we lie in the lap of immense intelligence" and are endowed with a connection "to the divine spirit so pure, that it is profane to seek to interpose helps" (CW 2: 37-8). It is the job of correct hermeneutics to reestablish that intimacy to which we are born. Contrary to Logan's assertion that hermeneutics was not problematic for Emerson ("Hermeneutics and American Literature" 102), it is in this attempt to bridge the gap between ordinary experience and transcendent reality that Emerson's hermeneutic principles become highly problematic, for, as Emerson argues in "The Transcendentalist," "these two states diverge every moment, and stand in wild contrast":

The worst feature of this double consciousness is, that the two lives, of the understanding and of the soul, which we lead, really show very little relation to each other, never meet and measure each other; one prevails now, all buzz and din; and the other prevails then, all infinitude and paradise; and, with the progress of life, the two discover no greater disposition to reconcile themselves (CW 1: 213-4).

This schism between the finite and infinite impacts hermeneutics at the point of language. Because one cannot accurately communicate or understand the Soul by means of language, no system of thought can be relied upon as a guide; no perspective is final or ultimately correct. As Emerson explains in "The American Scholar," "None is quite perfect. As no air-pump can by any means make a perfect vacuum, so neither can any artist entirely exclude the conventional, the local, the perishable from his book, or write a book of pure thought" (CW 1: 55). Indeed, for Emerson, such purity of expression is

“perchance, the least part of [a writer’s] volume” (CW 1: 58). As a result, others’ expressions of their deepest experiences, that is, intellectual systems, cannot serve to describe the transcendent realm in itself and thus enable us to understand that realm. Since all systems are ultimately partial, they should not be taken as final truths, but only as means to an end. When they are turned into creeds, or articles of faith, ideas become, as Emerson observes in “Self-Reliance,” a “disease of the intellect” (CW 2: 45). Instead, language and intellectual systems should function to drive us out of our entrenched perspective, opening us up to new views by exposing us to the ideas of another. New perspectives expel us from the comfort of tradition, ritual and creed, laying us open to direct connection with the Over-Soul just as, for Calvin, proper interpretation of scripture should wrench us out of our complacency and put us into direct relationship with the living Word of God. Thus, in “Self-Reliance,” Emerson argues that the value of unconventional words is not the “thought they may contain,” but “the sentiment they instill” of viewing life outside of one’s culturally-conditioned pre-conceptions (CW 2: 27). For this reason, Emerson suggests in “Self-Reliance” that intellectual systems are useful only for a time: Through the power of new concepts, “the pupil will find that his mind has grown by the study of his master’s mind. But in all unbalanced minds, the classification is idolized, passes for the end, and not for a speedily exhaustible means,” and becomes a prison which blinds one to reality (CW 2: 45).

“The Over-Soul” illustrates how Emerson creatively utilizes these concepts common to Calvin and non-Christian sources to explain his hermeneutic theories. Though Emerson frequently characterizes the transcendent realm in highly Kantian terms, contrasting it, for instance, with mere phenomena, and

though he employs a pantheism inspired largely by Hindu Scriptures, German Romanticism, and Christian mysticism, "The Over-Soul" also employs concepts reminiscent of Calvin's description of how we come to an understanding of the transcendent deity.<sup>10</sup> Like Calvin, Emerson privileges an experiential over a cognitive or linguistic view of knowledge. Because the Soul is "too subtile" for language, being "undefinable, unmeasurable" (CW 2: 161), we cannot approach the Soul through the concepts imposed by language, nor can connection with this realm be accurately described through language. Instead, connection with this realm involves a non-linguistic or pre-linguistic experience: "The soul answers never by words, but by the thing itself that is inquired after" (CW 2: 167). The truth contained in such an experience is not denotative, but experiential: "The soul's communication of truth is the highest event in nature, since then it does not give somewhat from itself, but gives itself, or passes into and becomes that man whom it enlightens" (CW 2: 166). Thus, it is "delusive" to seek "an answer in words": "Do not require a description of the countries toward which you sail. The description does not describe them to you, and to-morrow you arrive there, and know them by inhabiting them" (CW 2: 168). For Calvin, confidence in the Word is grounded in a self-authenticating experience by means of the Holy Spirit, and sole interpreter of that Word is the Holy Spirit that inspired it. "The Over-Soul" similarly grounds our understanding in the Soul, which is both the "perceiver and revealer of truth" (CW 2: 166), and the Soul guarantees the certainty of its truth by a self-validating experience: "We know the truth when we see it, let skeptic and scoffer say what they choose" (CW 2: 166).

"The Over-Soul" includes further hints of Calvin in its description of the touch of grace which opens the door to such experiences. The "elect individual" is wrenched out of his lowly condition by means of a "throe of growth" (CW 2: 163). Like justification, this state is not one of "particular virtues," but is "the region of all virtues" (CW 2: 163). Intellectually, this state liberates one from a limited perspective into a kind of a-perspectival or super-perspectival state that is the hermeneutic key by which the "horoscope of the ages" can be read (CW 2: 160):

The heart which abandons itself to the Supreme Mind finds itself related to all its works, and will travel a royal road to particular knowledges and powers. In ascending to this primary and aboriginal sentiment, we have come from our remote station on the circumference instantaneously to the centre of the world, where, as in the closet of God, we see causes, and anticipate the universe, which is but a slow effect (CW 2: 164).

Like the regenerate state in Calvin's scheme (see pages 12-13 above), an Emersonian throe of growth is not a human achievement. Rather, it comes to the individual through sincerity and self-exposure, or "casting aside your trappings, and dealing man to man in naked truth" (CW 2: 172); through a receptivity in which men "accept it thankfully everywhere, and do not label or stamp it with any man's name" (CW 2: 165); through humility and self-effacement: "This energy does not descend into individual life on any other condition than entire possession" (CW 2: 171). Connection with the transcendent comes not through any rationally controllable means, but is the result of forces outside human control.

As these passages indicate, Emerson emphasized the importance of being earnest and open in inquiring after the truth, values which are apparent in his early lecture "Modern Aspects of Letters" (1836). In this lecture, Emerson

criticizes the lack of significant American literature and attributes this deficit to artificiality and formalism, the privileging of form over content: Americans should avoid making "counterfeit books and reputations" and the "disposition to put the forms for the things, the plausible for the good, the appearance for the reality (*EL* 1: 381). Emerson criticizes Sir Walter Scott for his artificiality: He is "no lover or carer for absolute truth. The conventions of society are sufficient for him and he never pondered . . . the enterprise of presenting a purer and truer system of social life. He was content instead to have an idol" (*EL* 1: 376). In addition to sincerity, openness is necessary in a great thinker and writer. Because "nothing which has been done forecloses any of" the avenues of truth, we must always remain receptive to new ideas: "The wise man ever finds himself conscious of knowing nothing but being ready to begin to know. He is as if just born and ready to ask the first question. Truth is new to every mind and to every moment" (*EL* 1: 383). Such receptivity requires of the writer wakefulness and the quest for a very personal truth, one consistent with not only universal truth but also the "law of *his* being" (*EL* 1: 382). This is the basis of Emerson's criticism of Byron, whose "pride and selfishness . . . made him an incurious observer," caused him to explore not nature but simply his own "words and emotions," and thus resulted in a "famine of meaning" and "poverty of thought" (*EL* 1: 373). In contrast to these writers, Emerson praises Coleridge for his earnest searching for the truth and his receptivity to the truth in all places and from all men: "His eye was fixed upon Man's reason as the faculty in which the very Godhead manifested itself or the Word was anew made flesh. His reverence for the Divine Reason was truly philosophical and made

him regard every man as the most sacred object in the Universe, the Temple of the Deity" (*EL* 1: 378).

Emerson's view of hermeneutics and language as developed above helps explain his apparently contradictory attitude toward Calvin, Calvinism, Channing, and Unitarianism. If religious doctrines are essentially denotative, Emerson should have privileged both Channing and Unitarianism as doctrinally more accurate than Calvin or even the liberal Christians Marsh and Bushnell. However, as statements intended to provoke, doctrines correctly handled offer direction, not description. As Hodder observes, Emerson's work "is not essentially a rhetoric of representation but a rhetoric of provocation" (101). It would be consistent, then to praise the prophetic visions of thinkers as disparate as Calvin and Channing while excoriating the institutions devoted to perpetuating their dogmas. This perspective also explains why studies which categorize Emerson based primarily upon a set of doctrines distorts the spirit of his work. For example, Alexander Kern's "The Rise of Transcendentalism, 1815-1860" is a useful and influential summary of transcendentalist thought, concisely identifying some of the key aspects of a wide group of writers. However, this work is apt to lead to the misconception that the transcendentalists' and Emerson's projects can be equated with a series of doctrines, as if one is an Emersonian to the extent that one adheres to certain dogmas. Thus, Kern lists nine doctrines which the transcendentalists accepted and eleven that they rejected (250-1) as if he were listing the articles of faith that formed a solid "foundation for their religious belief" (270). The various transcendentalists are schematized according to the exact sect of idealism to which they adhere, whether Platonic, neo-Platonic, Kantian, or Coleridgian. Emerson is similarly



portrayed in a catechistic light: Emerson defends "doctrines" (264) which are eventually "completely worked out" (268) until they evolve into a "permanent form" (266) which Kern dubs "Emerson's system" (270). While such an analysis may simply be intended to provide a convenient schemata by which to understand the complex thought of a diverse group of individuals, the result is that it potentially distorts Emerson's program of pushing the individual past language toward experience itself and ignores his portrayal of linguistic representations as ever in danger of becoming idols which supplant reality.

The danger of such literalism is particularly acute in reading Emerson's "Divinity School Address," which is famous for its attack upon Christian formalism and for its radical assertions: "If a man is at heart just, then in so far is he God; the safety of God, the immortality of God, the majesty of God do enter into that man with justice" (CW 1: 78). In a literal or descriptive reading of the man-as-God theology, Emerson would be open to the charge of "egotheism" (Kern 255). As a description of reality, how is one to take this idea? Does Emerson mean that he literally created the universe, holds its fate in his hands, and issues eternal decrees? And how is this egomania supposed to harmonize with Emerson's emphasis on humility and selflessness? However, as a form of what can be called discursive intervention—that is, concepts employed not as description but as intervention in a cultural situation in order to transform that situation—the man-as-God theology acts as an invitation, sanction, and mandate to create meaningful experience, to dispense with external authority, and to place complete trust in one's private vision. As provocations to experience direct revelation, such radical statements certainly imply a significant break with traditional Christianity, but this is a break with how dogmas are understood, not

simply what the truth is, for even in critiquing Christianity, Emerson employs concepts resembling those which Calvin employed in attacking Catholicism, concepts which highlight the centrality of correct hermeneutic practices for spiritual development. In "The Divinity School Address," Emerson defines spirituality as a certain way of understanding and relating to reality. It is "a reverence and delight in the presence of certain divine laws" (CW 1: 77). In explaining this experience, Emerson employs perceptual imagery throughout the address.<sup>11</sup> Spirituality "perceives" the spiritual beneath the physical as an "insight" (CW 1: 77). The ideal teacher can "see" the spiritual laws "come full circle; shall see the world to be a mirror of the soul; shall see the identity of the law of gravitation with purity of heart" (CW 1: 93). These images of perception, reminiscent of Jonathan Edwards' concept of the spiritual sense, link up with several themes which run through the address. First, the concept of perception punctuates the importance of a certain kind of knowledge which, in Calvin's words, "takes root in the heart" (*Institutes* I. v. 9; see pages 35-6 above), for "the perception" of the Soul "awakens" the mind (CW 1: 79). This active knowledge contrasts with dogmas, or "thought" that "may work cold and intransitive in things" (CW 1: 79). Second, the concept of divine perception underscores the importance of primary experience. Unlike verbal formulae, spiritual perception "cannot be received at second hand" (CW 1: 80); rather, taking up the challenge of the Protestant reformers, we must "dare to love God without mediator or veil" (CW 1: 90). First-hand spiritual perception is central to the religious experience because the object of such perception, divine law, can be experienced but not communicated: "These laws refuse to be adequately stated. They will not be written out on paper, or spoken by the tongue. They elude our

persevering thought; yet we read them hourly in each other's faces, in each other's actions, in our own remorse" (CW 1: 77). In relating such experiences through language, we "sever" the divine unity and "describe or suggest" it "by painful enumeration of many particulars" (CW 1: 77). Emerson's language, then, must be taken as a rough approximation of the spiritual experience intended not as a litmus test of correctness but as a stimulus toward direct experience.

In "The Divinity School Address," the two errors which Emerson identifies in contemporary Christianity—an excessive focus on the person of Christ and the denial of revelation today—are hermeneutic and linguistic in nature. Forgetting that the incommunicable Soul must be experienced first hand, that language cannot truly describe the transcendent, that "no doctrine of the Reason" can "be taught by the Understanding," Christians supplant primary experience with linguistic formulae: "The idioms of [Christ's] language, and the figures of his rhetoric, have usurped the place of his truth; and churches are not built on his principles, but on his tropes" (CW 1: 81). For instance, when Christ speaks of miracles, he means something perfectly consistent with naturalism but, when understood too literally, the word is a "Monster" (CW 1: 81). This error is not limited to Christianity; it "corrupts all attempts to communicate religion" (CW 1: 82). The rejection of first-hand religious perception banishes God's revelation from the contemporary world, "throttles the preacher," and causes the best institutions to become an "uncertain and inarticulate voice" (CW 1: 84). It causes the church to be "usurped by a formalist" (CW 1: 85) so that the prayers and dogmas of the church, once deeply meaningful, are "wholly insulated from anything now extant in the life and business of the people" (CW 1: 86). In "losing sight" of the law, the Church loses its reason for being, becomes "sick and

faithless," and abandons the world to despair (CW 1: 88). Just as Calvin had noted regarding the power of Catholic scholasticism, Emerson argues that such "hollow, dry, creaking formality" (CW 1: 87) is sustained by "indolence and fear" and by the desire for ecclesiastical control over a "foreclosed and monopolized" truth (CW 1: 82):

You shall not be a man even. You shall not own the world; you shall not dare, and live after the infinite Law that is in you, and in company with the infinite Beauty which heaven and earth reflect to you in all lovely forms; but you must subordinate your nature to Christ's nature; you must accept our interpretation (CW 1: 82).

The result is the despair of a people who "love to be blind in public" because they "cannot see in secret" (CW 1: 89).

If the errors of Christianity are rooted in hermeneutic and linguistic errors, then, as Emerson suggests in the "Divinity School Address," right understanding and right speaking are crucial for the recovery of meaningful religious experience. Through language and through the examples of their lives, Christ and the "divine bards" offer not teachings about the divine, but "noble provocations" to perceive the divine personally (CW 1: 83). Religious expression can function correctly only when inciting its listeners, but it is a crucial function, necessary for both the speaker and the listener: "Always the seer is a sayer" because an unspoken perception of the divine "lies like a burden on the man" (CW 1: 84); moreover, the people stand in need "of a new revelation" from such seers to stem the "universal decay" of the church (CW 1: 84). Such speech is so important that preaching is one of the two major gifts of Christianity to the world because it encourages "the waiting, fainting hearts of men with new hope and new revelation" (CW 1: 92). However, to be effective, to avoid the dead legalism of contemporary Christianity, such speech must be the record of one's

authentic experience with the divine: “The spirit only can teach. Not any profane man, not any sensual, not any liar, not any slave can teach, but only he can give who has; he only can create who is (CW 1: 84). Unlike the minister who is less real than the snowstorm brewing outside, the real preacher must “convert life into truth” by experiencing life directly and bringing that experience into his preaching (CW 1: 85-6).

### **Emerson's Hermeneutic Method: A Flexible Dialectic**

In *Emerson's Rhetoric of Revelation*, Alan Hodder argues that there are Christian and biblical elements in Emerson's concept of revelation, aspects which bear strong family resemblance to what I have identified as the goal of Emerson's hermeneutics. Hodder points out, for instance, that while Emerson considers nature to be like a book with a decipherable meaning for man, nature itself does not supply the basis of such a view; rather, it is the Christian tradition of typology which sanctions such a view of nature (15). Hodder further analyzes the style of Emerson's writing, particularly in *Nature*, in terms which I have discussed above. According to Hodder, Emerson's disjunctive style—lacking in cohesion or logical development—is organized around the self-evident aphorism, thus reflecting Emerson's conception of revelation as a self-authenticating experience. The function of these aphorisms, like that of hermeneutics, is to propel the individual into a direct experience of the truth, or to lead the reader past the text to experience the revelation itself; the text strives for its own obsolescence (121-142). This goal is achieved not only through the sententious epiphany but also through the unsettling elements of the *Nature*

(1836)—its disruptive shifts in tone, its lack of cohesion, its disconcerting tension between expectation and fulfillment (115-121).

Hodder's analysis is valuable for directing critical attention to the artfulness of Emerson's prose and to Emerson's conception of revelation. Hodder also rightly recognizes that the method of accessing revelation is the dialectic. Hodder portrays this dialectical methodology in terms of creation and *kenosis*, or self-abnegation, death, and emptiness. Hodder also employs the images of centripetal forces aimed at self-transcendence and centrifugal forces aimed at self-recovery (85-90). According to Hodder, this dialectic of life emerging from emptiness and death was based on Christian psychology and reinforced by hard personal experience (51-65, 85-90). While there is certainly some truth to this view, I would add that the dialectical elements in Emerson's hermeneutics are connected not simply to traditional religious psychology but also to particular problems inherent in both Emerson's and Calvin's hermeneutics. The root of this problem is a tension—what we might call the contradiction of authenticity—embedded in the thought of both Calvin and Emerson. According to this line of thinking, authentic understanding involves not the mental assent to a distant proposition, but the internalization of a living reality, a process which involves incorporating an idea into one's existing structure of meaning. This concept of authenticity underlies the doctrine that all descriptions of God must be accommodated to our experience and that we can understand those descriptions only if we experience God personally and directly; that is, that God meets us where we are, in our finitude. These doctrines imply that both previous experience and the worldview which derives from that experience are essential for humans to find meaning in a text, text-analogue, or

religious experience. Thus, in the world of Calvin and Emerson, pre-conceptions are, by implication, essential for any meaning to take place. However, to be living in the past is to be living an inauthentic existence, divorced from the new reality expressed by the ever-creative, ever-communicative God or Over-soul, acting according to obsolete tradition rather than the living commands of God. Furthermore, even if our past experience of God was indeed authentic, we cannot guarantee that our current understanding or assumptions accurately reflect that experience, for no experience of the deity can be precisely reflected linguistically, nor can conclusions be drawn with certainty from those experiences. Living authentically in the moment involves the sloughing off of past assumptions and experiences, or, in Calvin's words, to "unlearn all that we have learned apart from Christ" (*Commentary 2 Tim. 3:14*), no matter how authentic those experiences may once have been. In both Calvin's and Emerson's thought, then, there is a tension between authentic meaning and authentic experience; between, on the one hand, the acceptance of previous assumptions and experience and, on the other, the rejection of granted assumptions and the drive to transcend the past.

Thus, in Emerson's writings, alongside the yearning and admonition to escape finitude, repudiate the past, and reject all pre-conceptions is the admission that we cannot. In his discussion of the interpretation of the past in "History," for example, Emerson repeatedly asserts that a good reader necessarily and rightly views history in terms of his own experiences, as limited as those experiences may be, and transfers "the point of view from which history is commonly read, from Rome and Athens and London to himself" (CW 2: 6). Our contemporary, private experience becomes the touchstone for determining the

meaning of the past: "All history becomes subjective; in other words, there is properly no history; only biography" (CW 2: 6). If we try, as many of his contemporaries suggested, to strip away all our own presuppositions to judge either objectively or purely from the perspective of the author, we miss the mark.<sup>12</sup> Instead of corresponding to the author's alleged consciousness, "the fact narrated must correspond to something in me to be credible or intelligible" (CW 2: 4). However, in a characteristic move, Emerson refuses to privilege one principle, subjectivism, and asserts that history also has its own integrity that can awaken in the perceiver latent aspirations and potentialities—"his unattained but attainable self" (CW 2: 5)—even if these aspirations have never been experienced personally. And since Emerson believes in each individual's connection to Mankind or Mind or Soul, and of the connection of each to all, he also believes it is possible for the individual to rise above his partiality, to aspire to and thus understand everything in its own integrity: "There is nothing but is related to us, nothing that does not interest us,—kingdom, college, tree, horse or iron shoe, the roots of all things are in man" (CW 2: 10). We should struggle to transcend our limited viewpoint, to "attain and maintain that lofty sight where facts yield their secret sense" (CW 2: 6). Likewise, literature can take us out of our limited experience, providing a "platform" from which we can evaluate our present life in all its limitations (CW 2: 185 "Circles"). In short, interpretation makes it possible to rise above our experience—the same experience which Emerson claims to be the limit of interpretation. The result is similar to Calvin's circular or dialectical hermeneutics of the Word and the Spirit: "In like manner, all public facts are to be individualized, all private facts are to be generalized. Then at once



all History becomes fluid and true, and Biography deep and sublime" (CW 2: 12).<sup>13</sup>

This contradiction of authenticity shapes the dialectic or circularity which pervades other elements of Emerson's hermeneutics, such as his dialectic of immediate experience and distance. On the one hand, Emerson values involvement in the world as essential for understanding that world. In "Self-Reliance," for example, Emerson extols connection to one's temporality as a means of spiritual nourishment. The individual must "take himself for better, for worse, as his portion," embrace the sustenance derived from "his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given him to toil" (CW 2: 28), and accept his divinely-ordained "place. . . , the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events" (CW 2: 28). The basis of this call for involvement in the world is the notion that man and the world are intimately connected to one another, both twin aspects of the same universal Being: "The sense of being which in calm hours rises, we know not how in the soul, is not diverse from things, from space, from light, from man, but one with them, and proceeds obviously from the same source whence their life and being also proceed" (CW 2: 37). Connection to this unity is the "fountain of action and of thought" and "the lungs of that inspiration which giveth man wisdom" (CW 2: 37).

A similar emphasis on involvement in life is advocated in "The American Scholar," in which Emerson seems to privilege action over contemplation: "Character is higher than intellect. Thinking is the function. Living is the functionary" (CW 1: 61). Advocating the use of the "intellect receptive," Emerson urges us to live close to nature, to "embrace the common," to explore "the familiar, the low" (CW 1: 67), to learn by experimenting actively or, in

Heidegger's Nietzschean image, by using the hammer. Emerson is clear that such openness to experience should involve seeing things anew, without the blinders of prejudice or presuppositions: "We should open our senses, clear away, as we can, all obstruction from the fact, and suffer the intellect to see" (CW 2: 195 "Intellect").

Amidst these assertions that truth is found within involvement in daily experience, Emerson repeatedly calls for the distancing of the subject from his experience. For instance, in "Self-Reliance," Emerson admonishes his readers to live "with nature in the present, above time" (CW 2: 39). This oxymoron captures both directions in Emerson's thought—both towards and away from finitude and temporality. Along with involvement in the horizontal world, one needs "isolation" which involves "elevation" (CW 2: 41): "You take the way from man, not to man" (CW 2: 39).

Likewise, in "The American Scholar," Emerson extols the act of thought, which distances us from our immediate experience:

The scholar of the first age received into him the world around; brooded thereon; gave it the new arrangement of his own mind, and uttered it again. It came into him, life; it went from him, truth. It came to him, short-lived actions; it went from him, immortal thoughts. It came to him, business; it went from him, poetry. It was dead fact; now, it is quick thought (CW 1: 55).

While immediate experience is apparently necessary for meaning, the meaning of that experience is never immediately apparent, but requires the mediating or separating effect of time. Thus, we are "quite unable to speculate" on a recent action until, "in some contemplative hour, it detaches itself from the life like a ripe fruit, to become a thought of the mind" (CW 1: 60). Likewise, any change of place induces a change of perspective which wrenches us from the conventional

and enables an authentic, original interpretation of the commonplace. Such distancing or use of the intellect constructive, involves not receptivity, but assertion of a pattern upon reality, producing "a new creation, a new understanding or interpretation of the world" (Neufeldt 258). The truth is to be found, then, not in any one single methodology, but in a dialectic involving both involvement and detachment, the rejection of all given experience and the use of previous experience.

A similar dialectic pervades virtually every element of Emerson's methodology.<sup>14</sup> Interpreters must not only pursue the truth but also allow it to come of its own accord; they must read or perceive not only creatively, asserting a pattern upon the material of the world, but also passively, allowing a "pious reception" of the truth (CW 2: 195 "Intellect"). As Neufeldt observes, for Emerson, "knowing is always a concomitant of a reciprocity with one's world in which the individual acts creatively" (254). Even attitudes which seem one-sidedly privileged in Emerson's thought are in reality balanced by their counterparts, such as Emerson's pervasive subjectivism and even solipsism, concepts which critics fasten upon and thus misrepresent. Abrams, for example, claims that Emerson's is "an exclusively introspective quest" ("Emerson at the Limits" 17). Similarly, Doherty argues that Emerson's rejection of a personal God results in an inescapably solipsistic self that is "condemned to a privately made universe that no one else may enter, nor the self ever leave" (71). If one focuses entirely upon certain statements of Emerson, one is led to similar conclusions. Urging us, in such essays as "Self-Reliance," to "detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within" (CW 2: 27), Emerson seems to privilege the subjective as the primary or sole source of

knowledge. This privileging of the subjective climaxes in such essays as "Friendship," in which Emerson argues that all humans live in "the same condition of infinite remoteness" from each other (CW 2: 116). Employing Kant's distinction of the phenomenal and the noumenal, and asserting that our only direct connection to the noumenal is through our individual consciousness, Emerson concludes that the external world and other minds lack the solid reality of the isolated self: "I cannot deny it, O friend, that the vast shadow of the Phenomenal includes thee also in its pied and painted immensity,—thee, also, compared with whom all else is shadow. Thou art not Being, as Truth is, as Justice is,—thou art not my soul, but a picture and effigy of that" (CW 2: 116).<sup>15</sup> However, even in such early essays as "Prudence"—written at a time when he had great confidence in the power of the intuition and the touch of grace—Emerson, while asserting the merely symbolic or apparent status of the sensual world, claims that we learn valuable lessons from Nature, the "perpetual counselor" (CW 2: 138), and that it is "occasions" or events in the external world that "disclose" meaning (CW 2: 134). Thus, understanding comes not only from the internal intuition but also from the external world and from one's "perpendicularity" (CW 2: 136) in the world, from one's rootedness in the world, with a center of gravity, connected with one's time and place. In fact, as is clear from *Nature*, not only is the external world a crucial source of knowledge, but it also is capable, in its immensity, of swallowing up the individual just as the subjectivism in "Friendship" threatens to devour both the external world and other minds: "Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being

circulate through me; I am part or particle of God" (CW 1: 10). Indeed, if one focuses solely upon certain elements of Emerson, it appears that, as Cascardi observes, "Emerson is in danger of losing nature and man to a nihilism which would not know how to distinguish nature from man" (207). The reality is that because of conflicting needs both to understand within our finite situation and to rise above our finitude, Emerson maintains flexible hermeneutic principles, consistently refusing to privilege one methodology over another. While critics consistently see only one side to Emerson's methodology,<sup>16</sup> it is clear that, like Schleiermacher, Emerson pictures the search for meaning as essentially dialogical and dialectical: "To interpret a text means to enter into a conversation with it, direct questions to it, and allow oneself to be questioned by it" (Grondin 74). In this polar world, in "our conversation with Nature" (W 6: 311 "Illusions"), both elements of the dialectic are necessary for the "unfolding" (CW 2: 195 "Intellect") of authentic meaning—involvement and distance, sense perception and intuition, creativity and passivity, pre-understandings and abandonment.

### **Growth: The Measure of Successful Interpretation**

Such flexible hermeneutical principles cohere well with Emerson's theory of social change—his goals of challenging all comfortable dogmas and forcing us to front the essential facts of life. However, such fluidity is also problematic in its own right because interpreters never know if they are right. Rather, one remain, as Abrams says, "in permanent cognitive suspense" ("Emerson at the Limits" 15), never arriving at a resting place, or a point of confidence. Such an anxiety-inducing attitude was not unfamiliar for Emerson, the son of the Puritans. Just as Calvin thought that people could not be "awakened, except that

they were made to think God was angry with them" (*Commentary on Jeremiah* 12:13), it is clear that Emerson employed such anxiety as a means of stimulating moral exertions.<sup>17</sup>

Anxiety acts not only as a moral prod but also as a hermeneutic shock collar, forcing us out of complacency, awakening us to the dawn. Indeed, in the absence of any truly fixed reference point, relentless growth is the primary means of assessing successful interpretation. This stems largely from Emerson's goal of interpretation—putting the interpreter into direct connection with the Over-soul, stimulating that self-authenticating experience of the Truth which was the grounding point for both Edwards and Calvin. However, considering the gap between everyday reality and transcendent reality, between phenomena and the thing-in-itself, the interpretive problem worked both in one's ascent and descent—whether interpreting the specific symbols to arrive at the general Truth, or finding specific ways to understand and express one's higher, authentic experience. As "Self-Reliance" emphasizes, no language of man or previous experience is of any use in understanding this experience: "The way, the thought, the good, shall be wholly strange and new. It shall exclude example and experience" (CW 2: 39). As a result of this gap, the interpreter alternates between times of expressing or realizing, to the best of his abilities, his unspeakable transcendent experience and returning to the fountainhead for new inspiration, a revelation which will destroy that interpreter's previous system. As Emerson argues in "Circles," this dialectic continues as long as the interpreter's power of renewal abides:

The life of man is a self-evolving circle, which, from, a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outward to new and larger circles, and that without end. The extent to which this generation

of circles, wheel without wheel, will go, depends on the force or truth of the individual soul. For it is the inert effort of every thought, having formed itself into a circular wave of circumstance,—as, for instance, an empire, rules of an art, a local usage, a religious rite,—to heap itself on that ridge, and to solidify and hem in the life. But if the soul is quick and strong, it bursts over that boundary on all sides, and expands another orbit on the great deep, which also runs up into a high wave, with attempt again to stop and to bind. But the heart refuses to be imprisoned; in its first and narrowest pulses, it already tends outward with a vast force, and to immense and innumerable expansions (CW 2: 180-1).

Hence, while there can never be a final truth for humans, we can be assured of successful interpretation as long as we continue to grow, to outrun finitude, to break out of each specific, limited perspective, to “habitually make a new estimate” (CW 2: 83 “Spiritual Laws”).

One measure of this growth is an increased sense of unity, the ability to see correspondences between seemingly diverse elements, or broadening generalizations. As he writes in “The American Scholar,” “the finding of analogy, identity, in the most remote parts” (CW 1: 54) is the essence of science, but not only science, for the laws of nature are “the laws of his own mind” (CW 1: 55).

Another measure of growth is the sense of power, a central theme in “Self-Reliance.” For Emerson, as for Calvin (see pages 17 above), power was one of the most crucial attributes of God: “Self-existence is the attribute of the Supreme Cause, and it constitutes the measure of good by the degree in which it enters into all lower forms. All things real are so by so much virtue as they contain. . . . Power is in nature the essential measure of right” (CW 2: 40). This sense of power is one of the surest signs that one stands outside one’s finitude, for “power ceases in the instant of repose” (CW 2: 40). Consequently, whoever is

more virtuous than I "masters me. . . virtue is a Height," and those who possess such eminence "must overpower and ride all cities, nations, kings, rich men, poets, who are not" (CW 2: 40). I would suggest, then, that we see growth, not subjectivism, as the center of gravity in Emerson's hermeneutics.

Dialectic between order and abandonment, polarity that culminates in ascension—this central goal of Emerson's program informs "The Poet," Emerson's justification for the value of the poet in society. On the one hand, there is the meaning-making function of the poet. Because of their finitude, humans may receive the Over-Soul but have great difficulty expressing this experience: "Adequate expression is rare. . . . The majority of men seem to be minors, who have not yet come into possession of their own, or mutes, who cannot report the conversation they have had with nature" (CW 3: 4). The poet, however, records "these cadences more faithfully, and these transcripts, though imperfect, become the songs of the nation" (CW 3: 6). This record is valuable to men because it reconnects them to the divine and thus restores meaning to the phenomenal world. Because "the Universe is an externisation of the soul" (CW 3: 9), all nature is an avenue to the divine, and it is this aspect of nature—"nature the symbol, nature certifying the supernatural, body overflowed by life" (CW 3: 10)—that men worship. Similarly, the "inwardness, and mystery, of this attachment" to the transcendent drives men to use and value symbols of all sorts (CW 3: 10). In our limited state, phenomena are detached from their divine source, but the poet "re-attaches things to nature and the Whole" (CW 3: 11), thus making life meaningful again. In this myth-making function, the poet establishes a "new confession" (CW 3: 7) and acts as "our interpreter" (CW 3: 7).



In addition to this myth-making function, the poet also has a liberating function. The poet is a free soul, possessing "a new energy. . . by abandonment" (CW 3: 15). The poet seeks such abandonment not only through false "substitutes for the true nectar, which is the ravishment of the intellect by coming nearer to the fact" (CW 3: 16), but also through the creative and unconventional use of symbols, which have "a certain power of emancipation and exhilaration for all men" (CW 3: 17). Such freedom enables the poet to use symbols unconventionally, which then frees the beholder of the poem: "The poets are thus liberating gods. . . . They are free, and they make free" (CW 3: 18). Consequently, while Emerson establishes a distinction between the knower, the doer, and the sayer, he dissolves this distinction later in the essay by arguing that "words are also actions, and actions are a kind of words" (CW 3: 6), for the words of the poet act as a force of liberation in the soul through the breaking of boundaries.

This breaking of boundaries, however, implies a contradiction with the creation of meaning or intelligibility, which depends upon definition, boundary, categories; that is, limitation. For instance, as a creator of meaning, the poet is the "Namer, or Language-maker" who appeals to the intellect's need for "detachment or boundary" (CW 3: 13)—the same detachment which "makes things ugly" (CW 3: 11). This contradiction is apparent even as Emerson describes poetic liberation: "Every thought is also a prison; every heaven is also a prison" (CW 3: 19). Thought imprisons through the boundaries imposed by the necessities of language. The poet liberates us from this old thought: "He unlocks our chains, and admits us to a new scene" (CW 3: 19). How has the poet admitted us to the new scene that liberates us from the prison of thoughts? He

"has yielded us a new thought" (CW 3: 19). However, if every thought imprisons, then the new thought would simply be a new prison rather than real freedom.

Emerson resolves this contradiction by arguing that the poet benefits not through the actual concepts expressed, but by provoking us to experience the transcendent personally: "An imaginative book renders us much more service at first, by stimulating us through its tropes, than afterwards, when we arrive at the precise sense of the author." (CW 3: 18-9). By means of this stimulation, the reader need not rely on the poet's account, but experiences transcendent freedom and meaning first-hand: "And now my chains are to be broken; I shall mount above these clouds and opaque airs in which I live,. . . and from the heaven of truth I shall see and comprehend my relations. . . . Life will no more be a noise" (CW 3: 8). Language, then, can serve to bind or to loosen, either to transfer us from one prison into another or to effect our escape. The difference depends upon how we use and understand language. The poet knows that symbols, resisting fixity, have "manifold meaning" (CW 3: 3): "Here is the difference betwixt the poet and the mystic, that the last nails a symbol to one sense, which was a true sense for a moment, but soon becomes old and false. For all symbols are fluxional; all language is vehicular and transitive" (CW 3: 20). Only by being "held lightly" (CW 3: 20)—that is, by the continuance of the dialectical relationship between meaning or boundary on the one hand and liberation or boundlessness on the other—do symbols serve their true function of engendering growth and power, for nature's end in producing "new individuals" is "*ascension*, or, the passage of the soul into higher forms" (CW 3: 14).

## From Radicalism to Pragmatism

This flexible hermeneutics must be considered one of Emerson's major achievements. In his reformulation of piety within a democratic society, Emerson has resonated with thinkers as diverse as Nietzsche, Dilthey, ~~Pi~~<sup>er</sup>ce and Royce. This hermeneutics underlies a long tradition of American dissent, creating a legacy which seeks to reform society through a prophetic call to awakening and through criticism which avoids the dogmatism of earlier Calvinist dissent. However, it is not entirely clear that such a catlike hermeneutic truly underwrites the prophetic criticism of Emerson's early theory of social change. Based on relentless growth, his hermeneutics argue that no one ever possesses the truth, that all statements of reality are relatively rather than absolutely true, and such relativism undercuts the prophetic power of the scholar's pronouncements, his ability to rest upon a secure foundation from which to criticize society.

The failure of Emerson's hermeneutics to support his theory of social change is apparent in the shift which his thinking undergoes in his later years, beginning, perhaps, in the mid-1840s and apparent with his last major work, *The Conduct of Life*. In this later period, Emerson launches his thought in a new direction which, while connected to his earlier hermeneutics, rejects the crucial underpinning of that hermeneutics, the goal of unmediated connection with the transcendent. Along with it, Emerson rejects the social corollary of that hermeneutics, the goal of awakening the people to their fallen state and driving them to experience the transcendent directly.

The idea of a shift in Emerson's thinking is commonly accepted among critics; however, the nature of that shift is a matter of contention. Robert Richardson, in *Mind on Fire*, argues that the shift is mainly one of tone and emphasis: Emerson's "deepest beliefs and values remained unchanged," and he merely spent more time discussing "the commodity view" before "dropping the other shoe" (491). According to Richardson, the cause of this shift was primarily "his own gathering success," which he accepted just as he had earlier accepted his "outsider status" (491). Despite the weight of Richardson's opinion, there is a great deal of merit in the opinions of David Robinson and Stephen Whicher, who both argue for a basic shift evolving out of Emerson's early thought and resulting in a "tragic sense." In *Apostle of Culture*, Robinson argues that Emerson's tragic sense stems from the problem of limitless growth: because the goal of self-culture always recedes before us, "the nature of existence is such that achievement cannot yield results. . . . it was an indictment of the universe as well as of the self" (116-117). In *Freedom and Fate*, Whicher maintains that Emerson's early optimism was based on the belief in humans' ability to connect intimately with God, to become God. According to Whicher's influential account, Emerson's later tragic sense became more pronounced as Emerson realized that we do not connect directly to God. According to Whicher, this tragic sense results in a new social philosophy which emphasizes corporate involvement instead of the hero as the engine of social change and rejects "the evangelical attitude toward social change" in favor of an "organic and evolutionary point of view" (*Freedom and Fate* 131). While there is undoubtedly a great deal of continuity between the young and old Emerson, including occasional flares of radicalism, Robinson and Whicher are better able to account for the marked shift in tone of

Emerson's later writing and the increase in Emerson's political and social activism. This shift in Emerson's thinking can also be seen from a hermeneutic perspective, according to which Whicher's idea of the inability to connect directly with ultimate reality and Robinson's notion of the futility of endless growth both play a role in altering Emerson's overall perspective and his view of social change.

One sign of the shift in Emerson's thought is his new attitude toward political and social activism beginning in the mid-1840s and increasing in the 1850s, when Emerson became increasingly active in political associations and in specific causes. Previously, Emerson showed interest and sympathy but little inclination to participate in many of the reform and political causes of the day. An early journal entry, for instance, expresses a strong curiosity in the pressing political and reform issues of the day: abolition, temperance, anti-masonry, Sunday School and Charitable societies, and "the political questions as of Banks; of the limits of Executive power; of the right of the people to instruct their representative; of the Tariff; of the treatment of Indians" (*JMN* 5: 440). Although Emerson expresses disgust at the slaveholder and trader, who "defend every inch of their plunder, of their bloody deck, & howling Auction" (*JMN* 5: 440), and although he is deeply interested in the morality of these issues, Emerson's dominant tone reflects not desire to participate or change specific policies, but rather openness to meaning: These issues, "pregnant with doctrine," are "instructive slides in our lantern" that "show us something of ethics & something of practicks" (*JMN* 5: 440-1). Even slavery, whose horrors will "drag all neutrals to take sides" (*JMN* 5: 440), will be judged not by men or through direct action, but by Providence, by the "verdict which Justice shall finally pronounce" (*JMN* 5:

440). Even when Emerson did act, he regretted it. For example, outraged at the forced removal of the Cherokee Indians from their homeland, Emerson spoke at a meeting on April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1838, and the following day wrote a letter of protest to President Van Buren. His journal entry illustrates his antipathy even to this mild action: "Yesterday went the letter to V. B. a letter hated of me. A deliverance that does not deliver the soul. . . . I write in my journal, I read my lecture with joy—but this stirring in the philanthropic mud, gives me no peace" (*JMN* 5: 479). More typically for this era, Emerson steadfastly resisted the temptation to join specific protests or causes, such as his refusal to join the Brook Farm experiment, a refusal which he justifies on grounds of self-reliance, explaining to George Ripley that it would be foolish "to put on your community the task of my emancipation which I ought to take on myself" (*L* 2: 369). In contrast to political activism, Emerson practiced the prophetic model of social change described above.

The mid-1840s reflects a change in Emerson's view of social change as he became increasingly involved in corporate efforts to alter social and political conditions. In 1844, he expressed his hostility to slavery not merely in his journals, but in a public speech, "Address on Emancipation in the British West Indies." Starting in the 1850s, Emerson participated in fund raising activities, offered public support for the Union during the Civil War, and gave a number of important abolitionist speeches: "The Fugitive Slave Law" (1854), "Speech on Affairs in Kansas" (1856), "Remarks at a Meeting for the Relief of John Brown's Family" (1859), "John Brown: Speech at Salem" (1860), and "Emancipation Proclamation" (1862). While much of this activism can be attributed to outrage over the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, according to which Northerners were

legally required to turn in runaway slaves, Emerson's activism is not explicable solely on these terms, for Emerson became increasingly involved in other organized political movements around the same time. In 1855, for instance, he broke with his previous detachment from the women's movement and began delivering lectures at women's rights conference and in 1869 was elected a vice-president of a women's convention (Rao 66-8).

Another sign of a shift in Emerson's thinking is his lecture "The Young American" (1844), which is progressive rather than radical in tone, advocating the evolution of America upon its current course rather than challenging that course by pushing men outside of their intellectual frameworks. Like the earlier lecture "Man the Reformer," "The Young American" was delivered to the Mercantile Library Association and stakes out some of the same positions as the earlier lecture. For instance, Emerson praises the power of agriculture to remedy "whatever is false and fantastic in our society" and to "bring us into just relations with men and things" (CW 1: 226). As agriculture is beneficial for morals, power, economics, and aesthetics, any enhancement of country living "will render a prodigious service to the whole face of the continent, and will further the most poetic of all the occupations of real life, the bringing out by art the native but hidden graces of the landscape" (CW 1: 229). While this praise for agriculture and the grounds for this praise are similar to sections of "Man the Reformer," Emerson enumerates one new reason for advocating agriculture—the fact that it "generates the feeling of patriotism" (CW 1: 229)—and initiates a jingoistic tone which grows throughout the essay: "I think we must regard the *land* as a commanding and increasing power on the

American citizen, the sanative and Americanizing influence, which promises to disclose new virtues for ages to come" (CW 1: 229).

Unlike the agriculture section, other parts of "The Young American," such as his acceptance of the beneficence of evil, contrast sharply with "Man the Reformer" and many of Emerson's other earlier works, which extol purity, moral perfectionism, and intolerance of evil. For instance, Emerson laments the powerlessness, ignorance, poverty, victimization, and near slavery of the Irish railroad workers: "They have too little money, and too little knowledge, to allow them the exercise of much more election of whither to go, or what to do, than the leaf that is blown into this dike or that brook to perish" (CW 1: 225). Nevertheless, their "plight is not so grievous as it seems" (CW 1: 225): they have left the "squalid despair" of Ireland for the "unlimited opportunities" of America (CW 1: 225); they are vivacious and good-natured, and their children quickly become socialized and gain the full benefits of citizenship to complement their naturally vigorous constitution—all this while the nation benefits from their cheap labor. A similar acceptance of evil shades Emerson's analysis of commerce, which no longer critiques it as a system of "distrust, of concealment, of superior keenness, not of giving, but of taking advantage" as Emerson does in "Man the Reformer" (CW 1: 148). Instead, Emerson views commerce as an agent in the democratization of the world. Even though there is both good and evil in the way that commerce turns everything into a marketable commodity, it "has done its work" (CW 1: 234): "The historian of the world will see that Trade was the principle of Liberty; that Trade planted America and destroyed Feudalism; that it makes peace and keeps peace, and it will abolish slavery" (CW



1: 234). Underlying this argument is a belief in the nation's destiny redolent of John L. O'Sullivan:

It seems so easy for America to inspire and express the most expansive and humane spirit; newborn, free, healthful, strong, the land of the laborer, of the democrat, of the philanthropist, of the believer, of the saint, she should speak for the human race. America is the country of the future. . . . It has no past: all has an onward and prospective look. And herein it is fitted to receive more readily every generous feature which the wisdom or the fortune of man has yet to impress (CW 1: 230).

The nation is guided by "Destiny," whose "cruel kindness" serves "the whole even to the ruin of the member": "That serene Power interposes an irresistible check upon the caprices and officiousness of our wills. His charity is not our charity. One of his agents is our will, but that which expresses itself in our will, is stronger than our will" (CW 1: 231). If the Calvinistic sense of divine sovereignty in this last passage is unmistakable, so is the whole lecture unmistakable in its faith in American institutions. This confidence extends even to government, which Emerson had previously argued to be inconsequential. In "The Young American," Emerson calls for a more active government, complaining that "the true offices of the State" have been "omitted,—the duty to instruct the ignorant, to supply the poor with work and with good guidance" (CW 1: 235). While he criticizes price controls, Emerson asserts that the government should act as "mediation between want and supply" (CW 1: 236). In calling on government to foster employment and balance supply and demand, Emerson repudiates his dictum from "Politics": "the less government we have, the better" (CW 3: 126). "The Young American" does not indicate a complete break from Emerson's past, for it includes the standard admonition to a high moral calling: "I call upon you, young men, to be the nobility of this land" (CW 1: 239). The national sins against

which this young nobility should fight are similar to those listed in earlier works: the lack of religion, faith, and heroism; excessive conformity, weakness, divisiveness, and materialism. What is different is the depth of faith in American institutions and the guidance of Providence on a national level. While "The American Scholar" concludes with a few sentences expressing hope in America's future as a nation of individualists, "The Young American is saturated with patriotism. In contrast to the Old World with its decadence and latent feudalism, America "is the home of man," a place where "organic simplicity and liberty" abides, offering "opportunity to the human mind not known in any other region" (CW 1: 241-2); a place where humans, "under Divine leading," go forth "to receive and inhabit their patrimony" (CW 1: 242); a place where God plans to fulfil our millennial hopes: "If only men are well employed in conspiring with the designs of the Spirit who led us hither, and is leading us still, we shall quickly enough advance out of all hearing of other's [sic] censures, out of all regrets of our own, into a new and more excellent social state than history has recorded" (CW 1: 244).

Emerson certainly was not settled in his convictions in "The Young American," for one month later he gave the lecture "New England Reformers," which, as we have seen, reflects Emerson's earlier goal of radical transformation through individual regeneration. In the latter lecture, Emerson was still convinced that what men really need and want is spiritual revival, to be jerked from their depraved finitude and brought into connection with reality, "to be convicted and exposed, to be shamed out of our nonsense of all kinds, and made men of, instead of ghosts and phantoms. We are weary of gliding ghostlike through the world, *which is itself so slight and unreal*. We crave a sense of reality,

though it come in strokes of pain" (italics mine CW 3: 161). In this passage, we see not only a concise expression of Emerson's early view of social change but also one of the crucial issues which I believe would drive him to a critique of that earlier view—the problem of connecting directly with reality.

We have seen that the grounding point for Emerson is the direct experience of the Over-soul. Such an experience is equivalent both to Calvin's notion of the self-authenticating knowledge of the Bible provided through the Holy Spirit and to Edwards' notion of the spiritual sense, which provides direct, self-witnessing access to reality. In his first major work, *Nature* (1836), Emerson employs this concept along with Kantian metaphysics to combat skepticism, demonstrating the truth of Idealism and the superiority of mind over matter. While questioning the existence of matter, Emerson makes the individual's direct connection to the Over-soul the crucial grounding point through which true knowledge of reality is possible: "If [idealism] only deny the existence of matter, it does not satisfy the demands of the spirit. It leaves God out of me. It leaves me in the splendid labyrinth of my perceptions, to wander without end" (CW 1: 37). The crucial turning point for Emerson comes with his realization that *all* experience, even a profoundly transforming epiphany, is interpretive or mediated by the intellect and thus subject to human finitude. Humans can never directly experience the thing-in-itself, but must inevitably interpret phenomena, or wander in the labyrinth of the mind. As a result, a political aim of putting individuals in contact with this deeper reality is futile.

The key text which marks this shift is "Experience" (1844), perhaps Emerson's most difficult essay and widely recognized as a turning-point in his career. "Experience" portrays reality as a series of interpretive frameworks or

moods or fragments of experience—the lords of life—illusion, temperament or mood, succession, surface, surprise or chance, reality, and subjectivity. Each of these frameworks is merely a perspective rather than the reality itself, a nearly consistent hermeneutic circle rather than a complete system of thought.

The first framework, illusion, apprises us that there is no grounding point for interpretation. Finding ourselves midway through a series, halfway up the stairs, already involved in the web of interpretive assumptions, we are left with no starting point, but are forced into “perpetual retreating and reference,” defining every term by means of another term or justifying every assumption by means of another assumption (CW 3: 28). If we could connect directly with reality, we could have a starting point, but there is an unbridgeable gap between subject and object: “Souls never touch their objects. An innavigable sea washes with silent waves between us and the things we aim at and converse with” (CW 3: 29). As a result, human experience is characterized not by “direct strokes” but by the glancing blows of interpretation, by the “evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest” (CW 3: 29). As a result, all experience is illusion; that is, ungrounded interpretation of experience rather than direct experience of reality itself.

What determines our given interpretations is not the inspiration of genius or Emerson’s early hope, intuition, but the next lord of life: our various moods and, more fundamentally, our temperament which determines our moods. Temperament colors our perceptions with “lenses which paint the world their own hue” (CW 3: 30). Like the other lords of life, temperament is a nearly self-enclosed circle of interpretation which, with its basis in materialism, “puts all divinity to rout” (CW 3: 31) by coherently explaining life while denying the

necessity of the spirit: "On its own level, or in view of nature, temperament is final. I see not, if one be once caught in this trap of so-called sciences, any escape for the man from the links of the chain of physical necessity. Given such an embryo, such a history must follow" (CW 3: 32).

However, the individual can never view life completely from any single framework, for a kind of hermeneutic trap door pushes us toward the next lord of life, succession, to get a picture of the whole: "The secret of the illusoriness is in the necessity of the succession of moods or objects. Gladly we would anchor, but the anchorage is quicksand. This onward trick of nature is too strong for us" (CW 3: 32). While Emerson strives in his early hermeneutics to transcend finitude, touch the Soul or at least grow toward a more unified understanding, the Emerson of "Experience" is aware that we are inevitably finite, or, in Calvin's words, subject to the inevitable "limiting" of "the wisdom of each" (*Commentary on Romans* 12:4). This condition forces us to perceive from a variety of standpoints—not from the ever expanding perspectives of "Circles," but merely from *a succession* of moods or objects. Indeed, in contrast to such essays as "Circles," "Experience" asserts that "there is not power of expansion in men," but merely special talents corresponding to the partial perspectives of each individual (CW 3: 33). Moreover, the necessity of succession accentuates our sense of illusion, for we realize that each book we read or each perspective we encounter provides merely "a tidings of their mood, and some vague guess at the new fact, but is nowise to be trusted as the lasting relation between that intellect and that thing" (CW 3: 33).

Because of the hopelessness of touching reality itself—indeed, the "world is all outside: it has no inside" (CW 3: 37)—one is forced along to the next mode

of life, surface. Rather than toil vainly to experience reality directly, we should merely accept the superficial phenomena, enjoy what the symbol or type offers without reference to the antitype, embrace the small goods without bothering about their reference to transcendent significance: "To finish the moment, to find the journey's end in every step of the road, to live the greatest number of good hours, is wisdom" (CW 3: 35).

If human finitude necessitates such despair of ever grasping reality, other elements of human nature force us to try to grasp reality. As Cavell observes, "The wish to escape the conditions of humanity, call them conditions of finitude, is itself only human" ("An Emerson Mood" 146-7). Thus, the next lords of life—surprise and reality—force us out of acceptance of our limitations. With "angel whispering," life surprises us, waking us from our habitual, superficial circle of understanding by means of anomaly, unexpected result, or the bolt of grace. The sense of reality is akin to Emerson's early notions of the Over-soul, of permanence and unity, of "the ineffable cause, which every fine genius has essayed to represent by some emphatic symbol" (CW 3: 42).

Beginning in this section of the essay, we see the revival of Emerson's original hermeneutic ideas—the bolt of grace, the Over-soul, growth toward unity, toward a new statement which "will comprise the skepticisms, as well as the faiths of society, and out of unbeliefs a creed shall be formed" (CW 3: 43). Indeed, virtually all of the notions expressed in the essay are present in some form in Emerson's earlier essays. However, what makes this a transition piece, what makes this essay simultaneously look back wistfully and forge ahead in a new direction, what undercuts the power of these older doctrines is Emerson's realization that the touch of grace and the awareness of the Over-soul are merely

a few among a number of interpretive gambits which cannot be placed into a clear order or privileging hierarchy and whose completeness is far from certain: "I am a fragment, and this is a fragment of me" (CW 3: 47). This fragmentary nature of understanding—the way in which each framework works with little connection or reference to the other frameworks—undermines any confidence in methodology. Even the overpowering nihilism of the last lord, subjectivity, must be taken as only one among many perspectives. Though we discover ourselves alienated from nature, able to see not "directly, but mediately," with no means of either correcting or calculating the error of our "colored and distorting lenses" (CW 3: 43), though "every object fall successively into the subject itself" (CW 3: 45), though the "reader and his book" is nothing more than a "kitten chasing so prettily her own tail" (CW 3: 46)—even this radical skepticism can be no final resting place for human perception but is merely one among several fragments.

While "Experience" expresses some hope of connection with reality through the individual consciousness—"yet is the God the native of these bleak rocks" (CW 3: 46)—Emerson loses all such hope with the publication of *The Conduct of Life*, especially his "Illusions." In this essay, Emerson definitively rejects the idea of unmediated experience, even within the individual consciousness, and in the remainder of the book, he works out some of the implications for social change. In "Illusions," Emerson portrays human existence as a series of interpretations with no direct access to life itself: "All is a riddle, and the key to a riddle is another riddle" (W 6: 313). While Emerson challenged the Harvard scholars in 1837 to wake men from their trifling pursuits, in 1860 he believes this is hopeless: "We wake from one dream into another

dream" (W 6: 313). While his early essays aim to smash idols, forcing his readers to face reality without the benefit of comforting mirages, "Illusions" warns us that "we rightly accuse the critic who destroys too many illusions. Society does not love its unmaskers" (W 6: 313). While his constant mantra in the early essays is that one connects with the Over-soul through the Self, now "our pretension of property and even of self-hood are fading with the rest, if, at last, even our thoughts are not finalities" (W 6: 320).

Despairing of unmediated contact with reality itself, unable to privilege one interpretive strategy over another, Emerson is left with little but power as a measure of successful interpretation. Along with the apparent hopelessness of "Illusions," therefore, is the realization that illusions are empowering. Just as the Kentucky town is supported by the "solid masonry foundation" of Mammoth Cave and its "six or eight black miles" (309), just as the illusions of the "Star-Chamber" provide an impetus or a context in which to sing and wonder, just as poverty-stricken children clothe their existence with enchantments, so illusions uphold, direct, and enhance the joy of life, shrouding the unhappiness beneath a veil of myth. Reflecting Emerson's sense of providential nature, illusions function progressively, leading us, albeit, toward other illusions, but at least toward more refined illusions. Behind these illusions, moreover, is the undetected presence of God, whom we see "face to face every hour" (W 6: 324).

Because of the beneficent results of illusions, the necessity of myth, and power as the ultimate standard—indeed, "life is a search after power" (W 6: 53 "Power")—Emerson's later ideas regarding social change, though not explored in theoretical detail, change greatly in *The Conduct of Life*. Instead of advocating iconoclasm, Emerson insists on the necessity and inevitability of belief: "We are



born believing. A man bears beliefs, as a tree bears fruit" (W 6: 203). Instead of emphasizing purity, he insists on the importance of both good and bad forms of power. Instead of aiming to transform the world, he offers specific proposals to ameliorate the practical conditions of man. Instead of throwing radical, thrilling gauntlets—"old age seems the only disease" (CW 2: 188)—he becomes a progressive: "Incapacity of melioration is the only mortal distemper" (W 6: 140).

Emerson's early hermeneutics represents one of the most enduring creative uses of concepts akin to Calvin. However, as Emerson's own development illustrates, this hermeneutic simply does not uphold the radical dissent of "The American Scholar." Thus, the gap remains between Emersonian individualism and Emersonian commitment to the transformation of the world—not because social action inevitably involves corporate action, but because the hermeneutics at the heart of this social action is ultimately relativistic and undercuts the resolute social criticism which his Calvinist forbears had employed both to resist ecclesiastical or monarchical tyranny and to institute their own tyranny.

## Chapter 6

### Ordeals in the Promised Land:

#### Puritanism and the American Way in Hawthorne's Early Fiction

One of the most contentious questions regarding Hawthorne's writings is whether he should be considered a writer of allegories or of symbolic literature. At a basic level, this question asks whether the moral pronouncements which frequent the conclusions of his stories and novels can be trusted as the authoritative guide for interpretation, or whether this ostensible moral is a kind of ruse, and if so, what its purpose is. Often this question is answered in such a way as to suggest that Hawthorne's themes either can be summarized in neat moral categories or are hopelessly indeterminate in meaning.

The traditional portrait of Hawthorne is that of a writer of allegories. Tacking morals onto the endings of his stories, titling his stories "A Parable" ("The Minister's Black Veil") or "An Allegory of the Heart" ("Egotism"), imitating Bunyan in "The Celestial Railroad," Hawthorne himself fostered this view of his art as allegory. In his preface to *Mosses from an Old Manse*, Hawthorne justified this art by reference to his desire to write "profound treatises of morality," moral "histories" like Bancroft's, or a novel "that should evolve some deep lesson" (*Tales and Sketches* 1124).<sup>1</sup> Following Hawthorne's lead, critics such as F. O. Matthiessen argue that Hawthorne's method is essentially allegorical: "He started with a dominant moral idea, for which his picture, like Spencer's, was to be an illustration" (301).<sup>2</sup> Assuming Hawthorne's allegorical purpose, many critics have focused their energies on trying to determine Hawthorne's philosophy or the moral of a given story. As we shall see below, this concern almost inevitably devolves into a question of crime and

punishment. The character has committed a sin or a crime and must pay for it. The only debate involves defining exactly the nature of the sin. The result is a series of competing portraits of Hawthorne: anti-Puritan, or feminist, or half-hearted transcendentalist, or very frequently Christian.<sup>3</sup>

With the demise of nineteenth century certainties and the rise of deconstructionism, a growing chorus of critics has come to view Hawthorne's works not as deep morality tales but as contradictory symbols whose meaning is ultimately indeterminate or expressive of the indefinite nature of human expression. These critics note the inability of earlier critics to formulate a coherent worldview out of Hawthorne's works, which seem to contradict each other, some apparently pro-Puritan, others anti-Puritan, some pro-Transcendentalist, others opposed, and so on. Despairing of ever discovering Hawthorne's philosophy of life and thus the meaning of his stories, many of these newer critics emphasize Hawthorne's misdirection, his ambiguous statements, his use of the indecisive adverb "perhaps," the irony which pervades his works, and his mock critical commentaries. Such critics point to the introduction to "Rappaccini's Daughter," in which a supposed editor criticizes the writer, Aubepine (Hawthorne), for his "inveterate love of allegory" (975). Such devices are seen as clues that Hawthorne's works are not actually allegorical, but employ allegory ironically in order to undermine the certainty assumed by allegory. Among the most powerful of such deconstructionist readings is J. Hillis Miller's *Hawthorne and History*. Miller argues that while "The Minister's Black Veil" purports to be about revelation or unveiling, it is truly indeterminate, leaving the reader stuck in a hermeneutic circle: "If you do not already understand the parable, the parable itself is not going to help you understand it"

(J. Hillis Miller 72). For Miller, indeterminacy is not limited to this story; rather, the story suggests that everything is uncertain in meaning: "It is the indirect, veiled expression of the impossibility of expressing anything verifiable at all in parable except the impossibility of expressing anything verifiable" (J. Hillis Miller 97).<sup>4</sup>

Noting both the allegorical and symbolic elements in Hawthorne's works, many critics view Hawthorne as a divided soul, attracted to both allegory and symbolism, unable to commit himself to either, and thus unable to control his art. Edgar Allan Poe, for instance, criticized allegory, which kills the "most important point in fiction—that of earnestness and verisimilitude" ("Review of 'Mosses'" 156), and censured Hawthorne for his inability to resist his allegorizing tendencies: "He is infinitely too fond of allegory. . . . This will not do, for allegory is at war with the whole tone of his nature" ("Review of 'Mosses'" 157). A divided author results in a disunited work, an artistically inferior product in which the "obvious meaning" smothers the "insinuated one" ("Review of 'Twice-Told'" 154). Hawthorne is similarly criticized by Feidelson, who notes that "the symbolistic and allegorical patterns in Hawthorne's books reach quite different conclusions; or, rather the symbolism leads to an inconclusive luxuriance of meaning, while allegory imposes the pat moral and the simplified character" (15). Feidelson attributes this contradiction to a division within Hawthorne himself, which impelled him toward both the freedom of the symbolic imagination and the safety of allegory (14-16).<sup>5</sup> Disagreeing with this view of an artist out of control, other critics, such as Newton Arvin, take a more positive view of our inability to neatly categorize Hawthorne's art: "He is neither quite an allegorist nor quite a symbolist, but a writer *sui generis* who occupies a

beautiful terrain of his own between these two artistic modes" ("Hawthorne's Tales" 91).<sup>6</sup> Or in Carolyn Van Dyke's words, he is the founder of "postallegorical literature," whose practitioners include "Kafka, Mann, Beckett and Pynchon" (291).

This chapter and the next study Hawthorne's "beautiful terrain" in light of the Calvinist tradition of hermeneutics. The result is a portrait of Hawthorne's works as neither simply moralistic, nor indecipherable, nor out of control, but as well-crafted works concerned deeply with the problem of meaning. These works offer profound, meaningful insights into the dangers and opportunities of American democracy, trace many of the dangers to America's Calvinist roots and to the problem of interpretation, and suggest a very different response from that of Emerson. The ambiguity and irony employed in these stories reflect not only the difficulty of free inquiry within a democratic society but also some of the basic conditions of life in the United States. In this chapter, I will explore Hawthorne's early coming-of-age stories, which problematize interpretation, especially as it revolves around the issue of authority. In the next chapter, I examine *The Scarlet Letter*, in which Hawthorne offers perhaps his most important contribution to the hermeneutic tradition in the United States.

### **The Quiet Critic**

As Tocqueville indicated (see pages 89-91 above), thoughtful American writers of the Jacksonian era faced a dilemma: to criticize the American Way would doom their careers and threaten their public platform; to remain silent would remove the content of the writing. If Emerson dealt with this problem by redefining core American values, Hawthorne did so through misdirection. On

the surface, many of his works seem supportive of Christian piety, democracy, and the American Way. Beneath this surface meaning, however, Hawthorne included more subversive suggestions, critical reflections of American society.

This technique is evident in many of Hawthorne's historical tales, which misdirect the reader in two ways. First, because they all take place in a historical setting, the reader can view each story with detachment, considering any criticism as directed toward the past. Second, because they are open to a simple, moralistic or allegorical interpretation, they can all be seen in a comfortable, unchallenging light. However, these stories are also filled with irony and ambiguity, which force the curious reader to question any easy faith in the status quo and lead the reader to consider the stories in a more subversive light.<sup>7</sup> This technique of misdirection, or what Millington calls "reading as disruption" (*Practicing Romance* 15-25), serves a number of purposes. It not only enables the solitary writer to speak critically toward a potentially tyrannous majority but also highlights the disjunction between apparent and hidden meaning. It consequently underscores the problems of language and interpretation, reflecting what Gustafson has observed to be one of the dominant concerns of early nineteenth-century thought in the United States, the search for language that "would free and unite rather than blind, imprison and destroy" (2). If readers cannot take the narrator's words at face value, they must question the source of interpretive authority. As Millington observes, "Hawthorne sets out to transform the reader's relation to cultural and psychological authority by inviting us to transform our relation to authority within the text" (15). This redefined relationship between the reader and interpretive authority is bound up

with both hermeneutics and problems of political power, two of the central, interconnected themes in the stories that will be discussed in this chapter.

### **Puritan Power**

One example of this technique of misdirection is "The Gray Champion," which is unrivalled in Hawthorne's oeuvre for its apparent jingoism. Based on a combination of legend and the historical 1689 rebellion against the administration of Sir Edmund Andros, the story seems straightforward enough: Subjected to "a harsh and unprincipled soldier," kept in "sullen submission," suffering under "evil times," "New-England groaned" under tyranny (Hawthorne, *Tales and Sketches* 236). This oppression is contrasted with the era of the charter, "when the colonists had ruled themselves, enjoying far more freedom, than is even yet the privilege of the native subjects of Great Britain" (236). Intending to crush the budding resistance of the people, Andros, his corrupt, gentrified councillors, and his soldiers display their power in a march through the streets of Boston. Symbolic of the religio-political source of the colonists' discontent, the most hated member of the group is "the Episcopal clergyman of King's Chapel, riding haughtily among the magistrates in his priestly vestments, the fitting representative of prelacy and persecution, the union of church and state, and all those abominations which had driven the Puritans into the wilderness" (239). Though they appear impotent against this show of force, the colonists are rescued by the personification of their Puritan heritage, the Gray Champion, who halts the procession, forces it to retreat, and precipitates the subsequent revolt against the Governor. The conclusion

emphasizes the debt which Americans of 1689, of 1776, and of future times owe to their Puritan heritage:

I have heard, that, whenever the descendants of the Puritans are to show the spirit of their sires, the old man [the Gray Champion] appears again. When eighty years had passed, he walked once more in King-street. Five years later, in the twilight of an April morning, he stood on the green, beside the meeting-house, at Lexington, where now the obelisk of granite, with a slab of slate inlaid, commemorates the first fallen of the Revolution. And when our fathers were toiling at the breast-work on Bunker's Hill, all through that night, the old warrior walked his rounds. Long, long may it be, ere he comes again! His hour is one of darkness, and adversity, and peril. But should domestic tyranny oppress us, or the invader's step pollute our soil, still may the Gray Champion come; for he is the type of New-England's hereditary spirit; and his shadowy march, on the eve of danger, must ever be the pledge, that New-England's sons will vindicate their ancestry (243).

Displaying the virtues of America's Puritan origins, linking those virtues to both the Revolution and contemporary America, such a story—especially the laudatory ending—seems the essence of patriotism and, as critics frequently affirm, intended to generate national pride and complacency.<sup>8</sup> Certainly such chauvinism was the tone with which such incidents were reported by contemporary historians. For instance, in 1837 George Bancroft recounted the same rebellion in a tone of pure praise, typologically linking this rebellion with the Revolution and with America's divinely-ordained destiny as a beacon of freedom and progress: "This New England revolution 'made a great noise in the world.' Its object was Protestant Liberty. . . . Boston was the center of the revolution which now spread to the Chesapeake; in less than a century, it would commence a revolution for humanity [the War of Independence], and rouse a spirit of power to emancipate the world" (57).

However, underneath the nationalism of Hawthorne's account lurk ironic, critical suggestions which undercut the jingoism not only on the surface of "The



Gray Champion" but also of the popular histories of the day. Much of this criticism revolves around the concept of authority. Of course, to defend themselves against tyrannical power, the colonists themselves must possess power, and this is the precise virtue of the Gray Champion, whose "evident authority" (240) is manifest in his "antique majesty," "unbroken dignity," "warrior's step" (240), and "stately form" (241). Wearing "a heavy sword upon his thigh," "carrying a staff in his hand" (240), he possesses the combined power of legal, religious, and military authority, having gained experience "giving laws, making prayers, and leading them [the old Puritans] against the savage" (240). In short, the Gray Champion possesses total power in the community—over mind and body. Making "a gesture at once of encouragement and warning" (240), he can both stimulate and channel the community's "lurid wrath, so difficult to kindle or to quench" (242). It is no wonder, then, that the Gray Champion so easily dominates Governor Andros: "One would have thought that the dark old man was the chief ruler there, and that the Governor and Council, with soldiers at their back, representing the whole power and authority of the Crown, had no alternative but obedience" (241).

If power corrupts, then we are justified in questioning the absolute power given to the Gray Champion—even if he is responsible for saving the colonists from the tyranny of Andros. Certainly, Hawthorne shakes any easy confidence in the spirit of the Puritan people, who, in King Philip's war, "had burnt villages and slaughtered young and old, with pious fierceness, while the godly souls throughout the land were helping them with prayer" (237). Mixing religious fervor with political activism, the Puritans view even moderate political crises with paranoia: "Satan will strike his master-stroke presently. . . . We are to be

massacred, man and male child" (237-8). In an even more subversive vein, Hawthorne compares the Gray Champion with the most despised figure of the procession, the Episcopal clergyman, "the representative of prelacy and persecution, the union of church and state" (239). If the Gray Champion possesses similar power over church and state, then he too may be considered a fitting representative of prelacy and persecution. Granted, the authority of the Gray Champion, unlike Andros's, grows "out of the character of the people" (239). In fact, this non-coercive authority—in essence, the power of voluntary submission—is certainly one of the primary sources of the Gray Champion's strength. Consequently, perhaps the only essential difference between the two forms of power is that the Gray Champion, able to stimulate and harness the free passions of the people, represents the winning side. This cynicism is certainly suggested by the term "Champion," which conjures up the Medieval world of trial by combat, the system of justice whereby the most powerful fighter was considered morally and legally just. In such a case, the justice of the Gray Champion consists of nothing more than his superior power.

In this light, we should revisit the conclusion of the story, reading it in a less adulatory tone. The Gray Champion appears in times of darkness, adversity and peril, when foreign or domestic powers threaten the nation's sense of identity or independence. Under such a threat of adversity, the American people habitually resort to the power latent in their Puritan heritage—to extreme fears of the designs of the enemy, voluntary submission of both mind and body to a single authority, absolute confidence in the complete righteousness of their cause, and a willingness to kill with a clean conscience.

It may be objected that Puritan New England bore little relation to the America of Hawthorne's time. While the Puritans were characterized by a pessimistic sense of human depravity and an invasive mechanism for controlling human divergence, Jacksonian America was a land of freedom, individual rights, and faith in the people. Granted, the dominant articles of faith differed greatly between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries; nevertheless, as Hawthorne suggests in "The Gray Champion," the ways in which the respective faiths functioned in their given societies were remarkably similar. These parallels are even more evident in Hawthorne's early coming-of-age stories—"Young Goodman Brown," "Roger Malvin's Burial," "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," and "The May-Pole of Merry Mount." Each of these stories dramatizes how the free individual submits to the authority of the group, how an individualistic ethic is co-opted into socially useful conformity, and how individual qualms are quashed in the great communal project. Moreover, because these stories illustrate how interpretative frameworks play a crucial role in this process of socialization, these stories reflect a dominant concern in Hawthorne's early fiction—the problem of interpretation.

### **Nihilism or Conformity: Young Goodman Brown**

Like "The Gray Champion," "Young Goodman Brown" has often been interpreted as consistent with the American Way. Many critics, for instance, view the story from some sort of Christian framework. In one version, Brown's discovery actually reflects Hawthorne's sense of overwhelming evil. According to John S. Hardt, "Hawthorne implies that this forest is a version of the Garden of Eden, albeit a darkened one already controlled by the serpent" (252). Fogle,

hedging his bet slightly and accounting for the ambiguity of the story, argues that Hawthorne "does not wish to propose flatly that man is primarily evil; rather he has a gnawing fear that this might indeed be true" (16).<sup>9</sup> Many recent critics have objected to this Calvinistic interpretation, arguing that Brown's perceptions are "the symbolic creatures of Brown's [own] distorted moral conscience," reflecting not external reality but subjective spiritual illness (William Bysshe Stein, *Hawthorne's Faust* 61). According to this interpretation, Brown begins with a commitment to sin, produces a sinful vision, and experiences the wages of his sin in terms of a bleak cynicism. McKeithan, for instance, argues that "Hawthorne himself does not share the black pessimism that finally came to Goodman Brown as a result of his sin. . . . Goodman Brown became cynical as a result of his sin and thought he saw sin where none existed" (95).<sup>10</sup> While the latter critics, whatever sin they may find Brown guilty of, are certainly right to question the accuracy of Brown's perceptions and thus to question whether Hawthorne truly adhered to the five points of Calvinism, their interpretation has its own weaknesses. For instance, such a reading ignores Brown's deep ambivalence and his desire to avoid a confrontation with evil, themes which run throughout the story. Furthermore, such a Christian scheme of sin and its blighting effects fails to fit the pattern of the story. According to traditional Christian allegory, the hero should be rewarded and strengthened for resisting the devil. Goodman Brown, however, ends his life in gloom and cynicism despite having eventually resisted the evil one, a fact which forces Terry Martin to admit, "The gloominess of its ending is disconcerting. . . . The conclusion raises more questions than it answers and leaves us with a vague uneasiness" (31-2). In fact, such an ending makes no sense in a crime-and-punishment scheme.

One critic who has attempted, within an allegorical framework, to explain the tale's ambiguity and disjunction is David Levin. In "Shadow of a Doubt: Specter Evidence in 'Young Goodman Brown,'" Levin argues that Brown's perceptions are neither objective reality nor projections of Brown's subjective state, but external projections upon his mind by Satan, who, according to Puritan lore, could fabricate the image of a person, making that person appear to another as engaged in illicit activity. Such "specter evidence" played a crucial role in the Salem witch trials, which hinged on the witnesses' accounts of the accused person's appearance urging the witness to sign the devil's book. There was much disagreement about the evidential value of specters. At first, the consensus was that the devil could impersonate only evil persons; thus, the image of a person urging evil was tantamount to their actual evil: specter evidence was accepted as real evidence. However, by 1693, the consensus was that since Satan could project the appearances of both sinners and saints, the appearance of an individual in league with the devil was no sign of guilt, thus undermining the value of specter evidence. The story takes place shortly before the witch trials, about 1691, for Goody Cory, Goody Cloyse, and Goody Carrier, who feature in the story, were prosecuted and the former two hanged in 1692. Based on this evidence, Levin argues that the story turns on specter evidence in order to condemn both the witch trials as a "graceless perversion of true Calvinism" (352) and Brown for his poor theology (344). Because Brown's perceptions in the forest are unambiguously "conjured" (348) by the devil, he has "no justification for condemning any of [the people he sees in the forest]—and no justification for suspecting them" (351). Levin thus addresses the ambiguity of the story and its unsettling ending, problems which plague allegorical

interpretations. According to Levin Brown's perceptions are not ambiguous, but clearly spectral, and his resistance of the devil is no help to him because he has already succumbed to Satanic deception and will apparently play his role in the witch trials to come.

While Levin's argument adds a crucial dose of historical background to the story and helps to focus interpretation upon Puritan intolerance and bigotry as crucial themes, his position also raises a number of questions, some of which are as anachronous as Levin's original argument. For instance, Doubleday has observed that since the event would have taken place before the trials, Brown would have been justified in his judgement because that was the theological consensus at the time (208). In that case, why is Brown under such condemnation? Another question relates to the broader allegorical framework assumed of Hawthorne. Allegory generally involves a clear and relevant moral made fresh and alive to a community of readers within a shared framework of truth. Levin's interpretation makes the story clear and relevant to a seventeenth-century Puritan, but Hawthorne's contemporary readers were largely ignorant of the nuances of spectral evidence, refused to employ such evidence in their court trials, and were disinclined to hang witches. If the story hinges on Satan's ability to project appearance, the contemporary reader is justified in questioning the ontological status of such apparitions and being dissatisfied with the admonition to "examine the story from the seventeenth-century point of view" (Levin 347). I believe many of these problems are alleviated if we note that Brown does not merely perceive; he also interprets. Brown's ordeal is a crisis of interpretation which stems from contradictions within himself and his society and is precipitated by his journey into the

wilderness. In this context, "Young Goodman Brown" powerfully dramatizes how ideology and public opinion redirect an individualistic ethic, prodding the divergent individual back into an acceptable social framework through the terror of an intolerable nihilism.

If an ideology or interpretive framework is the product of a given society, then no better place could be found to lose such a framework than the wilderness, where familiar, socially-approved categories break down. It is a realm of questioning, where clear, authorized distinctions between the good and the damned are obscured. This absence of clear distinctions is expressed in the darkness of the forest, where the road—the only clear path—is "darkened by all the gloomiest trees of the forest, which barely stood aside to let the narrow path creep through, and closed immediately behind" (277). On this insubstantial trail, Brown travels through "deep dusk" (277), passing "through the forest, where no church had ever been gathered, nor solitary Christian prayed. . . , so deep into the heathen wilderness" (282), later called the "unconverted wilderness" (285-6). Untouched by Puritan norms or the light of Christian categories, the wilderness is also "lonely," a place of "solitude" where the pilgrim must guide himself to the chosen land. It is, therefore, a dangerous land where the pilgrim can lose the path, or his moral compass, "leaving him in the heart of a dark wilderness" with nothing to guide him but "the instinct that guides men to evil" (283).<sup>11</sup>

Toward this expedition in the wilderness Brown feels intensely ambivalent, a feeling which is central to the story. For instance, Brown repeatedly refuses to continue but always resumes his march: "'It is my purpose to return whence I came. I have scruples, touching the matter thou wot'st of. . . . Too far, too far!' exclaimed the goodman, unconsciously resuming his walk"

(278). Like Adam and Eve, Brown tries "to conceal himself within the verge of the forest, conscious of the guilty purpose which had brought him thither" when he hears others approach, but he also strains to discover who else is in the forest (281-2). Even near the climax, when Brown has lost his faith and is about to be initiated, he feels a "loathful brotherhood, by sympathy of all that is wicked in his heart" (286). He feels connection, brotherhood, sympathy, but it is all loathsome.

This ambivalence stems from a conflict within Brown's heart and within his Puritan community.<sup>12</sup> On the one hand, in venturing past the clearly defined reality of the settlement, Brown is, as I have mentioned, entering a wilderness of relativism and questioning of authorized dogma. Clearly, this realm is antithetical to the Puritan social structure, with its communal watchfulness against deviance, its strict discipline and rigid orthodoxy. Thus, Brown considers himself a "wretch" for venturing out on "his present evil purpose" (276). This sense of evil is compounded by Brown's fear of losing his central reference point, a fear which is quite justified in his case. No longer able to rely on authority and tradition, Brown is potentially rudderless in the wilderness.

Nevertheless, Brown feels compelled to explore this wilderness region, claiming that this journey "must needs be done" (276). If this journey is so wrong, why does Brown feel so compelled to take it? Certainly Adams is right to suggest that this wilderness journey represents Brown's drive toward maturity (164-5). This drive has been thwarted by faith; that is, by the need to circulate within the narrow confines of the Puritan social structure. Thus it is that "Faith kept me back," or delayed his maturation (277). In another sense, this push into the wilderness stems from the very premises of Calvinist spirituality, which enjoins the individual to confront both God and reality personally, directly



and authentically without the mediation of society, to approach the text of God anew, stripped, as Calvin had argued, of "our native shrewdness."<sup>13</sup> That is, Goodman Brown must question all his most cherished assumptions, utterly exposing himself to God. The spiritual impetus behind Brown's dark night of the soul is evident in the story's language: Brown's pilgrimage is repeatedly referred to as a journey and an errand, the latter term reiterating the Puritan mission in America as an "errand in the wilderness." Furthermore, Brown has established a "covenant" (278) to meet his mentor in the wilderness, another term reflecting the Puritan mission in America. These terms are not used simply as irony; rather, they reflect Brown's need to develop spiritual maturity as defined by Puritanism itself. Brown's initial spiritual immaturity manifests itself in Brown's reliance upon others, especially upon Faith, a kind of icon or physical substitute for a spiritual reality. Like a young boy, he tells himself that he will "cling to [Faith's] skirts and follow her to heaven" (276). Moreover, his moral impulses stem not from the overflowing love for God which the Puritans had prescribed, but from a desire for comfort and ease, for maintaining the appearance of virtue before the watchful eyes of the community, for a "clear conscience" if "he should meet the minister in his morning-walk, nor shrink from the eye of good old Deacon Gookin," to have "calm sleep . . . purely and sweetly . . . in the arms of Faith" (281). Brown has a naive and uncritical faith in the community's righteousness: "We are a people of prayer, and good works, to boot, and abide no such wickedness" (278). This combination of immaturity and faith in authorities causes Brown to have no basis for his moral standards within himself. Conditioned by the ethic of watchfulness, he bases all of his arguments against the satanic guide on the shame he will feel when he meets the respected

members of the community: his father never went into the wilderness; he can never face the minister if he continues going into the forest; he must not disappoint Faith by venturing further. Never does he offer the most straightforward defense: "I do not want to be here." In essence, Brown's Puritan community is structured so tightly, pervades so deeply, molds so powerfully that, lacking the piety at the heart of Puritanism, Brown is obsessed not with the love of God, but with the fear of man.

Brown's journey, then, is propelled by the interaction of contradictory forces within himself and within his community, contradictions between Puritan worldliness and Puritan spirituality, between the authority of the community and the authority of the individual's relationship to God, between the need to find secure meaning circulating within acceptable social norms and the need to experience directly and authentically. Stemming from such contradictions, the journey results in ambiguous knowledge, in an obscure enlightenment which strips Brown of his moral and intellectual framework.

The main prize of this journey is a certain kind of knowledge: "This night it shall be granted to you to know their secret deeds. . . . It shall be yours to penetrate, in every bosom, the deep mystery of sin, the fountain of all wicked arts" (287). Like Adam and Eve, Brown receives the knowledge of good and evil. In particular, because Brown stands outside the community, he can view that community from a new vantage point, no longer blindly accepting the word of his elderly authorities, but scrutinizing those authorities, determining whether the community measures up to its own standards. For example, the Satanic guide informs Brown, "I helped your grandfather, the constable, when he lashed the Quaker woman so smartly through the streets of Salem. And it was I that

brought your father a pitch-pine knot, kindled at my own hearth, to set fire to an Indian village, in King Philip's war" (278). Brown is shocked at this news not because he hears that his progenitors fought Quakers and Indians (which would have been public knowledge), but because he now associates those actions with Satan rather than with God and God's community; that is, rather than accepting the socially approved interpretation, he views these actions from a new interpretive framework which manifests the barbarity of these actions. This awareness is both politically and psychologically dangerous: "the least rumor of the sort would have driven [Brown's father and grandfather] from New England" (278), for to raise such questions is to challenge the premises upon which the colony is built. Such ideas imply that the entire colony might be built on a worldly or even demonic foundation and call into question the entire structure of watchfulness and the legitimacy of the colonial government. Furthermore, because Brown lacks an internally-generated moral structure and thus bases his morals purely upon the opinion of others, doubts about others' morality undercut the psychological foundation of Brown's entire moral edifice.

As a result, though this knowledge is necessary for both spiritual and secular maturity, it stems from a problematic vantage point. It implies, for Brown, that nothing is morally valid and thus carries deep spiritual and moral implications. To question the purity of the religious elite is to question all religious truth. Hence, when Brown questions the virtue of Faith, he does not question any particulars of his faith; rather, he questions the existence of any virtue at all: "There is no good on earth; and sin is but a name. Come, devil! For to thee the world is given" (283). Furthermore, depriving Brown of his accustomed assumptions, the authentic wilderness experience dispossesses him

of any certain, grounded basis for interpreting his experience. This lack of grounded certainty leaves Brown wavering between total faith in the community and total doubt, between a questionable Puritan framework and no framework at all.

The mixing of categories or the breaking of boundaries which pervades the story is particularly problematic in the Calvinist tradition. For Calvin, despite the natural boundaries which God has fixed, the post-lapsarian world is inherently confusing, presenting a picture of "the whole earth jumbled together in undistinguished variety, and its individual parts in a manner tossed hither and thither" (*Commentary on Psalms* 30: 6).<sup>14</sup> To contend against this chaos, therefore, the believer must hold all the more strongly to God's natural order. It is especially important to "beware of the general contagion of other men; for it would have been intolerable that the elect people, whom God had surrounded by the barriers of his Law, that they might be separated from others, should freely and indiscriminately mingle with the pollution of the Gentiles" (*Commentary on Isaiah* 44:21). Thus, Calvin calls for believers to avoid the contamination of "associating with the ungodly. . . . lest the wicked, with whom we come into contact, infect us by their vitiated morals" (*Commentary on the Psalms* 106:35). For the Puritans, this separation was even more crucial, for the entire edifice of power was based on the ability of the community to distinguish clearly between the elect and the damned. Goodman Brown, then, is accustomed to the ideas of a clear division between the elect and the damned, of purity as a necessary and achievable goal, of the need to avoid contamination from the unregenerate. These notions leave no room for a gray area and thus do not cohere or provide direction in a tangled, dusky wilderness.

Consequently, Brown is bewildered when he hears the voices of the "pious and godly" mixed with the sounds of those he "had seen rioting at the tavern" (283). The faces of the witches' congregation quiver "to-and-fro, between gloom and splendor": "irreverently consorting with . . . grave, reputable, and pious people . . . there were men of dissolute lives and women of spotted fame. . . . It was strange to see, that the good shrank not from the wicked, nor were the sinners abashed by the saints" (285). In other words, because he abandons the framework he has inherited from society, he is left with no clear paradigm by which to evaluate and understand the wilderness.

Even worse, while the drive for authenticity places Brown in an interpretive wilderness where all is potentially meaningless, he is unable to begin completely anew but habitually reverts to his accustomed mode of interpretation. Madison Jones argues that Brown is successful in his "desire to see with [his] own eyes reality laid bare" and thus is "not mistaken" in his "pessimistic vision" (192). I believe this view is mistaken: Because the wilderness provides a vantage-point which is beyond the socially-approved limits, everything in the wilderness is, according to Brown's habitual way of thinking, guilty by association. He perceives not only himself but also the other beings he encounters there to be tainted—simply because they are in the wilderness. Brown's knowledge, experienced first hand rather than accepted from society, carries a certain kind of authenticity; however, just as Calvin observed that anxiety produces a distorted vision, causing us to "conjure up to ourselves lions, and dragons, and a host of frightful dangers" (*Commentary on Psalms* 91:13), so Brown's vision is also far from objective. Infected by the same conflicting drives which haunt Brown's entire journey, by the need to accept either an unreliable

but socially-authorized framework or to flounder with no framework at all, this new knowledge fluctuates between certainty and doubt and is distorted by satanic associations.

I believe these factors, rather than supposed satanic specters, disorient Brown's interpretive framework and account for Hawthorne's effective use of ambiguity to dramatize the confusion and distortions which Brown experiences. While Levin argues that Brown's wilderness guide is unambiguously the devil (347-8), the actual descriptions of this figure, vitally important if Brown is to make the right decision, are highly ambiguous. On the one hand, carrying a serpentine staff, appearing out of nowhere, having a worldly air about him, he seems to be Satan. However, the narrator conspicuously avoids calling him the devil, using instead terms such as "fellow traveler" or "he of the serpent." In fact, in the entire story, there are only two uses of the term "devil." The first instance occurs when Brown wonders "if the devil himself should be at my very elbow" (277). Immediately after that, the elderly man appears. Did Brown truly conjure the devil? Or might Brown merely feel overly suspicious and unfairly interpret his guide as Satanic? Unfortunately, Brown's discernment is limited, and the narrator leaves us in suspense—suspicious, yet never fully confirmed in that suspicion. A similar doubt taints the second use of the term devil, when the guide surprises Goody Cloyse, who screams "The devil!" (280). Perhaps Brown is correct to see Goody Cloyse as a consort of the devil. However, perhaps she merely screams "the devil!" out of fright—not because she sees the devil, but because she is startled by the guide's tapping on her shoulder. Likewise, perhaps the banter which follows regarding Goody Cloyse's stolen broomstick is merely a form of playfulness. Again, demonism is suggested but not confirmed.

Brown's sensory impressions oscillate between reality and fantasy, qualified by imperfect vision or a sense of subjectivity. For instance, the physical description of Brown's guide is "as nearly as could be discerned" (277). Likewise, each of the people Brown meets in the forest is described at least once as a "figure," a "shape," a "voice," "tone," or "accent." Many of Brown's perceptions are tainted by uncertainty. The guide's staff appears to "twist and wriggle itself, like a living serpent," but this is passed off as an ocular deception (277). If his impressions were totally doubtful, as Levin argues (348-350), Brown could pass them off as mere delusion, specters produced by the devil. However, interspersed with the fantastic are images of the concrete, of bushes and trees which Brown feels with his own hands. For example, Brown's guide throws his maple stick to Brown, providing evidence of concrete reality, and then "was as speedily out of sight, as if he had vanished into the deepening gloom" (281). At one moment, Brown hears voices so vividly that he can detect the accents of his neighbors, and the next moment, all is silent (283). The congregation, likewise, shines forth distinctly, then disappears into the abyss (285).

As these instances indicate, Hawthorne's use of ambiguity is neither indecisiveness nor indicative of faulty hermeneutics, but is deeply insightful into the workings of human understanding. It dramatizes how the drive for authentic experience without the mediation of society is illusory at best, for lingering presuppositions follow the interpreter around—even in the wilderness. Even when such pure authenticity is truly practiced, it leads potentially to nihilism, in which nothing is intelligible because there are no grounds for basing an interpretation. Hawthorne's ambiguity reflects Calvin's observations on the nihilistic effects of alienation and isolation. In his commentary on Isaiah 59:10,

Calvin notes that the Jews, wandering in "darkness and obscurity. . . . destitute of counsel," were plagued by a despair that "takes from us all ability to see or to judge." They were groping in a "labyrinth" and "reduced to a wilderness, so that, shut out from the society of men, they resemble the dead, and have no hope of escape." As Calvin's language indicates, the lack of intelligibility threatens not only understanding, but also the death of one's very moral identity; likewise, in Hawthorne's world, the frameworks of epistemology, morality, and identity are an inextricably bound triumvirate. It should not surprise us, then, to see Brown's epistemological nihilism resulting in moral uncertainty and in the collapse of the boundaries of his identity. When Brown receives a hint of Faith's guilt by means of the pink ribbon and thus evidence that his faith is unfounded, Brown cries out in "agony and desperation," in "grief, rage, and terror" (283). "Maddened with despair," Brown immediately rushes wildly through the forest and becomes "the chief horror of the scene" (283-4). Bereft of his faith in Faith, unable to reach an alternative affirmation, prey to communal images of faith's antithesis—Brown has been converted by the wilderness into a wild man, characterized by "frenzied gestures" and "horrid blasphemy, "reflecting the "lurid blaze" and the "tempest" of the "benighted wilderness" (284). At this point, Brown is plagued by uncertainty, despair, a loss of identity, and a sense of depravity: "What polluted wretches would the next glance shew them to each other, shuddering alike at what they disclosed and what they saw" (287-8).

Through the power of public opinion and ideology, then, Puritan society presents Brown with a choice—either conformity or nihilism. Like Hawthorne's America, Puritan society tells Brown that although he may, even must, seek



reality personally, speak his conscience honestly, and encounter his God freely—that is, he must be a free, responsible individual—he will pay a price if such freedom takes him beyond the confines of society. Indeed, it is the high price of radical freedom—the breakdown of all knowledge, ethics, and personal identity—that drives the individual to embrace authoritarianism. In this context, Brown's rejection of the initiation is neither peripheral nor contradictory to the heart of the story as many critics are forced to maintain. His rejection of the offer, not simply his entering the wilderness, is a central, defining element in Brown's life, a crucial choice, conditioned by the basic tension within the story. Unable to return to a pre-wilderness innocence, Brown must choose either a wilderness existence characterized by authenticity and a lack of boundaries, or the structured existence of the society which he can no longer trust. Considering the horrible, formless abyss of his night in the forest, his choice of the Puritan structure is quite understandable. Ironically, Brown's "Christian liberty," as Calvin would term it, leads to conformity, and in pursuing the logic of Calvinism, Brown ends up similar to those whom Calvin bemoans as "entangled" in doubts, those who, "wherever they turn, see offense of conscience everywhere" (III. xix. 7).

### **The Divided Self: Roger Malvin's Burial**

Like "Young Goodman Brown," "Roger Malvin's Burial" is frequently interpreted in a crime-and-punishment scenario: Reuben violates his promise and must pay the price in guilt, economic ruin, unhappiness, and ultimately the death of his son, but the sacrifice of his son acts as an atonement for his sins. Taking this line, many critics have focused their attention on what exactly

Reuben's sin is—the abandonment of Malvin, the concealment of this fact, or the failure to return and bury Malvin. Mark Van Doren, for example, argues that Reuben "has committed a sin [in abandoning Malvin] and has failed to confess it when he could" (80). Erlich argues that not only is Reuben guilty for abandoning Malvin, but Malvin is guilty for convincing Reuben to flee. Even psychoanalytic critics heap blame upon Reuben. Adams, for example, accuses Reuben of the modern psychological sins of neurotic immaturity and infantile dependence (166). Seen as a morality tale, however, "Roger Malvin's Burial" disappoints the reader: Reuben is cleansed of his sin not by confession, grace and salvation through Christ, but by murdering his own son. Thus, Doubleday considers "Roger Malvin's Burial" a flawed tale, for "although the tale seems, to begin with, so much in a Christian context, the concept of Cyrus' death as somehow a necessary sacrifice is certainly in no way Christian" (200). Richard P. Adams goes further, claiming that the "ending makes no sense—indeed it makes badly perverted nonsense" (166). Or as George Sebouhian observes, the story functions not as a Christian tale, but as a "parody of the original summons by God to Abraham to take Isaac to the mountain," in which Reuben finds peace through murder (45). As a Christian morality tale, the story seems contrived, the moral simplistic, and the climax incoherent.<sup>15</sup>

I believe many of these difficulties are abated if we notice some crucial similarities between "Young Goodman Brown" and "Roger Malvin's Burial."<sup>16</sup> Like Brown, Reuben is young and ignorant, qualities which make him only dimly aware of the forces at work in his soul. Having "scarcely attained the years of manhood" (89) when Malvin dies, Reuben is unaware of complex human motivation, so his decision to leave Malvin is influenced by motives

which act "unconsciously to himself" (93). Like Brown, Reuben is largely at the mercy of forces which he neither understands nor can control. Furthermore, the crucial experiences of both men occur in the wilderness, where normal reality breaks down. Like "Young Goodman Brown," "Roger Malvin's Burial" explores the consciousness of an individual who discovers the gap or tension between a socially-prescribed and an authentically-experienced reality, and it dramatizes the mistrust—here directed inwardly rather than against the community—and entrapment resulting from the inability to handle this discovery.

The most apparent difference between "Young Goodman Brown" and "Roger Malvin's Burial" is the change of setting from Puritan New England to the frontier of colonial America. Accompanying this new setting is a new ideology, the myth of the frontiersman and the West. As we have seen from O'Sullivan's panegyric upon America and her future in the West (see pages 104-108 above), the West was seen as the virgin land, unspoiled by corruption, waiting and longing for penetration by the representative of civilization, the frontiersman. While the frontiersman could impregnate the wilderness with advanced culture, the West bore the frontiersman's dream—of self-governance and equality, of opportunity and freedom from the burdens, sins, and limits of the past.

As we have seen from "The Gray Champion," however, Hawthorne recognized a certain continuity between Puritanism and the America of later generations. In particular, Puritan and frontier mythology both function as a means of not only channeling potentially divergent human thought and activity, but also sanctifying what would otherwise be called amoral. Furthermore, both ideologies are at odds with the authentic experience of the individual. Such

problems are evident in the basic economy of frontier life. On the one hand, for instance, the frontiersman aims to bring civilization and order to the savage wilderness. Thus, as Reuben and his family flee the settlement and venture into their new abode in the wilderness, they are called "pilgrims" (100), a term which highlights the vestiges of Puritan idealism behind frontier conquests. This same idealism—reminiscent of the Puritan mission—underlies Cyrus's vision of what the future holds: exploration, wealth, patriarchy, and a glorious nation. On the other hand, the frontiersman's actual life differs markedly from his missionary purpose. This contradiction is embodied in Reuben's role as hunter and warrior. He is a killer of man and beast as are all the frontiersmen, who must kill animals to eat and the Indians to maintain their claim to the land they have appropriated. This contradiction is highlighted by the story being placed in the midst of a war.<sup>17</sup>

The ideological riposte to this contradiction is to spin out further myths, in this case the myth of chivalry, heroism, and honor in battle:

Imagination, by casting certain circumstances judiciously into the shade, may see much to admire in the heroism of a little band, who gave battle to twice their number in the heart of the enemy's country. The open bravery displayed by both parties was in accordance with civilized ideas of valor, and chivalry itself might not blush to record the deeds of one or two individuals (88).

Like the myth of the West, the ideal of the glorious war requires some expunging of the historical record. Colacurcio points out the circumstances which actually were cast into the shade by those who had survived Lovell's Fight:

Having set out on an officially sponsored (if personally motivated) scalping expedition, Captain Lovewell's irregular troops began by slaughtering a party of Indians in their sleep. . . . In the aftermath of this lucky (and profitable—for they were to receive a bounty of 100

pounds for each scalp) raid, they went on to bungle their own mercenary strategy by the tactic of pursuing a lone Indian in such a manner as to get themselves ambushed; and in the bloody "Fight" that followed they were to suffer great (and needless) losses from among their own number (*Province of Piety* 118).

Residing in Indian lands with the purpose of furthering civilization, the frontiersman acts like a savage himself. In this respect, the frontiersman's superstitious concern for the dead (94) does not simply explain the pressure upon Reuben to bury Malvin; it also reflects the extent to which the "civilized" frontiersman himself is actually the savage. Like the Puritan community of "Young Goodman Brown," the frontier community of "Roger Malvin's Burial" lives at odds with its stated ideals and *raison d'être*.

These social tensions are embodied within the central drama of the story. On the one hand, Reuben can abandon his dying prospective father-in-law, condemning Malvin to "a ghastly fate, to be left expiring in the wilderness" (93). Toward this course he is impelled primarily by the instinct for self-preservation. Like that of any healthy youth, Reuben's "young heart clung strongly to existence" (96). Because Reuben's "wounds are deep, and [his] strength is failing fast" (90), to stay with Malvin means risking probable death in the futile tending of a man who will certainly die with or without Reuben's filial piety. Just as the frontiersman is compelled to kill in order to thrive in the wilderness, Reuben is forced to flee by his drive to survive.

On the other hand, pressures of both society and "conscience, or something in its similitude" (95) impel Reuben to stay with Malvin and either nurse him to health or give him a proper burial. The social pressures are intense. For instance, Reuben cannot stand the idea of facing Dorcas and explaining his desertion of her father: "And your daughter! How shall I dare to meet her eye?"

(91). As we have seen, the historical setting, far from being "separate and remote from the Hawthornean events that follow" (Donohue, *Calvin's Ironic Stepchild* 180), highlight these social pressures. Reuben has clearly internalized the myth of the West and of chivalric ideals, and he expects that the most noble ideals may be affirmed while humans go about the gritty business of living, that there are no contradictions between frontier life and frontier ideology. Shaped by such an ideology, Reuben's conscience now presses him to sacrifice himself for Malvin. Thus, while both common sense and the narrator concur that fleeing is a "justifiable act" (98), Reuben's abandonment is unacceptable according to the most important judge—his own conscience.

The insurmountable division within Reuben—a parallel of the contradictions of frontier life—is evident in Malvin's plea to get Reuben to depart. Aware that Reuben's willingness to leave is hindered by his scruples, Malvin realizes that he cannot simply appeal to Reuben's instinct for survival, for "no merely selfish motive, nor even the desolate condition of Dorcas, could have induced [Reuben] to desert his companion, at such a moment" (92). Rather, Malvin must plead with Reuben's conscience to allow Reuben to go: "I will urge no selfish motive to your generous nature" (91). Of course, the task is virtually impossible, so Malvin must deceive Reuben "to wile him to his own good" (91), and to this end, Malvin employs various sophistries: It makes no sense for both men to die; as a father, Malvin commands Reuben to go; Malvin needs time to be alone to settle his account with God; he wants Reuben to save himself in order to take care of Dorcas; if Reuben leaves quickly, he may find a search party and save Malvin's life. These arguments are persuasive enough to weaken Reuben's resolve, but not enough to make him feel confident that fleeing conforms to his

notions of heroism. Indeed, as Calvin observed, "No sooner do we undertake any thing, no matter how small, than we are grievously perplexed, and as if hurried off by a tempest, are confounded by conflicting counsels" (*Commentary on Psalms* 119:30). Likewise, as soon as Reuben sees that the desires of the flesh may, according to Malvin's sophistry, be consistent with his conscience, that conscience pricks Reuben with renewed vigor. Malvin's arguments, for example, remind Reuben "that there were other, and less questionable duties, than that of sharing the fate of a man whom his death could not benefit. Nor can it be affirmed that no selfish feeling strove to enter Reuben's heart, though the consciousness made him more earnestly resist his companion's entreaties" (90). Accordingly, as soon as conscience realizes that self-interest plays a part in Reuben's motivation, it impels him to counter Malvin's arguments with even greater promises of fealty.

The division within Reuben's soul is also evident in the way he departs. Even when he has finally agreed to leave Malvin, Reuben is forced by his conscience to perform certain rituals before he can actually go. Take, for instance, the "useless supply" of roots and herbs (93) which he collects and presents before Malvin. This useless supply acts not simply as a source of food for Malvin or as a token that he really believes that Malvin can be saved: It suggests a primitive offering to palliate an angry God. To further assuage his stern conscience, Reuben binds a bloodstained handkerchief to a tree, heroically binding himself to the promise to save or bury Malvin. As he departs, only "half convinced that he was acting rightly" (93), Reuben slinks away as quickly as possible in order to seek concealment from Malvin's eyes because of a "sort of guilty feeling, which sometimes torments men in their most justifiable acts" (95).

Finally, his conscience forces Reuben to face the horror of his desertion: "After he had trodden far upon the rustling forest-leaves, he crept back, impelled by a wild and painful curiosity, and. . . gazed earnestly at the desolate man" (95). This sight tortures Reuben "with an unutterable pang" and fills him with the desire "to return, and lie down again by the rock" with Malvin and thus die with him (95). Reuben finally departs, but the experience has left him full of division, self-hatred, and guilt.

For critics in the crime-and-punishment school, Reuben's lie is the crucial turning point, for lying is his clearest sin and the source of the punishments which follow. This interpretation is implausible, for Reuben's sense of guilt clearly stems not simply from his lying to Dorcas and the community. It stems, rather, from his inability either to conform to or resist the socially-condoned reality. The lie itself stems from his pre-existing feelings of guilt and division. Thus, upon regaining consciousness and being asked the fate of Malvin, Reuben's "first impulse was to hide his face" in shame (96), and he cannot "acknowledge that his selfish love of life had hurried him away" before Dorcas's father's had died (97). Reuben's lie and the accolades which follow simply compound the sense of guilt and division which he initially experienced in the wilderness, where his intellectual and moral framework broke down against reality.

Nevertheless, Reuben's lie is significant in two respects. First, it commits Reuben to an inauthentic life and thus propels the story toward the bloody climax. Once he corroborates the social myth, confirming that there is nobility and heroism even in the wilderness, once he receives "the miserable and humiliating torture of unmerited praise" (97), he is forced to maintain the hoax,



and as a he lives a lie, Reuben's life unravels. Here Hawthorne plays upon the reader's deepest anxieties of guilt, fate, and other horrors of the Calvinist universe. Calvin writes of the anxiety caused by a guilty conscience in his commentary on Isaiah 57:20:

Wicked men are "troubled" by inward distress, which is deeply seated in their hearts. They are terrified and alarmed by conscience, which is the most agonizing of all torments and the most cruel of executioners. The furies agitate and pursue the wicked, not with burning torches, (as the fable runs,) but with anguish of conscience and the torment of wickedness; for every one is distressed by his own wickedness and his own alarm; every one is agonized and driven to madness by his own guilt; they are terrified by their own evil thoughts and by pangs of conscience.

Similarly, unable to face the division between reality and appearance, Reuben rationalizes his initial desertion: "Reason told him that he had done right" (98). However, because the sense of guilt lies deeper than reason, Reuben is dominated by irrational feelings of guilt and even patricide, despite the comforting assertions of reason: "By a certain association of ideas, he at times almost imagined himself a murderer" (98). Because he cannot present his past openly to society but must hide it, he imparts "to a justifiable act, much of the secret effect of guilt" (98). Despising himself, he hates others, becoming sad and irritable; he develops a death wish; his farm deteriorates; he becomes alienated from Dorcas, the spoils of his guilty act; and he withdraws into himself. The only thing he is capable of loving now is his son and ideal, Cyrus—meaning "sun" and reminiscent of the Persian King—the purified image of Reuben—meaning "behold a son" (Hochberg 317-21).

Clearly, Reuben is trapped in a predestined hell, impelled toward his fated bourne. Whether presenting an offering of roots and herbs before the dying man or returning to the scene for one last look at his crime, Reuben is dominated

by forces outside his control. This "logic of compulsion," as Crews terms it (80-95), underlies the finale of the story. Reason tells Reuben to go in one direction, but subconscious forces direct him back to the site of Malvin's death. Any failure to follow the path to Malvin causes Reuben to be "ill at ease" and to walk "as if in fear of some pursuer" (101). As he marches back toward the site of Malvin's death, Reuben is led along as if in a dream, "Where am I? Whither am I wandering? Where did I leave him?" (102). Losing control, Reuben begins "straying onward, rather like a sleep-walker than a hunter" when he reaches the vicinity of his initial guilt (103). At this point, he is directed by a vengeful conscience, Jehovah, the God of retribution. While the story leaves the nature of the killing ultimately ambiguous—accident or murder—there is evidence that "the slaying of Cyrus is not at all the hunting accident it appears to be" (Crews 88), but is Reuben's "opportunity of expiating his sin" (Crews 103). After all, what experienced hunter, knowing that there are other people in the vicinity, would shoot at a rustling in the forest? The killing appears to be a murder directed by Reuben's tormented conscience against his dearest ideal. Conscience demands punishment, and since Reuben feels himself to be guilty of patricide, he must sacrifice not a mere ram, but his son and ideal.

Reuben's lie not only drives the action toward this fatal conclusion, but also accentuates the social implications of the story, for Reuben's lie to the community about his desertion parallels the deceit by the survivors of Lovewell's Fight. Just as Reuben denies the conflict he faces between reality and communal ideals, the survivors of the raid cast the realities of the battle into the shade and make it appear to conform to the purest ideals of chivalry and

heroism. In both cases, the men lie largely because their society expects them to lie, but their deceptions further reinforce social myth.

According to Calvin, liars are particularly evil because they "go beyond all bounds," destroy the natural order, and "so deform everything" in the minds of men (*Commentary on Psalms* 12:3-4), fostering the epistemological nihilism, or confusion of the wilderness, which was engendered by the fall. In lying and reinforcing the myth of chivalry, both Reuben and the survivors of Lovell's Fight perpetuate an unreal level of existence for those who never face such profoundly conflicting situations. This unreal or surface kind of existence is evident in the character of Dorcas, the recipient of Reuben's lie and the most important person who should know of her father's fate. Possessing a "simple and affectionate nature" (100), Dorcas has never experienced the kind of profound conflict which Reuben has. These factors incline her to live a kind of surface existence, to play a comfortable social role and accept social myths rather than brood over any conflict between the community's ideals and reality, or between herself and her appointed existence. Thus, when she asks if Reuben has dug a grave for Malvin, she does so not out of deeply felt personal concern, but out of role-playing, as a means "by which her filial piety manifested itself" (97). By maintaining a surface existence, Dorcas seems able to isolate herself from painful reality. For instance, just before Reuben kills Cyrus, Dorcas sings a song which insulates herself from the surrounding "desolate heart of Nature" (105): "As Dorcas sang, the walls of her forsaken home seemed to encircle her; she no longer saw the gloomy pines, nor heard the wind, which still, as she began each verse, sent a heavy breath through the branches, and died away in a hollow moan, from the burthen of the song" (105). The sentence immediately following foreshadows the shock Dorcas

will receive as she is ripped from the womb-like comfort of her domestic harmony: "She was aroused by the report of a gun" and begins "to tremble violently" (105). Still wrapped in her cocoon of illusion, Dorcas moves toward the vicinity of the gunshot to help bring home the venison "which she flattered herself" Cyrus had obtained, and she imagines her son's features around every corner (106): "The light that came down among the trees was sufficiently dim to create many illusions in her expecting fancy. Several times she seemed indistinctly to see his face gazing out from among the leaves; and once she imagined that he stood beckoning to her, at the base of a craggy rock" (106).

As Hawthorne shifts perspective here from the lost, cynical Reuben to the idealistic and deluded Dorcas, the story gains much of its dramatic power. The reader is privy to Reuben's fall and half expects a disastrous end for him. However, for Dorcas, the shock of recognition is a crushing blow, and the reader experiences that shock with her. In addition to this dramatic effect, the story is enhanced thematically by focusing on Dorcas at the finale. The shift in focus completes the vicious cycle underlying the story: illusions beget lies, which in turn propagate illusions. This, in essence, is the dark side of America's Puritan heritage, the continuity in American culture which Hawthorne suggests in "The Gray Champion." A succession of faiths may parade across the American scene, but as "Young Goodman Brown" and "Roger Malvin's Burial" make clear, these faiths reflect certain similarities. Though these faiths or this heritage empowers a society—enabling that society to resist British tyranny, domesticate a wilderness, or conquer the savages—it also traps the members of that community in alienation, unreality, or guilt, rendering those members powerless to resist communal reality, affirm their authentic experience, or set up alternative

interpretive frameworks. No matter what Bancroft's rhetoric of "Puritan liberty" may imply, the individual is not a free, autonomous being in such a world.

### **Reconstructing Robin**

With "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," we return to a milieu similar to that of "The Gray Champion." Unlike "The Gray Champion," however, "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" includes an economic as well as a political dimension and thus moves into more familiar terrain for Hawthorne's readers—the realm of political liberty and economic individualism, or classical liberalism. While Revolution forms a crucial part of the plot, the urban economic environment is also important. The European city was historically the locus of capitalistic development and resistance to Medieval economic and political strictures.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the city to which Robin ventures is an outpost of commercial progress, filled with images of money and ships, of opulent clothing and the "gorgeous display of goods in the shop window" (74). Like young Benjamin Franklin entering Philadelphia, Robin enters the city looking for freedom, wealth, and power. By setting the story within this milieu, Hawthorne moves the story and its implications closer to heart of his contemporary world.

As liberalism continues to be the dominant ideology of American society, it should not surprise us that many American critics should downplay the irony and cruelty of the story. For instance, Crews asserts that

Robin's real search is for an idealized father—a figure of benevolent power who will shield him from the world and lend him prestige. Robin's disappointment and recovery have been interpreted, quite correctly in my opinion, as relating to the crisis of late adolescence and its resolution in favor of a healthy independence from the paternal image (74-5).

According to this line of reasoning, Robin's conversion is a necessary condition for him to "rise in the world, without the help of" his kinsman (87). The revolt of the citizens parallels that of Robin. Both revolutions involve the repudiation of childish reliance upon an overbearing authority; both are necessary for the rebellious ones to develop their full, mature potential; both involve a certain amount of suffering and ugliness; and both are ultimately successful.<sup>19</sup>

However, like the previous stories we have discussed, "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" is simply too full of ironies and criticism to be read in such a light. Rather, this story continues the themes of domination, entrapment, and hermeneutic breakdown which we have seen in "Young Goodman Brown" and "Roger Malvin's Burial." As the story makes clear, even in a liberal world, Puritan-like modes of discipline are employed to maintain social order.

Like Goodman Brown's initiation into the wilderness, Robin's initiation is a disorienting hermeneutic nightmare, for Robin consistently employs a set of assumptions which are inapplicable in the new environment. In particular, Robin still operates under the assumptions of the passing patronage system which dominated eighteenth century England and which Benjamin Franklin had found so repulsive. In fact, as Duban points out, in the eighteenth century, "'Robinocracy' was a term of derision used to describe the political favoritism and corruption of Robert Walpole," and "Robin" referred to Walpole himself (275). Thus, Robin's fealty to his Uncle Molineux is not purely a personal commitment, but reflects an entire set of political, social, and economic commitments. Venturing into a society determined to resist this system and assuming with unshakable faith that Major Molineux is a respected figure in the community, Robin repeatedly misinterprets the hostility he encounters. For

example, he misinterprets the unreasonable hostility of the man of the sepulchral hems: "This is some country representative . . . who has never seen the inside of my kinsman's door, and lacks the breeding to answer a stranger civilly" (70). Likewise, he attributes the "strange hostility" he encounters in the tavern to his lack of money (73). Like the "individuals in outlandish attire," the entire community seems to be speaking "in some language of which Robin knew nothing," and they only speak in plain English in order to curse him (77).

Robin's hermeneutic difficulties find expression in the environment of the city, which reflects Calvin's idea that since God's kingdom "is a kingdom of light, all who are alienated from him must necessarily be blind and go astray in a labyrinth" (*Commentary 1 Peter 1:14*). For instance, the architecture is "irregular," varied, dazzling the eye but possessing little coherence. Robin, likewise, becomes "entangled in a succession of crooked and narrow streets" (70). Furthermore, the clothing of the city-dwellers constantly changes: the man of the sepulchral hems appears respectably dressed at the beginning, but appears at the end "dressed in a wide gown, his grey periwig exchanged for a nightcap" (86). The ringleader of the mob is dressed inconspicuously at the tavern, but appears later "muffled in a cloak" (77) and again at the end "clad in military dress" (84). The ringleader's "ill-dressed associates" (72) appear at the end as "wild figures in Indian dress, and many fantastic shapes without a model" (84). Such evanescence serves to highlight "that appearances . . . are of little use in determining reality, for appearances, like clothing, are constantly changing" (Collins 171). Similarly, unlike the light of God's truth, the man-made light of the city serves not to elucidate but to dazzle, the torches "concealing by their glare whatever objects they illuminated" (84).<sup>20</sup>

According to Calvin, those who take a stand independent of a corrupt society will have to “contend with the world,” be “loaded with many calumnies, and be called tumultuous, or morose, or disturbers of the peace” (*Commentary on Jeremiah* 15:10). Likewise, though some critics have taken Robin’s wilderness experience to mean that there is a “breakdown of almost all structures of authority” (Bellis 104), Robin is clearly subject to pervasive, hostile power. For instance, those who have political clout—the man of the sepulchral hems and the night watchman—threaten him with humiliating incarceration: “I have authority. I have—hem, hem—authority; and if this be the respect you show your betters, your feet shall be brought acquainted with the stocks” (70). Also apparent is the role of money in Robin’s marginality. Though Robin overestimates the importance of money in his expulsion from the tavern, he realizes that he is denied the cheerful companionship of the tavern meal because of his lack of money: “a parchment of three-penny might give me the right to sit down at yonder table” (71). Another obvious form of hostile power is the rebuke, which Robin receives for violating social norms (74) and for his ignorance of the city-dwellers’ secret language (77).

Other forms of alien power are more subtle. For instance, the “dainty little figure” with the “slender waist” would seem the last person to dominate Robin, but “her bright eyes possessed a sly freedom, which triumphed over those of Robin,” (75) and she “proved stronger than the athletic country youth” (76). Similarly, the city-dwellers’ “embroidered garments of showy colors, enormous periwigs, gold-laced hats, and silver-hilted swords”; their artful imitation of European gentry; their strolling “jauntily along, half-dancing to the fashionable tunes which they hummed”—this polished style of the city-dwellers



serves to put Robin off balance, making "poor Robin ashamed of his quiet and natural gait" (74).

While power relations saturate the city, they are different from what Robin expects. They are diffused, emanating not only from political leaders but also from prostitutes. In addition, power in the city is void of its spiritual content. In the city, Boston's church lies desolate and empty. The authority-structure of Robin's home, in contrast, is spiritual and beneficent, characterized by nature, sincere religion, and community. The dominant images of this agricultural society are "the great old oak"; his father performing "domestic worship"; and neighbors gathering "like brothers of the family" (80). Finally, authority in the city is the inverse of what Robin expects: in this nighttime, carnivalesque, democratic atmosphere, the subjects are the rulers, while the rulers must obey their subjects.

Robin, of course, is not a passive recipient of this hostility, but is ready to match power with power, to use his cudgel to extort the desired information from the muffled stranger (77). In a more important sense, however, Robin is a willing participant in the reconstruction of his identity, for he feels some attraction toward those very elements of the city which repulse him. Proud of his supposed shrewdness, tuned in to symbols of status, alert to the "mean" and the "respectable," he does not want to resist the city with the entirety of his being, but desires to succeed in the city. He wants to belong, to join the laughter and excitement of the distant celebration: "Robin's curiosity was strongly excited. . . . Robin rose from the steps, and looked wistfully towards a point, whither several people seemed to be hastening" (83). Likewise, in the tavern, though he feels closest affinity to the bumpkins, "his eyes were attracted from

them" to the powerful, sinister face of the leader of the night's procession (72). Robin's voyeuristic friend asks, "May not one man have several voices, Robin, as well as two complexions?" (83). Certainly Robin finds this observation to be true of the city-dwellers, but it is also true of himself, for a fifth column in his own breast contributes to the transformation of his own identity.

The inexplicable, alienating, overpowering hostility of the city is too much for Robin, and results in a state akin to that of the Calvinist lost soul. For instance, he feels a predestined "fatality" which "thwarted him," and he almost believes himself a victim of "a spell . . . like that, by which a wizard of his county, had once kept three pursuers wandering, a whole winter night, within twenty paces of the cottage which they sought" (77). Likewise, the city's "sleep-inspiring sound, . . . its drowsy influence" (79); the "evening of ambiguity and weariness" (80); the "deeper sleep" which wrestles with and nearly overcomes him—these images of collapsed vitality reflect Calvin's descriptions of sin as powerlessness and lethargy, as "sluggishness, . . . . effeminate listlessness," (*Commentary on Psalms* 30: 6) or "torpor" (*Commentary on Jeremiah* 18: 1-6).<sup>21</sup> Not only does Robin suffer deep, debilitating fatigue, a greater "fatigue from his rambles" in the city "than from several days on the other side" (74), but he is also alienated and isolated, cast out of all human fellowship just as man has been cast out of Eden. "Excluded from his home," (80) Robin can never return to the blissful innocence of youth, but must wander the streets, the "long, wide, solitary" streets (80), the "strange and desolate" (77) streets. The emptiness of the church, lit only by a faint moonbeam, "made Robin's heart shiver with a sensation of loneliness, stronger than he had ever felt in the remotest depths of his native woods" (79). Coupled with these feelings is a sense of bewilderment, of a mind "vibrating

between fancy and reality" (80). In short, Robin's ferry ride is a veritable voyage across the Styx and into Hades.

Just as prayer and preaching helped prepare the Puritan for his prospective conversion, so the hostile power and incomprehensibility of the city have brought Robin to the brink of a personal transformation. Laughter and mob violence, the "shrill voices of mirth or terror" (84), push him over the edge. Ridicule and the threat of mob violence—though seemingly incongruous—combine to subject Robin to what Foucault calls a "panoptic modality of power" (*Discipline and Punish* 221), making him acutely conscious of himself as an isolated, estranged being, excluded from the comforting norms and security of the tribe and vulnerable to its hostility. The open ridicule to which Robin is subject is a counterpart of the Puritan practice of watchfulness, for both modes of discipline result in the ostracism of the non-conformist subject. Thus, as Robin stands there—facing his disgraced kinsman, shocked into awareness of his vulnerability, aware of himself as the center of the town's ridicule and hostility—he is being scrutinized to discover how pliable a subject he may be. If he should succumb to the tyranny of the majority, he is acceptable to that group and may rise in that world. If, on the other hand, he resists the topsy-turvy authority structure, finds the moral courage to defy the mob, and defends or at least sympathizes with his uncle, he fails the test and endangers his own security. As Robin takes the road more traveled, proving his worth to the city, he bears out Calvin's conviction that "it is scarcely possible not to be shaken by the agreement of many people against us, even when they are in the wrong" (*Commentary on Matthew* 26:10).

Liberal ideology assumes the sanctity of the individual; it is based on the rational, contractual consent of the free citizen not coerced by others; it respects the individual's conscience. If Hawthorne's audience was conditioned to perceive "the pursuit of freedom" as "the moral force that had made Nature's nation grow" (McWilliams 27), then this story is a rude awakening, for Robin's conversion is extracted through terror and alienation, through the application of the superior power of the majority, in violation of his filial ties, and through "a sort of mental inebriety" (85). Likewise, despite Crews' confidence in Robin's "healthy independence," despite Hazel Cohen's description of Robin as "freed from the constraints of all authority" (29), Robin is clearly not autonomous, but is as subject to the whimsical, unspiritual, pervasive power of the majority as he was to his father and his agrarian community. In this "nightmare vision of the dangers of oppression latent in democracy" (Dennis 255), Robin is able to offer no resistance, voice no misgivings, harbor no scruples against the rule of the mob. The narrator's criticism of the multitude obviates the possibility of seeing Robin's conversion in Crews' positive light: "On they went, like fiends that throng in mockery round some dead potentate, mighty no more, but majestic still in agony. On they went, in counterfeit pomp, in senseless uproar, in frenzied merriment, trampling all on an old man's heart" (86). As Puritan society invaded the heart of the individual for the sake of social order, so the "free" society of urban New England invades and dominates Robin's soul, transforming him into a model citizen. Only then, with his very identity reconstituted—one submissive to the dictates of the majority—can Robin participate in the life of the city and "rise in the world, without the help of your kinsman, Major Molineux" (87).<sup>22</sup>

## A Private Space

If America's Puritan heritage empowers the nation as a whole, then, it correspondingly weakens the individual. Contesting America's self-image as a bastion of freedom, individual rights, and virtue, Hawthorne portrays characters who lead desperate lives—divided from themselves and their society, plagued by a sense of guilt, entrapment, alienation, and impotence against the power of the majority to circumscribe reality through interpretive frameworks. In such a world, is there any hope? Among these early coming-of-age stories, Hawthorne offers a ray of hope in "The May-Pole of Merry Mount," a prospect he would later expand in *The Scarlet Letter*.

Like "The Gray Champion" and "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," "The May-Pole of Merry Mount" exploits the conventional pattern of contemporary histories, such as Bancroft's, in which political opponents embody contrary values. History, according to this millennial scheme, involves the working out of these values toward a divinely ordained end, and America is the battleground of this conflict. Individuals within the history play a crucial role in directing the fate of the nation. Like "The Gray Champion" and "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," "The May-Pole of Merry Mount" ironically undercuts this convention.

Superficially, "The May-Pole of Merry Mount" is about the conflict between opposing systems of values and interpretation: "Jollity and gloom were contending for an empire" (360). On the one hand, the society of Merry Mount represents institutionalized joy. Its emblem, the May-Pole, is described in imagery of flowers, joy, colors, ribbons and youthful vigor. Decked in the antlers of the stag, the visage of the wolf, "the beard and horns of a venerable

he-goat" (361), the revelers of Merry Mount celebrate nature, beauty and sexuality. The Puritans, on the other hand, represent the power of gloom. Their lives are filled with toil, prayer, sermons, and the conquest of nature.

Most critics accept the narrator's dichotomy unquestioningly and build an interpretation around such polarities. As John Miller points out, "If not jollity vs. gloom, then hedonism vs. repression, pagan phallicism vs. moralistic Christianity, dream vs. actuality, Pleasure Principle vs. Reality Principle, or delusions of atemporal innocence vs. overinsistence on post-lapsarian sin" (112). According to such interpretations, Hawthorne's intent is either to argue for some ideal social order (perhaps a balance between the Merry Mount and the Puritan orders) or to illustrate the social implications of contrasting religious commitments. Harold Bush, for example, analyzes the story as a conflict between "the myth of concern" and "the myth of freedom," arguing that Hawthorne advocates a balance of Puritan moralism and Merry Mount freedom:

Hawthorne proposes a utopic version of the American public sphere, one that encourages openness and discourages untoward manifestations of Endicott's Ghost. Such a public sphere, Hawthorne suggests, may be America's only chance for maintaining any semblance of meaningful and enlightened cultural dialogue as would be befitting of the social experiment of American democracy (149).<sup>23</sup>

Such interpretations miss Hawthorne's ironic narration and the "entirely spurious" dichotomy of jollity and gloom (Colacurcio, *Province of Piety* 254). Take, for instance, the footnote doubting Endicott's accuracy in criticizing Blackstone (367). If the narrator is to be taken with complete seriousness, this footnote is bizarre at best. As a mocking comment on contemporary histories, however, the footnote shows up the pseudo-critical nature of those histories, for Blackstone was nowhere near Merry Mount on the day in question (Colacurcio,

*Province of Piety* 260). Likewise, in a parody of Bancroft's "authentic passages from history," the narrator draws out, in the most extreme terms, the implications of the conflict between the revelers and the Puritans:

The future complexion of New England was involved in this important quarrel. 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. But should the banner staff of Merry Mount be fortunate, sunshine would break upon the hills, and flowers would beautify the forest, and late posterity do homage to the May-Pole (366)!

Beneath such apparent contrast, Hawthorne portrays two very similar social systems. Both systems try to freeze one aspect of human nature and make it permanent through institutions. While the revelers mandate perpetual spring and sunshine, the Puritans dictate constant winter and gloom. However, as neither reality is complete, the story takes place under neither condition, but in midsummer and at sunset. Because both systems perpetuate only a portion of reality, they warp that reality, causing the adherents of that system to live an illusion. The revelers, for instance, appear as monsters, in the "similitude of man or woman, but distorted or extravagant" (361). "Following a flower-decked corpse, with merriment and festive music, to his grave," they celebrate and laugh even when all cause for joy has passed: "when sport itself grew wearisome, they made a game of their own stupidity and began a yawning match" (366). In this "counterfeit" (361) existence, sexuality is particularly perverted. For instance, one reveler, combining male and female sexuality, is dressed "in the likeness of a bear erect," but with "pink silk stockings" on his hind legs (361). Likewise, the revelers appear like "the crew of Comus, some already transformed into brutes, some midway between man and beast, and others rioting in the flow of tipsy jollity

that foreran the change" (362). Thus, Merry Mount is a place of "jest and delusion, trick and fantasy" (362). While the revelers are clearly living a lie, the Puritans appear no better. Their "superstition peopled the black wilderness" with "devils and ruined souls" (362), and the most eminent member of the band, Endicott, commands the dancing bear to be shot because he suspects "witchcraft in the beast" (369). While the phallic May-Pole is the emblem of Merry Mount, the sadistic whipping post is the Puritans', but both are perversions (365). Thus, living in their own fantasy world, the Puritans cannot, as Fogle maintains, be considered "in tune with the nature of things" (60). Rather, both societies distort reality: Merry Mount colony does this by, in Calvin's words, "endeavouring to break" through the "lines of demarcation in the world" (*Commentary on Psalms* 74: 17), thus throwing "heaven and earth into confusion by our sins" (*Commentary on Jeremiah* 5: 25); Puritan New England distorts through superstition, which Calvin calls "crass and foul" (II. 6. 4), and which causes the misguided to labor under a "blindness . . . mixed with proud vanity and obstinacy" (I. 4. 1); indeed, what Calvin observed of that other chosen people, the Jews, was applicable to the Puritans: they are "inclined toward superstition" and imagine that "what God brings forth from his eternal essence and from the continuing order of nature belonged to but one people!" (I. 11. 2).<sup>24</sup>

Such distortions are no accident, but are part of both societies' power structures. By denying the reality or virtue of alternative values, by cutting off part of nature, each society channels its members' activities more sharply and powerfully but creates a dissonance between socially-prescribed reality and personal experience. Thus, the revelers enhance the united joy of the community by denying the reality of sadness: "it was high treason to be sad at



Merry Mount" (363). Likewise, the Puritans fight diversity and decentralization by imagining a wilderness with devils and lost souls, by punishing heretics, and ultimately by defeating alternative social structures: "For such as violate our social order, it may be permitted us to show mercy. But woe to the wretch that troubleth our religion!" (368). Through illusion and orthodoxy, both societies enhance the enthusiasm and energies of its members. Through the power of pleasure, for example, the society of Merry Mount stimulates the "gleesome spirits" and "wild revelry" (361) of its individual members. Similarly, Endicott, the "energetic" Puritan (369), "the remorseless enthusiast," (367) exudes great power:

The leader of the hostile party stood in the centre of the circle, while the rout of monsters cowered around him, like evil spirits in the presence of a dread magician. No fantastic foolery could look him in the face. So stern was the energy of his aspect, that the whole man, visage, frame, and soul, seemed wrought of iron, gifted with life and thought, yet all of one piece with his head-piece and breast-plate. It was the Puritan of Puritans; it was Endicott himself (367)!

As is suggested in "The Gray Champion," the most crucial difference between the Puritans and their adversaries is not the particular values to which they adhere, but the ability of the Puritans to win. With ease Puritan violence and cruelty dominate the weak sensuality of the revelers: "The ring of gay masquers was disordered and broken; the stag lowered his antlers in dismay; the wolf grew weaker than a lamb; the bells of the morrice-dancers tinkled with tremulous affright" (367). However, both the Puritans and the revelers are deluded, tyrannical toward their members, and accepting of only a portion of reality. In short, those in power and those who resist are one, and in the middle stands "the hapless pair" who must contend against both (369).<sup>25</sup>

According to Samuel Chase Coale, the darkness, imprisonment, and alienation of Hawthorne's characters indicates that he is hopelessly Manichean in outlook (*In Hawthorne's Shadow* 1-21). However, Hawthorne is not completely pessimistic, for Edith and Edgar are not completely dominated by their world in the way that Goodman Brown, Reuben, and Robin are. While the latter protagonists end in alienation, guilt, and entrapment, Edith and Edgar end, like the Adam and Eve of *Paradise Lost*, hand in hand wandering "heavenward, supporting each other along the difficult path which it was their lot to tread," and their marriage is even sanctified by Endicott himself, who "lifted the wreath of roses from the ruins of the May-Pole, and threw it, with his own gauntleted hand, over the Lord and Lady of the May" (370). In this way, Hawthorne offers some hope for the individual, some means of resistance which is not itself oppressive.

While these suggestions are developed at length in *The Scarlet Letter*, already in this early period Hawthorne envisioned a general direction which an exit would take. First, contrary to Bush's assertion that Hawthorne advocates a "utopic version" of American society, it is clear that this hope is decidedly non-utopian. In fact, Hawthorne's stories reflect a profound distrust of social orders, particularly utopian orders.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Hawthorne breaks with Emerson in rejecting a purely individualistic solution.<sup>27</sup> In contrast to both the mass society and the isolated individual, Hawthorne posits the value of family. Thus, unlike the previous protagonists—Goodman Brown, Reuben, and Robin—Edith and Edgar not only are aware of the incongruity between their experience and the socially approved reality but also can share their feelings with each other. This connection breaks the "spell" of unreality which engulfs the other revelers (363).

Furthermore, it provides a basis for something which Goodman Brown, Reuben, and Robin never possess—an ethic independent of either the dictates of society or the desires of the flesh, an interpretive methodology which, by affirming dialogue rather than monologue, avoids not only a purely private and dangerously subjective interpretation but also a stultified, inauthentic interpretation handed to one by society. Although they are powerless to resist the superior force of the Puritans, it is not true that "the Lord and Lady of the May merely submit to the power of the stronger" (Becker 29). Rather, in their willingness to sacrifice their own lives for each other, Edith and Edgar establish a sphere which Endicott cannot control. Thus, they not only influence the "immitigable zealot" Endicott into softening his cruelty but also earn his respect. In short, Hawthorne extols domesticity not simply as a form of nineteenth century sentimentalism, but, like Tocqueville's praise of community involvement, as a bulwark against both the tyranny of the majority and the debilitating effects of egotistical individualism.<sup>28</sup>

This solution, naturally, raises numerous questions. By a happy coincidence, Edith and Edgar's moral independence corresponds with the Puritan notions of marital support and encouragement. What happens in the case of dissonant values? Would they find similar respect, tolerance, and mercy? Furthermore, Endicott sees the opportunity of co-opting the pair's moral independence into greater social power: "There be qualities in the youth, which may make him valiant to fight, and sober to toil, and pious to pray; and in the maiden, that may fit her to become a mother in our Israel, bringing up babes in better nurture than her own hath been" (370). In such a situation, is any lasting

independence possible, or will Edgar and Edith's temporary independence merely be transformed into greater social cohesion and power?

## Chapter 7

### Beyond Indeterminacy:

#### Word, Spirit, and Community in *The Scarlet Letter*

While Hawthorne problematizes interpretation in his short stories, he offers perhaps his most important solution in *The Scarlet Letter*. In this novel, Hawthorne suggests an interpretative methodology akin to Calvin's methodology in 1 John 4: 1 (see pages 34-35 above): both a private interpretation combining the dictates of the Word and the prompting of the Spirit and a public test, conducted among a community of equals through dialogue. The result is a hermeneutics which accepts finitude and historicism as inevitable human conditions but also attempts to counter both a nihilistic subjectivism and an authoritarian dogmatism.

#### The Hermeneutic Circle of *The Scarlet Letter*

Increasingly critics have recognized the centrality of interpretation in *The Scarlet Letter*. For instance, Sanderlin argues that *The Scarlet Letter* is Hawthorne's "study of the meaning of meaning" (145), and Millicent Bell maintains that the novel is "an essay in semiology" (9). Paula K. White similarly asserts that "interpretation gradually dominates center stage. It turns out to be highly problematical, and it is linked ever more closely with life itself" (48).<sup>1</sup>

It is not surprising that critics have been drawn to the novel's hermeneutics, for the problem of interpretation runs throughout the novel. Interpretation is announced as a problem at the outset, when the narrator comes upon the scarlet letter and is perplexed at its import: "Certainly, there was some

deep meaning in it, most worthy of interpretation, and which, as it were, streamed forth from the mystic symbol, subtly communicating itself to my sensibilities, but evading the analysis of my mind" (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 33-4).<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the entire novel can be seen as the narrator's attempt to come to some understanding of Hester and her token. All the main characters of the book, like the narrator, carry on their own quests for meaning. Chillingworth searches for the adulterer who has wronged him. A great deal of Hester's energy is devoted to the quest for meaning within "the dark labyrinth of mind" (177). She searches for the meaning of Pearl: "Child, what art thou? . . . Art thou my child, in very truth?" (103). She wonders about the nature and fate of one so evil as Chillingworth (187). She is uncertain whether the best course for Dimmesdale is open confession or fleeing (270), and she seeks some meaning for Dimmesdale's death, some hope of life beyond the grave: "Shall we not meet again? . . . Shall we not spend our immortal life together? Surely, surely, we have ransomed one another, with all this woe! Thou lookest far into eternity, with those bright dying eyes! Then tell me what thou seest?" (273). Characters in the novel search for the meaning not only of facts but also of signs. For example, Pearl's two obsessive concerns—with Dimmesdale's gesticulations and with Hester's token—are hermeneutic in nature: "What does the letter mean, mother?—and why dost thou wear it?—and why does the minister keep his hand over his heart?" (193).

Hermeneutics is central to the novel because it informs one of the most basic dichotomies within the world of *The Scarlet Letter*—that of fact and interpretation. While facts are usually—though not always—apparent, the meaning of those facts depends upon interpretation; that is, upon the paradigm

through which one views the facts. For instance, among the multitude, there is a "difference of opinion as to the cause of" Dimmesdale's physical decline—some attributing it to excessive attention to duty, others to the unworthiness of the world, and Dimmesdale himself to his own unworthiness. While the meaning of his illness is open to interpretation, there "could be no question of the fact" that he was infirm (128-9). Whereas meaning is less certain than facts, it is substantially more important, for one's very sanity depends on arriving at the correct interpretation. For example, Dimmesdale must decide how to interpret Chillingworth's prying—is the motive beneficent or sinister? Unfortunately, in rejecting his suspicions, Dimmesdale continues the relationship and hastens the dissolution of his soul. Indeed, one's paradigm is so important that very often facts are facts only in so far as they conform to one's interpretative framework. For instance, during Dimmesdale's death scene, when most of the Puritans see a scarlet A on Dimmesdale's breast—of course, its meaning open to interpretation—some "denied that there was any mark whatever on his breast, more than on a new-born infant's" (275). If the facts do not fit one's interpretative framework, they are not facts at all. Because of the problematic meaning of facts and because of the centrality of meaning in human existence, discovering adequate hermeneutical methodology is of crucial importance in the novel.

The centrality of hermeneutics is further evident in the repeated concern with perspective in the novel. As in "Young Goodman Brown," perspective is everything, and its accuracy is often questionable. Thus, what seems to Dimmesdale like a piercing shriek on the scaffold goes unnoticed by the townspeople (158-9), and he thinks he speaks to Father Wilson but apparently

does not (161). Perspective not only distorts the facts but is also unstable, for one can bounce between competing and incompatible frameworks. For instance, after the forest scene, Dimmesdale is "awestricken" with the new perspective of the wilderness, an outlook which carries the power of authenticity: "The soul beheld its features in the mirror of the passing moment" (204). Having agreed, under the influence of this standpoint, to flee to Europe, Dimmesdale returns to the town with a new sense, an iconoclastic version of Jonathan Edwards' "spiritual sense" (see pages 73-74 above), in which the facts remain the same, while the meaning of those facts is somehow transformed: "There, indeed, was each former trace of the street, as he remembered it, and all the peculiarities of the houses, with the due multitude of gabled peaks, and a weathercock at every point where his memory suggested one. Not the less, however, came this importunately obtrusive sense of change" (321). Prompted by the wilderness perspective and its relativistic leanings, Dimmesdale barely restrains himself from iconoclastic pronouncements. While part of Dimmesdale is carried away by this maverick ethic, another part recalls the Puritan framework to harness and choke such deviance:

What is it that haunts and tempts me thus? . . . Am I mad? or am I given over utterly to the fiend? Did I make a contract with him in the forest, and sign it with my blood? And does he now summon me to its fulfilment, by suggesting the performance of every wickedness which his most foul imagination can conceive? (236).

The answer to these questions might be a resounding "yes" or a resounding "no," depending on the interpretative framework. Unable to maintain a single paradigm, Dimmesdale is unable to answer these piercing questions with any certainty.



A similar ambiguity infects the signs or symbols of the novel. Indeed, as Millicent Bell has observed, "the actualities of [Hawthorne's] tale are or may be taken as signs, and he uses repeatedly such words as 'type,' 'emblem,' 'token,' or 'hieroglyph'" to refer to facts (10). Thus, depending upon the assumptions of the individual and the context or status associated with the sign, a given symbol, like a given fact, may be interpreted in widely disparate manners. Of course, Hester's token is the most obvious example, mutating from a symbol of adultery to that of high status (110, 263); divine instruction (118); Hester's ability, strength, and calling (172-3); her good deeds (174); womanhood (196); and Hester's freedom (214). Other signs in the novel are the focus of similar interpretive investigation and are subject to similar hermeneutic problems. Pearl, for instance, is a clear symbol of Dimmesdale and Hester's union—clear, that is, if and only if one possesses the correct interpretative framework: "She had been offered to the world, these seven years past, as the living hieroglyphic, in which was revealed the secret they so darkly sought to hide,—all written in this symbol,—all plainly manifest,—had there been a prophet or magician skilled to read the character of flame!" (222). Similarly, only a "spiritual seer" could understand Hester's expression as she awaits the New England Holiday, "some preternaturally gifted observer" who "should have first read the heart, and have afterwards sought a corresponding development in the countenance and mien" (243).

At the heart of the novel, then, lurks the problem of interpretation: if facts depend on an interpretative framework for their meaning, then one must first have the correct framework in order to unlock the significance of facts. However, in order to derive a valid framework, one must first build up

generalizations based on the correct interpretation of specific meaningful facts. The characters in the novel, like both the narrator and the audience, are trapped in the hermeneutic circle, in which the framework that establishes meaning for facts is in turn supported by those facts. Two competing frameworks may explain the same facts in different ways, and the same facts may be used to support competing frameworks. How, the novel asks, can one arrive at stable, reliable meaning?

### **Beyond Indeterminacy**

While a growing number of critics rightly recognize interpretation as central to the novel, I maintain that most critics fail to see the real significance of this hermeneutic concern, a failure which blinds them to Hawthorne's achievement in *The Scarlet Letter*.

In response to the hermeneutic circle which pervades the novel, most critics argue either that the reader is left with the meaninglessness or inscrutability of all facts and signs, or that the reader must arbitrarily assert one interpretation over another. Both Reed Sanderlin and Millicent Bell, for instance, correctly trace Hawthorne's concern with symbolism to Puritan and Transcendentalist modes of thought and to the problem of a loss of faith in the older interpretation. However, both critics see Hawthorne's point as "the obliquity or indeterminacy of signs" (Millicent Bell 9), a problem arising from modern skepticism: "With loss of confidence in the sacred grounding of signs we have lost confidence in their objectivity, and see them only as games in the mind" (Millicent Bell 12).<sup>3</sup> In contrast to this nihilism, other critics see a more existentialist novel, in which the reader can find meaning only through an

interpretive leap of faith. For instance, though he repeatedly talks of the “true meaning” of a given symbol and of Hawthorne’s supposed religious beliefs, James Walter paradoxically contends that “it is the faith of the reader, forced to make choices while following a labyrinth of possible interpretations, that must determine the novel’s meaning” (37). Both views of *The Scarlet Letter* are fused in Logan’s “Hermeneutics and American Literature,” the only extended analysis of Hawthorne’s hermeneutics. Logan argues that *The Scarlet Letter* and virtually all of Hawthorne’s works end in indeterminacy because of Hawthorne’s unwillingness to commit himself to some sort of hermeneutic principles—and for Logan, it does not matter which principles one adopts: It is necessary for “the interpreter to develop and to use a hermeneutical principle. Such a principle may take any form, but it must be consciously developed and consistently applied if the hermeneutic project is to succeed” (269). The problem for Hawthorne was his “failure to adopt some kind of hermeneutical principle” a neglect which results in “ambiguity, confusion, and eventually. . . interpretive nihilism” (270).<sup>4</sup>

In perhaps the most influential contemporary reading, Sacvan Bercovitch links politics with hermeneutics to argue that Hawthorne’s ambiguity serves liberal pluralistic domination. According to Bercovitch, in highlighting indeterminacy, Hawthorne produces in the reader “a mystifying sense of multiplicity” (Bercovitch, *The Office* 19) which forces the reader, “in the interests of some larger truth, *not to choose*. Ambiguity is a function of prescriptiveness” (Bercovitch, *The Office* 22). Basing much of his argument on Hawthorne’s support for his college friend and advocate of compromise Franklin Pierce, Bercovitch maintains that Hawthorne targets the radical abolitionists who would sunder the nation in their dogmatic certainty regarding the evils of slavery.<sup>5</sup>

I maintain that these commonly accepted ways of seeing *The Scarlet Letter* are deficient, largely because they fail to consider the problem of interpretation within the larger framework of Hawthorne's work and within the Calvinist tradition. In reality, indeterminacy is not the conclusion of the novel, but a premise which the novel seeks to address, and the solution is decidedly not sought through an existentialist leap of faith, but through hermeneutic principles rooted in the Calvinist dialectics—between the Word and the Spirit and between the individual and the community. Moreover, while the text seems to advocate a certain amount of compromise, it does not advocate the silent acquiescence which Bercovitch identifies. I believe these points become evident when we analyze the dichotomy in the novel between the letter and the spirit; the relationship between Hester Prynne and both Ann Hutchinson and Ralph Waldo Emerson; the novel's structure around the three scaffold scenes; the crucial forest scene; the narrative voice; and Hester's return.

### **The Letter Killeth...**

Nina Baym argues that *The Scarlet Letter* is focused on "the conflict between the forces of passion and of repression in the psyche and in society" ("Passion and Authority" 209). In this view, Hester and Pearl are associated with passion, individualism, and creativity against the repression, guilt, and domination of social roles as embodied in such characters as Dimmesdale and Chillingworth. This dichotomy can also be seen in relation to the hermeneutic aspects of the novel, especially the contrast between the word and the spirit. As Baym observes, "One might say, indeed, that the deepest conflict in *The Scarlet Letter* is that between Hester and the Puritan rulers over what the letter means

and who is to decree its meaning—for clearly, meaning is a matter of power and politics" (Introduction 17). Like Hawthorne's short stories, *The Scarlet Letter* continually plays upon the dichotomy between a socially-imposed dogmatism and authentic, private, open interpretation, a dichotomy which parallels that of symbolism and allegory discussed by Feidelson. Associated with the Word, with allegory, with a closed, fixed meaning, with death, and with a meaning that captures only a part of the whole—dogmatism is embodied in the Puritans' use of the letter as a punishment for Hester. Open interpretation, on the other hand, is connected with authenticity, with multiplicity of meaning, with the Spirit, and with the creative transformation of the world.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Calvinist dogmatism is apparent in the Puritans' attempt to control the significance of the letter by fixing its "true" meaning. For instance, the Puritan authorities are careful to attend the scaffold ritual so that "the infliction of a legal sentence would have an earnest and effectual meaning" (61). Not content with the mere presence of authority and solemnity, the Puritans strive to fix the true meaning of the letter and of Hester as "a living sermon against sin" (67). To this end, Reverend Wilson

addressed to the multitude a discourse on sin, in all its branches, but with continual reference to the ignominious letter. So forcibly did he dwell upon this symbol, for the hour or more during which his periods were rolling over the people's heads, that it assumed new terrors in their imagination, and seemed to derive its scarlet hue from the flames of the infernal pit (73).

Aware of the potential for the erosion or transformation of meaning, the Puritans repeat the scaffold ritual in their Sunday sermons by making Hester "herself the text of the discourse" (91). The effect of such public speech is, on the one hand, to draw the faithful members of the community together in a

corporate identity, ideology, and purpose, and, on the other hand, to transform Hester and her letter from multi-faceted symbols into one-dimensional allegorical objects:

Giving up her individuality, she would become the general symbol at which the preacher and moralist might point, and in which they might embody and vivify their images of woman's frailty and sinful passion. Thus the young and pure would be taught to look at her, with the scarlet letter flaming on her breast,—at her, the child of honorable parents,—at her, the mother of a babe that would hereafter be a woman,—at her, who had once been innocent,—as the figure, the body, the reality of sin (84).

Just as allegory, in the preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*, is associated with death—"as by sticking a pin through a butterfly" (2)—the letter's function is, as Paul Johnston observes, "to kill the spirit" (29). In "Another View of Hester," which describes Hester's nihilistic wanderings and the thoughts of suicide which she resists, Hawthorne inserts a crucial one sentence paragraph: "The scarlet letter had not done its office" (177). Neither bringing Hester into the fold nor exterminating her spirit, the letter has failed. However, after Dimmesdale lies dead, branded with the letter on his chest, his resistance to Puritan ideology crushed, the narrator observes that the letter has now "done its office" (275). As in "Young Goodman Brown," "Roger Malvin's Burial," and "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," the dogmatism of *The Scarlet Letter* serves either to kill the spirit or to secure compliance.

Because the letter influences Dimmesdale most powerfully, it is in his life that we can see the letter's office most effectively. Like the major characters in Hawthorne's short stories, Dimmesdale is entrapped and alienated, divided between a lying, conforming social self and an authentic self. In Calvinistic terms, it is the inability of the letter to touch the spirit, to transform the heart

authentically, that causes death. As Calvin observes in his commentary on 2 Corinthians 3: 6-7 ("The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life"), "because the Law only prescribes a rule for good living without reforming men's hearts into obedience of righteousness and threatens transgressors with everlasting death, it can do nothing but condemn. . . . To kill is thus a perpetual and inevitable accident of the law." Inflexible, insensitive to particular cases, molding outward behavior rather than reforming the soul, mere dogmatism, like the law, kills. Instead of functioning as a dead and killing letter, the truth must be understood authentically—as "spiritual teaching that is not uttered only with the mouth but effectively makes its way with living meaning into men's minds." Because he conforms out of social pressure rather than obey from his heart, because he needs the dogmas which strangle him—"it would have been as essential to his peace to feel the pressure of a faith about him, supporting, while it confined him within its iron framework" (132)—Dimmesdale is killed by the letter. This Calvinist psychology explains the repeated allusions linking Dimmesdale's practices to Catholicism, which, for Calvin, epitomized a dogmatism which kept the individual separated from reality behind empty forms and a dead letter. Thus, Dimmesdale, that "miserable priest" (183), rejects all potential wives "as if priestly celibacy were one of his articles of church-discipline" (134); avails himself of "parchment-bound folios of the Fathers . . . and monkish erudition" (135); thrice denies seeing the meteoric A just as Peter, the head of the church, denied Christ (169); and finally practices self-flagellation (155).<sup>6</sup>

### ... but the Spirit Giveth Life

In contrast to Dimmesdale and his submission to Puritan dogmatism, Hester practices an open hermeneutics, a hermeneutics of the Spirit, as a means of resisting Puritan dogmatism. This is most apparent in the similarities between Hester and both Ann Hutchinson and the self-reliant Emersonian hero.

Hester's determination to resist Puritan authority is evident from the opening of the novel, when she strides to the scaffold with "a haughty smile, and a glance that would not be abashed" (57). Just as she transforms the scarlet letter, intended as a token of shame, into beautiful artwork, she makes "a halo of the misfortune and ignominy in which she was enveloped," and, like Christ, she is "transfigured" by the experience (57-8). Beyond such symbolic shows of resistance, Hester takes political stands, forcefully defending her most treasured possession—Pearl: "Ye shall not take her! I will die first! . . . I will not give her up" (120). The most important battleground for Hester, however, is in the realm neither of society nor of art, but of thought. Hester is struck with the significance of thought as a means of either freedom or entrapment when—from the perspective of many years' separation—she reflects on her loveless marriage with Chillingworth and on the horror that "he had persuaded her to fancy herself happy by his side" (188). Chained in her thoughts, the young bride Hester was firmly imprisoned, and she can only realize her captive state from outside the cage. In fact, Hester's utter repudiation of Chillingworth—"I hate him! . . . He betrayed me! He has done me worse wrong than I did him!"—illustrates her hard-won independence not only from Chillingworth but also from Puritan norms, which would have considered Chillingworth the aggrieved party (188). Hester's mental independence becomes more



pronounced as the novel progresses—"The world's law was no law for her mind" (175)—and culminates in the dramatic forest scene, in which she utterly reverses the Puritan norms: "What we did had a consecration of its own" (209).

This resistance is largely hermeneutic in nature, for Hester seeks a means of interpreting her experience distinct from Puritan dogmatism. This search for an alternative mode of interpretation links her with Ann Hutchinson, with whom Hester

might have come down in history, hand in hand. . . as the foundress of a religious sect. She might, in one of her phrases, have been a prophetess. She might, and not improbably would, have suffered death from the stern tribunals of the period, for attempting to undermine the foundations of the Puritan establishment (176).

In many ways, this comparison is particularly apt, for Hester, like the spiritist rebel, takes advantage of the space between fact or sign and meaning to resist Puritan authority. Manipulating the indeterminacy of the Bible's meaning and appealing to the Spirit as arbiter, Ann Hutchinson posited opposing interpretations and thus undermined the legitimacy of the Puritan authorities; likewise, Hester undercuts Puritan authority by positing alternative values and meanings.<sup>7</sup> This process is most evident in Hester's manipulation of the badge of shame. Rather than accepting the Puritan attempts at closing meaning through allegory and dogmatism, Hester wages constant warfare by exposing the letter in a new context, and since it is context that establishes meaning, the letter takes on new meanings. Transforming a life-killing allegory into a life-enhancing symbol, Hester challenges the Puritan meaning and hermeneutics from the outset:

On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold-thread,

appeared the letter A. It was so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy, that it had all the effect of a last and fitting decoration to the apparel which she wore; and which was of a splendor in accordance with the taste of the age, but greatly beyond what was allowed by the sumptuary regulations of the colony (57).

In artistically adorning the letter, Hester tries to establish two meanings to her adultery—beauty and freedom from social restriction. These new meanings are understood immediately by the Puritan women: "She hath good skill at her needle, . . . but did ever a woman, before this brazen huzzy, contrive such a way of showing it! Why, gossips, what is it but to laugh in the faces of our godly magistrates, and make a pride out of what they, worthy gentlemen, meant for a punishment?" (58). Hester further contests the Puritan meaning of the A through the power of the spoken word. While the authorities try to fix the meaning simply—"Woman, it is thy badge of shame"—Hester insists upon complexity, multiplicity, and ambiguity—"Nevertheless, . . . this badge hath taught me—it daily teaches me—it is teaching me at this moment—lessons whereof my child may be the wiser and better" (118). The most important means of transforming the meaning of the letter, however, are Hester's acts of kindness, strength, and virtue, which provide a new context from which the letter is perceived. Rather than being associated with the power of sex to destroy families and politicians, the letter is now associated with society's highest virtues: "Such helpfulness was found in her,—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" (172-3).

While there are significant similarities between Hester and Ann Hutchinson, there are—as the repeated “might” in the passage above indicates—also important differences that many critics overlook. For instance, though hedging slightly, Colacurcio argues that “Hester passes through a phase of antinomianism comparable to (though not identical with) that of Ann Hutchinson” (“Footsteps” 23)—and then proceeds to emphasize the “comparable” rather than the “not identical with.” Johnston, following in Colacurcio’s footsteps and equating Hester with Ann Hutchinson, argues that “Hawthorne, far from repudiating the antinomian spirit manifest in St. Paul’s text [2 Corinthians 3: 6] and in Hutchinson’s assertion of it in early Boston, rather allies himself with it, however ironically” (28).<sup>8</sup> However, while there are similarities between the heroine of the novel and the radical spiritist, there is a crucial difference in their hermenutics which is essential for understanding *The Scarlet Letter*. This is most evident when we compare Hester with the Ann Hutchinson of Hawthorne’s early sketch “Mrs. Hutchinson” (1830). Both Hester and Mrs. Hutchinson are symbolic of the new woman—liberated, intelligent, and powerful. Both are women of talent, intellectual boldness and imagination, yet full of deep trouble, restlessness, and as Colacurcio observes at length, sexual energy, power, and frustration (“Footsteps” 22-25). However, the two women part company in their hermeneutics, a point which is easily missed because of the strong element of subjectivism in both. Though both women affirm the Spirit over the Letter, Ann Hutchinson, in Hawthorne’s version, becomes as dogmatic as the Puritans—affirming the subjectivist dogmatism which, as we have seen, evolved as a counterpart to Calvin’s objective dogmatism (see page 33-34 above). Leaving Rhode Island, which she finds too tolerant, Hutchinson

establishes as authoritarian a system as the Puritans had: "Secluded from all those whose faith she could not govern, surrounded by the dependents over whom she held an unlimited influence, agitated by none of the tumultuous billows which were left swelling behind her, we may suppose, that, in the stillness of Nature, her heart was stilled" (*Tales* 24).<sup>9</sup> For Hawthorne, this subjectivist dogmatism is not a true means of resistance to Puritan dogmatism, for it merely replaces one set of authoritarian creeds for another.

In contrast to Hutchinson's dogmatism, Hester finds no certainty, even when presented with a self-authenticating intuition. For instance, Hester is given a Goodman Brown-like "new sense," a "sympathetic knowledge of the hidden sin in other hearts" (92), but rather than accept this intuition as Ann Hutchinson would—indeed, Hutchinson claimed to know who had been selected by God and who had been damned (Colacurcio, "Footsteps" 25)—Hester refuses to accept the certainty of this sense, but withholds judgement, remaining open to new meaning. Thus unwilling or unable to ground her interpretations in either the socially-sanctioned creed or her private intuitions, Hester wanders in an interpretive wilderness, "without a clew in the dark labyrinth of the mind: now turned aside by an insurmountable precipice; now starting back from a deep chasm. There was wild and ghastly scenery all around her, and a home and comfort nowhere" (177). Thus, Hester is not what Calvin would describe as one of the "fanatics" who "seek inspiration from heaven" (*Commentary on Acts* 8:31). Rather, in Calvin's words, she wanders "in darkness and obscurity. . . destitute of counsel, and overwhelmed by so deep anguish" that she has "no solace or refuge"; "thrown into a labyrinth," suffering from a "despair" which "takes from us all ability to see or judge," Hester resembles the Jews, who "have been

reduced to a wilderness, so that, shut out from the society of men, they resemble the dead, and have no hope of escape" (*Commentary on Isaiah 59:10*).

This lack of grounding is evident in Hester's tortured view of Pearl. At times, Hester acquiesces in the Puritan interpretation of the child: "She knew that her deed had been evil; she could have no faith, therefore, that its result would be good" (94-5). Thus, Hester continually looks for signs of Pearl's supposed demonic origins, seeing a "fiend-like" face appearing in Pearl's eyes (102), hearing "a witch's anathema" in her screams (99), fearing that the Puritans might be right in regarding her as a "demon offspring" (104). At other times, Hester is open to seeing Pearl from a new perspective—as an earnest questioner, as potentially a courageous, self-respecting, honest friend and confidant, as someone with whom Hester can establish an authentic connection. However, this is not an interpretation in which Hester can rest fully assured. Thus, when Pearl asks Hester the meaning of the scarlet letter, Hester sees the letter as a symbol not of a consecrated act, but of her sin and shame, and, unwilling to "pay the price of the child's sympathy," Hester evades an authentic answer: "I wear it for the sake of its gold-thread" (193). Unable, like Ann Hutchinson, to affirm subjectivity with absolute certainty, Hester conforms to her duty as a role model and accepts the Puritan version of her adultery—that it is a shameful, embarrassing act.<sup>10</sup>

In the novel, then, the Spirit is associated not with the dogmatic certainty of the radical reformation, but with an open hermeneutics—ungrounded, uncertain, and even nihilistic. If Hester is, "in Hawthorne's mental universe, just about halfway between Ann Hutchinson and Margaret Fuller" (Colacurcio, "Footsteps" 23), the scale is clearly tipped toward the Transcendentalist, or, with the threat of relativism and nihilism, toward Emerson and his flexible

hermeneutics.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Hester seems to have fallen into the trap which Calvin warned about in his commentary on 2 Corinthians 3: 6—that the appeal to the Spirit could result in the Word being taken to mean anything, that people would “without restraint” play “all sorts of games with the sacred Word of God, as if they were tossing a ball to and fro. . . .When it was accepted practice for anybody to interpret any passage in any way he desire, any mad idea, however absurd or monstrous, could be introduced under the pretext” of the Spirit. While this warning could apply to Ann Hutchinson’s subjectivist dogmatism, it also applies to the open hermeneutics of Emerson and Hester Prynne, which undercuts any firm foundation for meaning and results potentially in a nihilism as debilitating as Dimmesdales’ inauthentic dogmatism.

### **Toward the Community**

Thus, while Kaul is certainly right to see Hester—with her open hermeneutic—as “the sympathetic heroine of the novel” (13), we would be mistaken to identify Hawthorne as antinomian. Indeed, the warning against ungrounded openness, embodied in Hester’s wandering in the labyrinth of the mind, should be seen as part of Hawthorne’s attempt to salvage open hermeneutics from relativism, to establish a hermeneutics which avoids both reductive dogmatism and the displaced uncertainty which forces characters such as Goodman Brown back into uncomfortable conformity with society. As “The Custom House” makes clear, this search for a moderating or grounding principle was a primary concern of his art. If *The Scarlet Letter* finds its origins in Hawthorne’s attempt to find “some deep meaning” in the letter (33), his initial answer is to be found in a “neutral territory, somewhere between the real world

and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other" (38). Just as Calvin sought a balance—often unattainable or precarious—between the Word and the Spirit, Hawthorne seeks the authenticity, creativity, and vitality of an open hermeneutic with the grounded stability of the Word.<sup>12</sup> In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne suggests that this grounding principle is to be found in a dialectic between the individual and the community.

The quest for community, evident, as we have seen, in Hawthorne's short stories and contrary to the dominant individualism of the nation, was an important, counter-cultural feature of Jacksonian America. Many people were interested in utopian communities, such as Brook Farm, in which Hawthorne briefly participated. However, there were other proposals for community not based on utopian idealism, but which reflect Calvin's conviction that "no one has sufficient for himself, but is constrained to borrow from others" in "the bond of mutual communication" (*Commentary on Romans* 12:4). For instance, Hawthorne's friend and fellow Salemite, Edwin Percy Whipple, popularized Coleridge's "philosophical" criticism in the 1840s and espoused a hermeneutics which, like Hawthorne's, sought to avoid two extremes: on the one hand, echoing Hawthorne's "The Birthmark" and the preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*, Whipple abhorred interpretation as "intellectual anatomy" in which "the living body of a poem or institution is dissected, and its principles of life sought in a process which annihilates life at its first step. . . . The soul ever eludes the knife of the dissector, however keen and cunning" (qtd. in Walhout 696); on the other hand, Whipple despised excessive subjectivism, in which hermeneutics is "employed as a mere cover under which to smuggle individual impressions"

(qtd. in Walhout 698). According to Walhout, one of the primary aims in Whipple's hermeneutics was to help bridge the political differences which divided the nation, to "rescue literature from the clutches of partisan critics and establish a common literary culture capable of uniting Whigs, Tories, and even Democrats," to cultivate a community of interpreters in dialogue (700). A similar quest for community can be seen even in the hermit of Walden Pond, Henry David Thoreau, who affirms the hermeneutic value of friendship. For instance, in "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers" (1849), Thoreau, reviving Edwards' notion of communal dialogue as a medium for the emergence of meaning (see pages 75-76 above), extols friendship as a necessary condition for truth: "It takes two to speak the truth,—one to speak, and another to hear" (376). Because of our tendency toward spiritual torpor, toward habitual acceptance of our limited perceptions, dialogue is, according to Thoreau, essential as "a confirmation and guarantee of the legitimacy of the soul's perceptions of reality and itself" (Yarbrough 67); that is, "to validate a man's vision of reality" (Yarbrough 73). Perhaps the most important theoretical development along this line came from theologian Horace Bushnell, whom critics have identified as central in the development of an American philosophy of symbolic language in the 1830s and 1840s. What is often overlooked is the communal element in Bushnell's hermeneutics.<sup>13</sup> According to Bushnell, because of the amorphous nature of spiritual expression, humans seek form to their spirituality by means of imitation. Through imitation of each other's symbolic representations, including not only language and art but modes of dress, gait, and other manners, we learn the inner meaning of external action. As David Smith says, "Adopting [society's] habits, we adopt its insides" (53), and thus develop a symbolic language to



understand and express our spirituality. Separated from society, men lack such language and form and are reduced to spiritual vacuity, but within a social context, "we overrun the boundaries of our personality—we flow together. . . . And thus our life and conduct are ever propagating themselves by a law of social contagion" (Bushnell 136).

Like Thoreau and Bushnell, Hawthorne looked to friendship and community as means of moderating, grounding, and giving expression for the open hermeneutics to which he was deeply attracted. This is evident in the ways in which human connection saves the various characters in the novel. Hester, for example, is preserved from Ann Hutchinson's subjective dogmatism by her connection with Pearl.<sup>14</sup> The "spell" over Pearl is broken by a kiss from Dimmesdale (272). Dimmesdale himself finds brief peace in his connection with Hester. Moreover, this need for connection is apparent in the structure of the novel. As critics such as Matthiessen have observed, the novel's "symmetrical design is built around the three scenes on the scaffold of the pillory" (275). As far as Hester's development is concerned, the first to the second scaffold scenes dramatize Hester's awakening to self-reliance, authenticity, and an understanding separate from that of Puritan dogma. Taken to its ultimate conclusion, this purely private understanding leads to the labyrinth of the mind and thoughts of suicide. If Hester could live an existence without meaning, she could rest content with simply denying the Puritan version of reality. As a human, however, Hester must not only struggle for her independence but also live and think in meaningful terms. This quest for meaning drives Hester back toward society, for, as we shall see, a necessary condition for meaning is relationships with other humans. After the second scaffold scene, therefore,

Hester is drawn back into human connection—into dialogue and the search for truth through fellow humans: “Now, however, her interview with the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale, on the night of his vigil, had given her a new theme of reflection, and held up to her an object that appeared worthy of any exertion and sacrifice for its attainment” (177). The second half of the novel, then, pushes Hester back into human community.

Nina Baym has observed that Hester is drawn back into community because of her love for Dimmesdale. A woman's freedom is thus “circumscribed by love” (“Passion and Authority” 222). In addition, Hester's return can be seen from a hermeneutic perspective, and looking simply at what psychiatrist Viktor Frankl calls “the primary motivational force in man. . . [the] will to meaning” (121), we can see the importance of community even to as independent a person as Hester. Take, for example, Hester's declaration of independence in the crucial forest scene:

“What we did had a consecration of its own. We felt so! We said so to each other! Hast thou forgotten it?”

“Hush, Hester!” said Dimmesdale, rising from the ground. “No; I have not forgotten!” (209).

Upon issuing her proclamation, Hester offers Dimmesdale evidence that their adultery was in fact consecrated: “We felt so.” But feeling it to be true is not enough; to be a meaningful reality, it must also be spoken. In Wittgenstein's words, “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence” (*Tractatus* 74). Thus, Hester offers the most important evidence that their adultery was consecrated: “We said so to each other.” If language is a condition for meaningful reality, then the knowledge or confirmation of reality cannot be

purely private, for language, by its very nature, is public.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, there can be no consecration without some mutual agreement that it is so.

This condition—that communal, symbolic expression is necessary for meaning—helps explain the most shocking feature of Hester's declaration of independence—the verb tense: "What we did had a consecration of its own. We *felt* so! We *said* so to each other!" After years of stuttering progress from guilt and the acceptance of Puritan norms toward independence and the revaluation of values, Hester has advanced to the point where she can affirm what she and Dimmesdale had agreed upon seven years earlier! This anachronism is explicable only if we consider the constraint mentioned above. For seven years, Hester's struggle to reinterpret her adultery has been a private struggle against society. Lacking any confirming voice, she is forced either to employ the concepts and terms of her enemies—terms which condemn her to the status of reprobate—or to struggle to achieve the impossible, to create her own radically new language for her experience. Thus, Hester's world is frequently described either in the Puritan language of sin and redemption or in the language of wilderness and confusion. Seven years after her adultery, she has traveled far toward her independence through apprenticeship to "Shame, Despair, Solitude" (214-5); however, not until she has gone the further step of entering into society with Dimmesdale can she utter the fateful words, transform the meaning of her infidelity, and begin to create a world whose language is neither Puritan nor labyrinthine, neither circumscribed entirely by the creeds of society nor completely cut loose in a deconstructive abyss. As Millington observes, "To achieve freedom of mind that avoids solipsism is, for Hawthorne, to understand the sense in which the meaning of one's own life—even to oneself—belongs to

the community, but to refuse nevertheless to accede to the coercive patterns of mind that the community attempts to enforce" (*Practicing Romance* 100).

### Corollary to Communitarianism—Historicism

If community, including its linguistic and symbolic heritage, is necessary for meaning, then, in order to find meaning, humans are inevitably limited in their ability to rise above their time and space, necessarily seeing "*through* time rather than over it or around it" (Lewis 120). This acceptance of finitude and historicism is one of the most striking features of the novel, an element which separates Hawthorne not only from Emerson and his call to repudiate the past but also from Herder, who, advocating empathy as the primary hermeneutical tool, grounded interpretation in the consciousness or intent of the author.

To rescue her experience with Dimmesdale from meaninglessness, Hester is constrained to employ terms which she has been given. Consequently, Hester quite naturally reverses the term *consecration* to refer to an adulterous relationship. Indeed, lacking the vocabulary with which the twentieth century is littered—*release of repressed instinct, self-actualization, fulfillment of evolutionary drives*—Hester is forced to employ terms which were given to her by her society to indicate highly significant experiences. For Hester, adultery can be an act either of consecration or, as she frequently thinks throughout the novel, of sin, but not an expression of the id. Given such a choice and considering Hester's growing independence, it is not surprising that Hester employs *consecration* to refer to her relationship with Dimmesdale. Indeed, throughout the novel, Hester's language and thus her structure for understanding and establishing meaning are firmly rooted in seventeenth century Puritanism—subject, as

Colacurcio observes, "to an exquisite (and painful) historical conditioning" ("Footsteps" 31). Hester may see her needle-work as useful for society and a livelihood, or she may, "like all other joys," reject it "as sin"(89); however, she cannot see it as therapeutic. To Hester, Pearl may be fiend-like; she may be demon offspring, an elf or an imp; she cannot, however, be hyperactive with attention deficit disorder. Thus, in her very declaration of independence, in her climactic expression of the meaning of her affair, Hester is bound by the conceptual framework of seventeenth century Puritanism.

A similar historical conditioning influences the narrator of the novel. "The Custom House" introduction serves, among other things, to acquaint the reader with the author *as a finite person*, as someone influenced by the same forces which drive Hester Prynne—the same quest for meaning, the same need to separate from one's community for a time, and the same inevitable influence of culture. Like Hester, the narrator is open to various explanations for the events in the novel and thus repeatedly employs, as F. O. Matthiessen terms it, the "device of multiple choice" (276): The rose bush at the prison door may have either survived naturally or "sprung up under the footsteps of the sainted Ann Hutchinson" (52); Chillingworth gives Hester medicine perhaps out of "humanity, or principle, or, if so it were, a refined cruelty" (78); the Puritans eagerly purchase Hester's handiwork out of "commiseration," or "morbid curiosity," or simple supply-and-demand economics (88); and the list goes on. In each of these cases, it is not the characters in the novel who struggle to interpret reality, but the narrator himself.

Like Hester's search for meaning, the narrator's search involves tentative commitments to various meanings according to what seems reasonable to him.

This commitment is most apparent in the narrator's moral judgment of the characters. Take, for instance, his severe criticism of Hester. While most readers consider Hester in a fairly heroic light, the narrator sees the "taint of deepest sin" in Hester's adultery (60). To the narrator, Hester's ascetic rejection of joys betokens "no genuine and steadfast penitence, but something doubtful, something that might be deeply wrong, beneath" (89). When Hester declares her hatred of Chillingworth and her conviction that he had done worse than she, the narrator could sympathize with Hester and even celebrate her independence. Instead, he judges: "But Hester ought long ago have done with this injustice. What did it betoken? Had seven years, under the torture of the scarlet letter, inflicted so much of misery, and wrought out no repentance?" (189). The narrator similarly judges the Puritans for punishing Hester so severely, Dimmesdale for wanting to leave New England and Pearl for her detachment from humanity.

Finally, like Hester, the narrator is limited in his search for meaning by his historical conditions. Hawthorne conveys this point by skillfully distancing himself from the narrator through narrative fallibility. For instance, when Dimmesdale sees the letter A in the night sky, the narrator offers a historical analysis, explaining that Puritans regularly saw spiritual meanings for the nation in natural phenomena. While he neither rejects nor accepts this notion, the narrator is skeptical when such messages to the nation are seen only by "some lonely eye-witness, who beheld the wonder through the colored, magnifying, and distorting medium of his imagination, and shaped it more distinctly in his afterthought" (165). Though tolerant or merely skeptical in these instances, the

narrator completely repudiates such a hermeneutic when an individual receives a personal message:

In such a case, it could only be the symptom of a highly disordered mental state, when a man, rendered morbidly self-contemplative by long, intense, and secret pain, had extended his egotism over the whole expanse of nature, until the firmament itself should appear no more than a fitting page for his soul's history and fate (166).

While he admits that there may have been a meteor in the sky, then, the narrator denies that it had "such shape as [Dimmesdale's] guilty imagination gave it" and imputes Dimmesdale's perception of an A "solely to the disease of his own eye and heart" (166). The narrator thus presents a carefully graded response to Puritan hermeneutics, a response which the nineteenth-century reader might find perfectly agreeable. However, at the end of this chapter, Hawthorne lets the text undercut the narrator's interpretation when the sexton reports a perception similar to Dimmesdale's: "But did your reverence hear of the portent that was seen last night?—a great red letter in the sky,—the letter A, which we interpret to stand for Angel. For, as our good Governor Winthrop was made an angel this past night, it was doubtless held fit that there should be some notice thereof!" (169). Clearly, the text belies the narrator's interpretation, for Dimmesdale did not simply imagine the A in the sky.

Moreover, the narrator is at odds with not only the text but also himself. He criticizes Hester's adultery but also reprimands the Puritans for their punishment and presumption to "meddle with a question of human guilt, passion, and anguish" (69). He bemoans Hester's sense of others' sinfulness, an awareness which leaves nothing "for this poor sinner to revere" (93), but he repeatedly undermines the reader's reverence for Puritan authority. He

considers Dimmesdale's plan to flee a "crime" (215), and under the influence of the new wilderness perspective, Dimmesdale is considered "sorely tempted" and "lost and desperate" (235):

The wretched minister! He had made a bargain very like [selling his soul to the devil]. 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. And the infectious poison of that sin had been rapidly diffused throughout his whole moral system. It had stupefied all blessed impulses, and awakened into life the whole brotherhood of bad ones. Scorn, bitterness, unprovoked malignity, gratuitous desire of ill, ridicule of whatever was good and holy, all awoke to tempt, even while they frightened him (237-8).

However, these "wicked" impulses grow "out of a profounder self" (233), a "wiser" self (238). He draws a moral of unabashed authenticity from the novel: "Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!" (276); however, he repeatedly censures the characters in the novel for showing their sinful side. Such attitudes reflect the contradictions within nineteenth century American society, with its rhetoric of liberty, democracy, and Christian moralism.

Indeed, like Hester, the narrator is largely trapped within the contradictions and framework of his own world. Like Hester in her dreams of sexual equality, the narrator tries to escape his time and place, to reach beyond the universe of decayed Puritanism, Yankee materialism, and Transcendentalism, to make the scarlet letter more than just a "rag of scarlet cloth," to understand the "deep meaning in it, most worthy of interpretation." Indeed, like Hester, he partially succeeds in imaginatively connecting with another time and place—but not until he detaches himself, not until the "life of the Custom House lies like a dream behind me" (47). Even then, there are limits to his mental freedom and



separatism, for the very language by which he struggles to understand and relate Hester's tale expresses his nineteenth century framework, with its truisms of morality, tolerance, and liberty. In other words, to connect with a world outside his own, the narrator must inevitably employ the same "colored, magnifying, and distorting medium of his imagination," the use of which among the Puritans led to delusions (165). In this way, Hawthorne undercuts the romantic reverence for the divinely-inspired author, a concept which simply perpetuated another form of dogmatism or privileged, super-finite state, and he instills "a canniness about literary authority designed to induce in his reader a more self-conscious, freer relation to authority at large" (Millington 7).<sup>16</sup>

### **Opportunities and Dangers**

In *The Scarlet Letter*, then, Hawthorne suggests a hermeneutic method which is neither completely deconstructive nor open to an existentialist leap of faith. Rather, meaning is a product of both a personal, private experience—much akin to that of the Emersonian hero—and a communal consensus, a concurrence which reflects one's cultural and linguistic heritage. Thus, like Schleiermacher, Hawthorne recognized that while a certain degree of empathy and separation from one's own time is valuable for understanding, one is unavoidably rooted in one's place and time.<sup>17</sup> As a grounding or stabilizing principle, community serves a crucial function, salvaging the open, authentic hermeneutics of the Calvinist and Emersonian tradition from the debilitating, rootless nihilism which besets such characters as Goodman Brown.

There are both dangers and opportunities associated with this communal turn. On the one hand, that which grounds also limits, and contrary to the

persistent myth of Hester's total autonomy, Hester's communal turn clearly limits her.<sup>18</sup> It forces her, for instance, into a negotiation with Dimmesdale over the meaning of their adultery. While Hester tries to shame Dimmesdale into consent—"Hast thou forgotten it?"—Dimmesdale, uncomfortable with the radical implications of Hester's assertion, tries to silence her—"Hush, Hester!" Hence, in the very act of affirming her independence, Hester is thrown into a contest over meaning—much as she battles with the Puritan community over the meaning of the scarlet letter. The result is that Hester is limited by the willingness of her small community to assent to her interpretation of facts and by their demands upon her. This problem—the failure of love to fulfill its promise—was recognized by Calvin. In his commentary on Genesis 2:18, for instance, Calvin argues for the importance of marriage as the most basic form of community by invoking the principles "that man was formed to be a social animal," that the "sacred bond is especially conspicuous, by which husband and wife are combined into one body, and one soul, . . . that solitude is not good," and that God "ordains the conjugal life for man, not to his destruction, but to his salvation."<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, the fall resulted in the failure of this institution to fulfill its promise:

Now, it has happened by our fault, and by the corruption of nature, that this happiness of marriage has, in a great measure, perished, or, at least, is mixed and infected with many inconveniences. Hence arise strifes, troubles, sorrows, dissensions, and a boundless sea of evils; and hence it follows, that men are often disturbed by their wives, and suffer through them many discouragements.

Nevertheless, enough "residue of divine good remains" and man is sufficiently incomplete in himself to necessitate marriage. Experiencing this dark side of human inter-dependence, Hester has power struggles not only with

Chillingworth and the Puritan community but also with her closest relations. As Mottram observes, "Hawthorne is well aware that interference with another self" involves "a perverse desire to move in on someone's life and use it, perhaps use it up" (191). For instance, Hester certainly loves Dimmesdale, but she also looks upon him as an object of her radical impulses. Hester sees Dimmesdale as a surrogate "object" of her "exertion and sacrifice"(177), a person for whom Hester can act as savior: "Hester Prynne resolved to meet her former husband, and do what might be in her power for the rescue of the victim on whom he [Chillingworth] had so evidently set his gripe" (178). Indeed, in saving Dimmesdale, Hester has god-like powers in the minister's mind: "Neither can I live any longer without her companionship; so powerful is she to sustain,—so tender to soothe! O Thou, to whom I dare not lift mine eyes, wilt Thou yet pardon me!" Instead of lifting his eyes toward and receiving a command from heaven, Dimmesdale finds the goddess Hester: "'Thou wilt go!' said Hester calmly, as he met her glance" (216). It is no surprise, then, that Dimmesdale's perspective changes not entirely of his own volition: "The minister's will, and Hester's will, and the fate that grew between them, had wrought this transformation" (232). What *is* surprising is that Hester is also dependent upon this feeble, infantile minister: "she groped darkly, and stretched forth her cold hands, and found him not" (256). Thus, after his public confession, Dimmesdale is the confident, powerful leader, while Hester is bewildered and dependent for interpretation:

"'Is not this better,' murmured he, 'than what we dreamed of in the forest?'

'I know not! I know not!' She hurriedly replied" (270).

Likewise, Hester and Pearl engage in frequent power struggles which limit Hester's freedom. For Hester, Pearl serves much the same purpose as Dimmesdale—as an object for “the mother's enthusiasm . . . to wreak itself upon” (176). However, Pearl has her own forms of power, which she employs effectively. The most heart-wrenching instance, of course, occurs after Hester, in a flood of joy, liberated sexuality, authenticity, and connection, discards her scarlet letter. Forbidding her mother to have a sexual identity and refusing to be placated by deceptive smiles and words, Pearl forces Hester to take up her badge of shame: “Come thou and take it up!” (226). Even in her moment of triumphant independence, then, Hester is constrained not only by her linguistic heritage but also by the struggle which she carries on with her circle of loved ones.

In her early writings, Nina Baym argues for a “doubly gloomy thrust” to *The Scarlet Letter*:

On the one hand, [Hawthorne] finds . . . life in society to be the death of art, of love—of the heart. Without denying the wilful, amoral, and chaotic aspects of the un-social core, he yet asserts its primacy and its basic value. But on the other hand, he does not believe that true self-fulfillment is possible. Men are born into society and shaped by it. When they strike out toward freedom, the unknown and unimaginable, they are defeated. . . . The vision. . . is. . . of a Romantic Hell (“Passion and Authority” 230).

This pessimistic view of the novel certainly has some merit, but it should be tempered with a view of the possibilities suggested by the novel, possibilities of Hester as “an agent of social change” which Baym highlights in her later writing (Introduction 19). If the hermeneutic position of *The Scarlet Letter* rests in dialectic and dialogue, in a private understanding moderated by public discourse, then one can claim only partial autonomy at best. This lack of pure autonomy

explains the limitations upon Hester at the end of the novel: her return to New England; her voluntary wearing of the scarlet letter; her appeal to Providence, rather than immediate, direct action, as a source of social change for the emancipation of women; her glance with "sad eyes downward at the scarlet letter" (280). It is this pervasive limitation, perhaps, which caused Hawthorne to consider the novel "a hell-fired story, into which I found it almost impossible to throw any cheering light" (*Letters* 312). Finitude forces the reader—just as it forces Hester in her Puritan world or the narrator in his nineteenth century world—to chisel out a space of hermeneutic autonomy only within the larger sphere of a potentially dominant society.

However, Hester's return illustrates not simply the limitations, but also the possibilities for the individual and society, especially if we consider the role of speech in the novel. Such considerations are especially important in light of the theories of Sacvan Bercovitch. According to Bercovitch, Hester's return is decisive evidence that Hawthorne's aim in *The Scarlet Letter* is to contain radicalism and co-opt it in support of liberal pluralistic ideology, resulting in what Bercovitch calls "thick propaganda" (*Rites* 226). This analysis discounts some crucial features of Hawthorne's work and its background: his powerful portrayal of the debilitating entrapment induced by ideology as embodied in such characters as Dimmesdale, Goodman Brown, and Reuben Bourne; Hawthorne's depiction of the protean nature of ideology, its ability to entrap no matter how liberating the content; the dogmatism of American nationalism, which would not embrace pluralism for another hundred years; and the three-hundred year tradition of Calvin's open hermeneutic, and the way this hermeneutic challenged authoritarianism and its supporting dogmatism.<sup>20</sup>

While Bercovitch argues that liberation can come only through radical, revolutionary critique and that one never escapes ideology, Hawthorne would argue that a radical critique would in turn entrap the individual and only through an open hermeneutic can one find a modicum of liberation.

We can notice another piece of evidence that the communal turn in the open hermeneutic does not “conspire to deprive us of choice” (Bercovitch, *Rites*, 209) or render us silent before the “mystifying sense of multiplicity” (Bercovitch, *Office*, 19) if we note the role of speech in *The Scarlet Letter*. Returning to the Puritan community at the end of the novel, Hester takes up where she left off—with the struggle for meaning. She completes her work of transforming the meaning of the scarlet letter from “a stigma which attracted the world's scorn and bitterness” into a type of sorrow, awe, and reverence (279). More importantly, as a counselor to the sad and perplexed, Hester speaks, and in speaking, she takes a stand and engages the community in the quest for justice by modifying meaning and language within her community. In this respect, Hester's return not only salvages meaning for Hester while it threatens her autonomy but also redeems the Puritan community from dysfunctionality and provides a medium for Hester to act significantly within the world. Hester's public speaking role at the end of the novel contrasts sharply with both her initial silence and Dimmesdale's deceptive speech. As a disgraced outcast, the woman on the scaffold cannot speak both autonomously and acceptably. To the authorities' admonition—“Speak, woman! . . . Speak; and give your child a father!”—she cannot justify or defend herself without incurring further wrath, and to name the father openly would be to submit to Puritan authority. Her only autonomous recourse is muted defiance: “I will not speak!” (73).

Furthermore, by ostracizing Hester, the Puritans cut her off from meaning. As Kaul observes, "The most terrible part, the truly inhuman aspect, of Hester's fate is not that she is punished publicly but that her punishment takes the form of isolating her from the rest of the community" (13), banishing her, as the narrator observes, from "the ordinary relations with humanity, and enclosing her in a sphere by herself" (58). In addition, however, the community itself suffers, cutting itself off from her contribution to public dialogue. While the early Hester is thus silenced and estranged, Dimmesdale is free to speak openly. Possessing the gift of tongues, the power of "addressing the whole human brotherhood in the heart's native language," Dimmesdale is a pivotal figure in the Puritan community of meaning (152). However, rather than use his speech to challenge Puritan complacency, he intentionally leaves all of his speech open to an interpretation which buttresses Puritan dogmatism. Thus, Dimmesdale's tone, reflecting his authentic feelings, is at odds with his politically correct words. For instance, in the Election Sermon just before his death, when he has the least to lose from openly challenging Puritan illusions, Dimmesdale preaches his most rhetorically obedient sermon in the novel, an appeal to the Puritan social covenant, which, as we have seen, was a rich source of social control (see pages 54-62 above):

His subject, it appeared, had been the relation between the Deity and the communities of mankind, with special reference to the New England which they were here planting in the wilderness. And, as he drew towards the close, a spirit as 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 judgements and ruin upon their country, it was his mission to foretell a high and glorious destiny for the newly gathered people of the Lord. But, throughout it all, and through the whole discourse, there had been a certain deep, sad undertone of pathos, which could not be

interpreted otherwise than as the natural regret of one so soon to pass away (265).

Committed to politically correct speech, Dimmesdale can offer resistance only through his deeply sad tone, which itself is co-opted into an orthodox interpretation, making this speech, as Dimmesdale's last, even more meaningful as a support of the existing social system. Hence, as a community of meaning, the Puritan society is corrupted at its core: if it is community which establishes meaning, then that meaning maintains its moorings only to the extent that the community's members speak openly and authentically; to lie is to distort meaning for all. Meaning must be perverted, then, in a community whose most authentic member is silenced and whose most eloquent member lies. At the core of this dysfunctionality is the centralization of authority. Dogmatism relies on monologue, and to the extent that Puritans employ "coercive hortatory and didactic public language" (Barnett 19), they perpetuate this dysfunctionality.

Critics have rightly pointed out the imprisoning effects of language and speech in *The Scarlet Letter*, foreshadowing Foucault's assertion "that we are already, before the least of our words, governed and paralysed by language" (*The Order of Things* 298).<sup>21</sup> However, even before Hester returns to New England, the Puritans show some of the openness requisite for dialogue and for language to be a means not simply of maintaining social order, deceiving or entrapping, but of transforming that order, illuminating possibilities and connecting with others. While private individuals in the community bend more easily than the rulers, even the authorities relax "their sour and rigid wrinkles" (173). Indeed, though these rulers are "fortified in themselves by an iron framework of reasoning" (173), they mollify their dogmatic authoritarianism



from the outset—refusing, for instance, to inflict on Hester the full severity of the law, responding to her pleas to keep Pearl. These signs of humility and openness pave the way for Hester’s return at the end of the novel when Hester is welcomed, a change which partially redeems both Hester and the community. Upon returning, she becomes a respected mentor, a role which gives her the opportunity to speak both influentially and authentically, to offer consolation, counsel, and hope. Moreover, while Louise Barnett has helpfully pointed both the positive and negative aspects of language and speech in *The Scarlet Letter*, we should question her rigid dichotomy of private and public language: “The tension between individual speakers and society has no positive dimension” (23). Though we should not ignore the real elements of conflict, Hester’s opportunity to speak in the conclusion enables her to alter the structure of meaning within the Puritan community, to inject the community with new interpretive possibilities. This influence benefits the community by grounding it in authentic experience, and it benefits Hester by sheltering her from the meaninglessness of the wilderness.

For those with Emersonian expectations of leaping out of finitude, Hawthorne’s hermeneutics must seem a disappointment. To Hawthorne, however, this middle-ground is the only source of tenable, stable meaning—the only hermeneutics which can withstand dogmatic hermeneutics and its debilitating effects.

## Conclusion

For Emerson and Hawthorne, symbol and allegory carried deeply contrasting meanings, and the contrast was shaped largely by the tradition in hermeneutics with which they were familiar. While this tradition resonated with many cutting-edge aspects of their thinking—with mysticism, Asian thought, German philosophy, English romanticism, and Transcendentalism—it was rooted in the Reformation, especially in Calvin's conflict between personal integrity and social order. Calvin employed two images to express his ambivalence toward the reform which he helped spur: the labyrinth and the abyss. For Calvin, a labyrinth symbolizes man's entrapment in an inauthentic existence, his separation from God and reality, his hiding from God behind empty conventions and artificial formulas and dogmas. Separated from God, humans are like "stray sheep and scattered throughout the labyrinth of the world" (III. vi. 2). This confusion stems largely from the inability of finite man to fathom God and his creation: "The splendor of the divine countenance, which even the apostles call 'unapproachable,' is for us like an inexplicable labyrinth unless we are conducted into it by the thread of the Word" (I. vi. 3). In place of the Word or reality—and, as we have seen, because of the difficulty in rightly understanding and using the Word—humans substitute man-made constructs as a buffer between themselves and the awful reality. Thus, Calvin frequently criticizes the Scholastic theologians "who have, as it were, drawn a veil over Christ to hide him. Unless we look straight toward him, we shall wander through endless labyrinths" (III. ii. 2). The dread of a labyrinthine existence impelled Calvin to question accepted reality, to experience God directly without

the mediation of either physical or mental icons, to ground interpretation in the ultimate. However, to look "straight toward" God threatens one with blindness; likewise, outside the labyrinth lies the threat of the abyss, the absence of all boundaries, norms, definitions, or order. Thus Calvin speaks of "an abyss of confusion" and likens hell and death to an abyss (qtd. in Bouwsma *Sixteenth-Century Portrait* 46). In this chaos, man wanders without identity or guidelines, strays into subjectivism, or madness, and is too amorphous to withstand the power of a dogmatic society in its rigid conventions.

Later Calvinists tended to fear the formlessness of the abyss and incorporated hermeneutics in their channeling of individualistic energies into a corporate goal. The Puritans were particularly adept in this respect, combining the covenant, the jeremiad, and typology to justify and stimulate the tight social controls of their colony. Allegory, of which typology was one form, came to be associated with social control, limitations upon thought, and rigid dogmatism. Emerson and Hawthorne were thus suspicious of language, interpretation and art that was reductionist, dogmatic, or allegorical. They portray such discourse as alienating, imprisoning, and degrading, in a word, labyrinthine.

While such discourse can be seen as an heir of Calvin's more dogmatic, controlling side, there was also a side to Calvin and his heritage that rejected such a reductionist hermeneutics. This tradition emphasized humility, the limits of language and thought, the necessity for active, personal knowledge, and the power of the indwelling spirit. It highlighted multivalence, creativity, and a living relationship with reality. Such an interpretive methodology can be seen as a counterpart of Emerson's and Hawthorne's symbolism, and it is also connected

with view of social change that encourages dynamism, growth, and the breaking of boundaries.

Both Emerson and Hawthorne employed their symbolism in combination with an open hermeneutic methodology in order to break the labyrinth of dogmatism and social control. For Hawthorne, however, an excess of freedom has its own dangers. In particular, while Emerson pinned his hopes for renewal within the self-reliant individual, Hawthorne was skeptical of unmediated experience outside the labyrinth, where the individual floats in an abyss. For Hawthorne, the individualism, openness, and freedom of a symbolic approach must be tempered through community.

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## NOTES

### Introduction

<sup>1</sup> For early studies of Melville's symbolism, see Richard Chase, *Herman Melville: A Critical Study* (New York: MacMillan, 1949); R. W. Short, "Melville as Symbolist," *The University Review (Kansas City)* 15 (1948-49): 38-46; and Nathalia Wright, "Form as Function in Melville," *PMLA* 67 (1952): 330-40.

<sup>2</sup> Related studies by Mason Lowance, Jr. include "Images and Shadows of Divine Things: The Typology of Jonathan Edwards," *Early American Literature* 5 (1970): 141-81; "Typology and Millennial Eschatology in Early New England," in *Literary Uses of Typology from the Late Middle Ages to the Present*, ed. Earl Miner (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 228-273; and *The Language of Canaan: Metaphor and Symbol in New England from the Puritans to the Transcendentalists* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> The seminal essay tracing the influence of Puritan radicalism on Emersonian mysticism is Perry Miller, "From Edwards to Emerson," *The New England Quarterly* 13 (1940): 589-617. See also Howard W. Hintz, *The Quaker Influence in American Literature* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1940), 41-75.

<sup>4</sup> Hazard Adams, in *Philosophy of the Literary Symbolic* (Tallahassee, FL: University Press of Florida, 1983), 46-98, summarizes the distinction between allegory and symbolism in European Romantic literature, focusing on the figures of Goethe and Coleridge. Also see Gordon E. Bigelow, *The Poet's Third Eye: A Guide to the Symbolisms of Modern Literature* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1976), 14-21. Emerson and Hawthorne were clearly familiar with these writers, owning and borrowing a profusion of Romantic texts. See Walter Harding, *Emerson's Library* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1967), 64 and 116-118; Kenneth Walter Cameron, *Ralph Waldo Emerson's Reading* (New York: Haskell House, 1966), 65 and 74-5; and Marion L. Kesselring, *Hawthorne's Reading, 1828-1850* (New York: New York Public Library, 1949), 47. For a study of the shift from allegory to symbolism in American Romanticism as a movement influenced by European Romanticism, see Leon Chai, in *The Romantic Foundations of the American Renaissance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 17-99.

<sup>5</sup> These theologians were also influenced not only by their Protestant heritage but also by the European romantics, especially Herder and Coleridge. Marsh edited and introduced the first American edition of *Aids to Reflection* and translated Herder's *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, texts which were influential in the development of American hermeneutic theory. See M. D. Walhout, "The Hermeneutical Turn in American Critical Theory, 1830-1860," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 57 (1996): 683-703.

<sup>6</sup> Especially important in this development is theologian Horace Bushnell, whose hermeneutic theories, as we shall see, bore strong resemblance to those of both Emerson and Hawthorne.

<sup>7</sup> The current critical consensus is that Calvin's hermeneutics were revolutionary and distinct from that of the other reformers. See Richard C. Gamble, "Current Trends in Calvin Research, 1982-1990," in *Calvinus Sacra Scripturae Professor: Calvin as Confessor of Holy Scripture*, ed. Wilhelm H. Neuser (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 91-112.

<sup>8</sup> For studies of the "dark" side of Calvinism and its influence on American literature, see Agnes McNeill Donohue, *Hawthorne: Calvin's Ironic Stepchild* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1985), 1-34; William H. Shurr, *Rappaccini's Children: American Writers in a Calvinist World* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1981); Randall Stewart, *American Literature and Christian Doctrine* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1958); and T. Walter Herbert Jr., *Moby-Dick and Calvinism: A World Dismantled* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1977), 23-44.

<sup>9</sup> Support for doctrines such as predestination can be found in Thomas Aquinas and especially Augustine, whom Calvin cites frequently and approvingly. For a study of precursors of "dark" Calvinism, see Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1975), 365-7; and C. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: Divine Election* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1960), 28-31. Calvin cites Augustine in support of the five points of Calvinism in the *Institutes* II.ii.12, II.iii.13-14, III.iii.12-13, III.xxi.4, III.xxii.1, 8, 10, III.xxiii.1, 3, 5, 7, 10-11, 14, and III.xxiv.1, 6, 12, 13.

## Chapter 1

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all references to Calvin are from the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960).

<sup>2</sup> While Calvin considered the Eucharist to be a means of grace, he rejected the idea of Christ's literal presence in the host. Luther believed in Christ's "real presence" in the Eucharist. This disagreement split the two major schools of the Reformation. See Kilian McDonald, *John Calvin, the Church, and the Eucharist* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), 63-70; and David Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 172-186.

<sup>3</sup> For a study of Calvin as a harbinger of modernity, see Ralph C. Hancock, *Calvin and the Foundations of Modern Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> For a thorough general introduction to the radical Reformation, see George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962). The Peasant's War, combining the religious fervor of the Reformation with the long-standing complaints of social and political inequality, threw Germany into upheaval in 1524-1525. From 1533-1535, Münster was controlled by radical reformers, who overthrew the ruling oligarchy, instituted communism, polygamy and draconian laws, punishing even slight dissent with death. See George H. Williams, 64-81, 362-386. For studies of Calvin's criticism of the radical Reformation, see Roland H. Bainton, "Servetus and the Genevan Libertines," *Church History* 5 (1936): 141-49; Coleman G. Luck, "Calvin and Servetus," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 104 (1947): 236-41; Karl H. Wyneken, "Calvin and Anabaptism," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 36 (1965): 18-29; James Weis, "Calvin Versus Osiander on Justification," *Springfielder* 30 (1965): 31-47; Ross William Collins, *Calvin and the Libertines* ed. F. D. Blackley (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Co., 1968); Joseph Tylenda, "Christ the Mediator: Calvin versus Stancaró," *Calvin Theological Journal* 8 (1973): 5-16; Joseph Tylenda, "The Warning That Went Unheeded: John Calvin on Giorgio Biandvata," *Calvin Theological Journal* 12 (1977): 24-62; Allen Verhey and Robert G. Wilkie, "Calvin's Treatise 'Against the Libertines,'" *Calvin Theological Journal* 15 (1980): 190-219; and Willem Balke, *Calvin and the*

*Anabaptist Radicals*, trans. William J. Heynen (1972; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981).

<sup>5</sup>Note Calvin's contradictory attitudes toward democracy. On the one hand, the elect form an imperceptible minority. On the other hand, the majority have the power of excommunicating and of electing ministers.

<sup>6</sup>A useful indicator of Calvin's willingness to exact punishment is the list of penalties inflicted upon his political enemies in 1555, including banishment, public humiliation, disenfranchisement, and execution. See William G. Naphy, *Calvin and the Consolidation of the Genevan Reformation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 195-6.

<sup>7</sup>The most outspoken and influential critic of Calvin's intolerance was Sebastian Castellio, who excoriated Calvin for his role in the execution of the heretic Servetus. See Robert White, "Castellio against Calvin: The Turk in the Toleration Controversy of the Sixteenth Century," *Bibliothèque d' Humanisme et Renaissance* 46 (1984): 573-86.

<sup>8</sup>Dogmatism as a basis for Calvin's intolerance is treated by Paul Woolley in "Calvin and Toleration," in *The Heritage of John Calvin*, ed. John H. Bratt (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1976), 1-10. Critics are divided regarding Calvin's view of Scriptures. For studies which assert that Calvin held to a dogmatic view, see Edward Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), 90-105; Kenneth Kantzer, "Calvin and the Holy Scriptures," in *Inspiration and Interpretation*, ed. J. Walvoord (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 115-155; J. I. Packer, "Calvin's View of Scripture," in *God's Inerrant Word*, ed. J. W. Montgomery (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1974), 95-114; John H. Gerstner, "The View of the Bible Held by the Church: Calvin and the Westminster Divines," in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 383-410, 482-485; and Roger Nicole, "John Calvin and Inerrancy," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25 (1982): 425-52. For studies of Calvin's less dogmatic side, see Lester de Koster, "Calvin's Use of Scripture," *The Reformed Journal* 9 (1959): 3-6; John T. McNeill, "The Significance of the Word of God for Calvin," *Church History* 28 (1959): 131-46; Richard C. Prust, "Was Calvin a Biblical Literalist?" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 20 (1967): 312-28; Ford Lewis Battles, "God Was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity," *Interpretation* 31 (1977): 19-38; Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* (San Francisco: Harper, 1979), 89-116; Dirk W. Jellema, "God's 'Baby-Talk': Calvin and the 'Errors' of the Bible," *Reformed Journal* 30 (1980): 25-27; and T. F. Torrance, *The Hermeneutics of John Calvin* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1988). For studies which, like mine, argue for a split within Calvin's thought, see H. Jackson Forstman, *Word and Spirit: Calvin's Doctrine of Biblical Authority* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962); and William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 98-109, 150-161.

<sup>9</sup>Although Calvin rejected allegorical readings, he did employ typological interpretation; that is, Old Testament heroes and events were seen as foreshadowing types—essentially allegories—whose fulfillment was Christ, the antitype. Typology proved to be crucially important in the development of Puritan hermeneutics.

<sup>10</sup>Calvin's ambivalence is apparent in the interpreter's ideal attitude toward Scripture. On the one hand, we should, in Torrance's words, "let ourselves be called into question so radically that we are stripped of all our own presuppositions" (*Hermeneutics* 64). Only in this way can Scriptures

function as they were meant—to lift us out of the circle of human finitude, depravity, and ignorance. On the other hand, interpretations must not deviate doctrinally from traditional orthodoxy; that is, from theological presuppositions.

<sup>11</sup> For a helpful study of Calvin's hermeneutics as part of more general Renaissance revolution in epistemology, see William J. Bouwsma, "Calvin and the Renaissance Crisis of Knowing," *Calvin Theological Journal* 17 (1982): 190-211.

## Chapter 2

<sup>1</sup> For a useful introduction to the ways that Calvinism spiraled in the directions of absolutism, constitutionalism, and natural rights, see George Lachman Mosse, ed., *Calvinism: Authoritarian or Democratic?* (New York: Holt Rinehart, and Winston, 1961). The influence of Calvinism, via the Calvinist Congregationalist John Owen, upon Locke's theory of religious tolerance is treated by J. Wayne Baker in "Church, State, and Toleration: John Locke and Calvin's Heirs in England, 1644-1689," in *Later Calvinism: International Perspectives*, ed. W. Fred Graham (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1994), 525-543. For a study of the development of Calvinist support for violent revolution, see Gerry Bowler, "Marian Protestants and the Idea of Violent Resistance to Tyranny," in *Protestantism and the National Church in Sixteenth Century England*, ed. Peter Lake and Maria Dowling (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble Books, 1987), 124-143. Calvinist militancy is also treated by Michael Walzer in *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 277-299.

<sup>2</sup> For studies of Calvin's influence in the rebellion of John Knox and the authoritarianism of Scottish Presbyterianism, see James K. Cameron, "Scottish Calvinism and the Principle of Intolerance," in *Reformatio Perennis*, ed. B. A. Gerrish (Pittsburgh: Pickwick P, 1981), 113-28; W. Stanford Reid, "John Calvin, John Knox, and the Scottish Reformation," in *Church, Word, and Spirit*, ed. James E. Bradley and Richard Muller (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 141-51; Peter Lake, "Presbyterianism, The Idea of a National Church and the Argument of Divine Right," in *Protestantism and the National Church in Sixteenth Century England*, ed. Peter Lake and Maria Dowling (London: Croon Helm, 1987), 193-224; Richard L. Greaves, "Calvinism, Democracy, and the Political Thought of John Knox," in *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism in France, Netherlands, Scotland and England*, ed. Richard C. Gamble (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992), 205-216.

<sup>3</sup> For a study of the radical origins of English Puritanism, see Ronald J. Molen, "Anglican against Puritan: Ideological Origins during the Marian Exile," *Church History* 42 (1973): 45-57. Molen observes that early Puritanism developed primarily over disagreement over the need for radical reform in ecclesiastical structure while English reformers were in exile during the reign of Queen Mary (1553-58). At that time, Puritans did not oppose Anglican doctrine, which was fully Calvinistic. Rather, the Puritans primarily objected to the elements of Roman Catholicism which remained in Anglican worship and ecclesiastical organization. As Molen reflects, "Puritans saw no validity in historical church tradition (50). . . . The Anglicans were willing to accept what history had given and to use their religion to account for their complete obedience to the state. The Puritans used their theology as a device for judgment and for returning to a point in history when Christianity was, in their opinion at least, 'pure'" (56).



<sup>4</sup> For a useful summary of the contradictions at the heart of Puritanism, see Richard Reinitz, ed., *Tensions in American Puritanism* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1970).

<sup>5</sup> For a general treatment of Puritan radicalism, see Philip F. Gura, *A Glimpse of Zion's Glory: Puritan Radicalism in New England, 1620-1660* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1984). For a study of American Puritanism and the Fifth Monarchists, see James F. MacLear, "New England and the Fifth Monarchy: The Quest for the Millennium in Early American Puritanism," *William and Mary Quarterly* 32 (1975): 223-260. Puritanism and the baptism controversy is discussed by E. Brooks Holifield in *The Covenant Sealed: The Development of Puritan Sacramental Theology in Old and New England, 1570-1720* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974): 139-224. Antinomianism is addressed in numerous studies. See especially William K. B. Stoever, *'A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven': Covenant Theology and Antinomianism in Early Massachusetts* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1941); Emery Bettis, *Saints and Sectaries: Ann Hutchinson and the Antinomian Controversy in the Massachusetts Bay Colony* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1962); David D. Hall, ed., *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636-1638: A Documentary History* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1968); Ronald D. Cohen, "Church and State in Seventeenth Century Massachusetts: Another Look at the Antinomian Controversy," *Journal of Church and State* 12 (1970): 475-94; and William K. B. Stoever, "Nature, Grace, and John Cotton: The Theological Dimension in the New England Antinomian Controversy," *Church History* 44 (1975): 22-33

<sup>6</sup> The propensity of Puritanism to generate its own dissent made their society the ideal case study for Kai Erikson to demonstrate his thesis that each society must produce its own deviants in order to clarify its identity. See Kai Erikson, *Wayward Puritans: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1966).

<sup>7</sup> David Zaret, in *The Heavenly Contract: Ideology and Organization in Pre-Revolutionary Puritanism* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984), shows how covenant theology helped Puritan clergy in England to channel the anarchic tendencies which they themselves fostered.

<sup>8</sup> There was a price to pay, however, for this consistency. Having resolved or smoothed over the tensions in their soteriology, the Puritans created some troubling implications—the human will became crucial in the process of salvation, for the covenant was essentially a free act of both parties; furthermore, God was no longer the arbitrary and mysterious sovereign of the universe, but a rational, rule-following—even somewhat tame—business partner. In freeing man, the Puritans imprisoned God. For a study of the growing rationalism and Arminianism within Puritan Calvinism, see Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954) and Perry Miller, "The Marrow of Puritan Divinity," in *Errand into the Wilderness* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), 48-98.

<sup>9</sup> For a brief history of typological interpretation, see Thomas M. Davis, "The Tradition of Puritan Typology," in *Typology and Early American Literature*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1972), 11-45.

<sup>10</sup> The critical consensus is neatly summarized by Stephen Foster in *Their Solitary Way: The Puritan Social Ethic in the First Century of Settlement in New England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971), 7: "The drama of

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Puritan society in New England lies in the extent to which the force of ideological commitment alone could maintain a system of social subordination for which the traditional material and institutional bases were lacking and which was undermined by many tendencies within the very ideology which supported it." While the discordant interaction between conservative ideology and radical dissent was dramatic, it would be unfortunate to focus entirely on ideology and ignore the communal institutions which both maintained social harmony and challenged central authority.

<sup>11</sup> Perry Miller's studies of Puritanism led him to view Emerson as a nineteenth-century antinomian, with Jonathan Edwards as the crucial link. See Perry Miller, "From Edwards to Emerson." The other dominant figure studying Puritan influence on American literature is Sacvan Bercovitch, who argues that the major American romantics were critics in the tradition of the jeremiad, critiquing society in order to better reaffirm social goals and cohesion. See especially Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993). According to Bercovitch, this capacity "to enlist radicalism itself in the cause of institutional stability" is the primary source of Puritan and, through historical influence, American vitality and power (50). Indeed, for Bercovitch, so pervasive is this attitude throughout American history and literature that virtually no independent critique of America is possible from within the system, for all critique is inevitably co-opted, employed to motivate the individual to rededicate himself to the corporate mission. While this view certainly captures a central feature of American rhetoric and power, it would be a mistake to assume that all critique serves this interest of socialization and that all Puritans adhered to the myth of the corporate mission. In fact, if Puritanism managed to channel radicalism, it also generated its own dissent—the Calvinist conscience turned against society, rebellion employed not as a means of social harmony, but as a basis for resistance to authority and a denial of New England's cosmic importance.

<sup>12</sup> The Puritans had such faith in the institution of the family that they required all single adults who moved to the colony to live with a family. In fact, when many single males migrated to New England in the early years of the colony, they were placed in artificially-designed family-like units.

<sup>13</sup> The townships were responsible for regulating a wide range of social and economic activities, such as fixing prices and wages, dividing land, and building schools and roads. They punished lying and laziness; banned venison, cakes, silk, laces and gambling; denied admittance to unwelcome strangers; and enforced compulsory education laws and attendance at the Sabbath and town meetings. See George Lee Haskins, *Law and Authority in Early Massachusetts* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1968), 68-79.

<sup>14</sup> Though each of the institutions of community (family, township, and church) was potentially democratic or anarchic, Puritan leaders took great pains to ensure the fidelity of these institutions to the corporate goal. Families were controlled by means of the punishment of parents who failed to properly indoctrinate and discipline their children. Magistrates controlled the establishment, citizenry, and growth of townships, thus facilitating their compliance. While congregational church structure is theoretically democratic, tending toward anarchy and diversity, the Puritans checked these centrifugal forces by screening congregations and ministers. The founders of new congregations had to be approved by the magistrates or ministers for orthodoxy. In turn, the leaders of the congregation examined all prospective

members for evidence of regeneration, denying admission to those who seemed untouched by God's grace. These orthodox members could then support the like-minded magistrates in the annual elections, for only church members could vote. The most glaring abuse of community power was the Salem witchcraft trials. For a study of the political and social conflicts precipitating these trials, see John Demos, "Underlying Themes in the Witchcraft of Seventeenth Century New England," *American Historical Review* 75 (1970): 1311-1326.

<sup>15</sup> In fact, it was only the immense difficulty of finding ministers which finally forced congregations to accept the Covenant.

<sup>16</sup> For a study of communal power in the debate over the Half-Way Covenant, see Robert G. Pope, *The Half-Way Covenant: Church Membership in Puritan New England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 132-184. For a study of the influence of the laity upon the normal religious experience of the community, see Charles Lloyd Cohen, *God's Caress: the Psychology of Puritan Religious Experience* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1986), 162-200. Analyzing diaries of the lay Puritan, Cohen argues that while the laity did not challenge the Puritan system, they did modify specific applications of Puritan doctrine, re-interpreting Biblical passages in light of their own needs. Local communities also influenced the central government on a regular basis. See B. Katherine Brown, "A Note on the Puritan Concept of Aristocracy," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 41 (1954): 105-112; and Michale Zuckerman, "The Social Context of Democracy in Massachusetts," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 25 (1968): 523-544.

<sup>17</sup> The assumptions underlying Williams' rejection of dogmatism were commonplace among orthodox Puritans. For instance, orthodox theologian Samuel Willard expressed Calvinist truisms regarding the limits of language to understand or communicate the transcendent God: "Though the things concerning God, which are revealed in the Scripture, are not false, but true, yet they are infinitely short of expressing his sublimity, and they are very improper. We must remember that God is inconceivably more, and better, than all that is or can be said of him. And it also teaches us to have a care how far we strain the human expressions of Scripture in drawing conclusions from them, concerning the nature of God" [quoted in Ernest Benson Lowrie, *The Shape of the Puritan Mind: The Thought of Samuel Willard* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), 35]. While this sense of humility before a transcendent God was commonplace, Williams drew an uncharacteristic conclusion in advocating religious tolerance.

<sup>18</sup> For a study of the demise of the Puritan system, see James W. Jones, *The Shattered Synthesis: New England Puritanism before the Great Awakening* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973).

### Chapter 3

<sup>1</sup> For studies of the disjunction between Calvin and what we have come to call Calvinism, see Bernard Hall, "Calvin and Calvinists" in *John Calvin*, ed. G. E. Duffeld (Appleford: Sutton Courtenay Press, 1966), 19-37; Alan C. Clifford, *Atonement and Justification: English Evangelical Theology 1646-1790: An Evaluation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 69-105; and Brian Armstrong, *Calvin and the Amyraut Heresy: Protestantism and Humanism in Seventeenth Century France* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969).

<sup>2</sup> For studies of the Calvinistic credentials of Arminius, see Carl Bangs, "Calvin as Reformed Theologian," in *The Heritage of John Calvin*, ed. John H. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 209-222.

<sup>3</sup> For a study of Calvinist dominance in early seventeenth century England and of the rise of Arminianism, see Nicholas Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of English Arminianism, 1590-1640* (1987; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990). See also the discussion of Calvinism in Peter Collinson, *The Religion of Protestants: The Church in English Society 1559-1625* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 82-92.

<sup>4</sup> For a study of Richard Baxter and his attempts to unify English churches by advocating tolerance, see A. Harold Wood, *Church Unity without Uniformity* (London: The Epworth Press, 1963).

<sup>5</sup> The complex sources of Leighton's views are addressed by R. Stuart Loudon in "Robert Leighton: The Bishop," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 20 (1967): 198-209.

<sup>6</sup> For studies of the influence of *Aids* and Marsh's preface, see Alexander Kern, "Coleridge and American Romanticism: The Transcendentalists and Poe" in *New Approaches to Coleridge: Biographical and Critical Essays*, ed. Donald Santana (London: Vision Press, 1981), 113-136; Paul F. Boller, Jr., *American Transcendentalism, 1830-1860* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1974), 44-54; and John Beer, "Editor's Introduction," in *Aids to Reflection, The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* 9 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993) cxvi-cxxviii.

<sup>7</sup> For Calvin's influence on Bushnell, see Barbara M. Cross, *Horace Bushnell: Minister to a Changing America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), ix-xiv.

<sup>8</sup> For comment on the influence of *Aids to Reflection* on Horace Bushnell, see Glenn A. Hewitt, *Regeneration and Morality: A Study of Charles Finney, Charles Hodge, John W. Nevins, and Horace Bushnell* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1991), 126.

<sup>9</sup> For useful summaries of Bushnell's theory of language and hermeneutics, see David L. Smith, *Symbolism and Growth: The Religious Thought of Horace Bushnell* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981); James O. Duke, *Horace Bushnell on the Vitality of Biblical Language* (Chico, CA: Scholar's Press, 1984); David A. Crosby, *Horace Bushnell's Theory of Language* (The Hague: Mouton, 1975); and Thomas Gustafson, *Representative Words: Politics, Literature, and the American Language, 1776-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 326-327.

<sup>10</sup> For a study of Calvin as a precursor of Edwards' theology of nature, see Diana Butler, "God's Visible Glory: The Beauty of Nature in the Thought of John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards," *Westminster Theological Journal* 52 (1990): 13-26. While Butler emphasizes Edwards' orthodoxy, it is also clear that Edwards pushed natural revelation farther than had Calvin.

<sup>11</sup> Calvin had held to a progressive revelation from the Old until the New Testaments but had denied any further revelation past the Bible.

<sup>12</sup> For a useful study of the unintended effects of Edwards' evangelicalism on American republicanism, see Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind from the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 2-24 and Mark Valeri, "Church and State in America from the Great Awakening to the American Revolution," in *Church and State in America: A Bibliographical Guide, 1*, ed. John F. Wilson (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), 115-50. The combination of radicalism and

conservatism in Edwards' writing has fueled much debate. For a portrait of a conservative Edwards, see Conrad Cherry, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards: A Reappraisal* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990) and Vincent Thomas, "The Modernity of Jonathan Edwards," *The New England Quarterly* 25 (1952): 60-84. For a more radical Edwards, see Michael Reposa, "Jonathan Edwards' 12<sup>th</sup> Sign," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 33 (1993): 153-61; Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (1949; Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, rev. ed. 1981); and Frederic I. Carpenter, "The Radicalism of Jonathan Edwards," *The New England Quarterly* 4 (1931): 629-44. For a balanced view, see Daniel L. Pals, "Several Christologies of the Great Awakening," *Anglican Theological Quarterly* 72 (1990): 412-27; Bernard L. Brock, *American Orators before 1900: Critical Studies and Sources*, ed. Bernard K. Duffy and Halford R. Ryan (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1987) 146-53; and Mark T. Ledbetter, "Changing Sensibilities: The Puritan Mind and the Romantic Revolution in Early American Religious Thought," in *The Interpretation of Belief: Coleridge, Schleiermacher and Romanticism*, ed. David Jasper (London: Macmillan, 1986), 176-84.

#### Chapter 4

<sup>1</sup> For a study of American nationalism as a response to the potential for disunion which was engendered by the federalism of the Constitution, see Hans Kohn, *American Nationalism* (New York: MacMillan, 1957), 133-70.

<sup>2</sup> The founding fathers' skepticism regarding the ability of the masses to maintain the virtue necessary for self-government is treated by Mason Drukman in *Community and Purpose: An Analysis of American Political Theory* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), 30-59, 79-98. As Drukman's analysis makes clear, the pessimistic view of these thinkers, especially James Madison, obviated the possibility of any real community being embedded in the framework of the Constitution. Instead of community, nationalism was advocated as a means of unifying the nation. See Edward Millican, *One United People: The "Federalist Papers" and the National Idea* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1990), 58-171.

<sup>3</sup> As new states were admitted to the Union, they generally included no property-holding and taxpaying requirements. Indiana (1816), Illinois (1818), and Alabama (1819) allowed universal white male suffrage. Under pressure from the example of these states, older states such as Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New York abolished their property requirements by 1820. See Gary B. Nash and Julie Roy Jeffrey, *The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 330.

<sup>4</sup> For a sample of contemporary horror of democratic upheaval, see Mrs. Samuel Harrison Smith, "The Inauguration of Andrew Jackson," in *The Annals of America*, vol 5 (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1976), 288-290.

<sup>5</sup> For studies of the religious aspects of American nationalism, see Charles M. Segal and David C. Stineback, *Puritans, Indians and Manifest Destiny* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1977), which shows the relationship between Puritanism, the appropriation of Indian lands, and the doctrine of Manifest Destiny; Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96 (1967): 1-21; Robert N. Bellah, "Religion and the Legitimation of the American Republic," *Society* 15 (1978): 16-23; and Wilbur Zelinsky, *Nation into State* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 232-245.

<sup>6</sup> Montesquieu's influence in the foundation of American government is cited by Forrest McDonald in *Novus Ordo Seclorum: The Intellectual Origins*

of the Constitution (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1985), 199-201, 233-235, 238, 244, 259-60.

<sup>7</sup> For a general introduction to the development of American symbols and rituals and their relationship to American nationalism, see Daniel J. Boorstin, *The National Experience* (New York: Random House, 1965), 337-390. For a more detailed study, see David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Scholars since mid-century generally argue that the Democrats and Whigs differed partly over rhetoric, partly over means toward a commonly accepted end, rather than over ideology or class structure. See, for instance, Richard P. McCormick, *The Second American Party System: Party Formation in the Jacksonian Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966); Lynn L. Marshall, "The Strange Stillbirth of the Whig Party," *American Historical Review* 72 (1967): 445-468; Lee Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 64-84; Grady McWhiney, "Were the Whigs a Class Party in Alabama?" *Journal of Southern History* 23 (1957): 510-522; Glyndon G. Van Deusen, "Some Aspects of Whig Thought and Theory in the Jacksonian Period," *American Historical Review* 63 (1958): 305-322; and Edward Pessen, *Jacksonian America: Society, Personality, and Politics* (Homewood, IL: The Dorsey Press, 1969), 211-274.

<sup>9</sup> For a study of American nationalism as fundamentally white, Anglo-Saxon and Protestant and of the development of the concept of pluralism in the early to mid-twentieth century, see Michale Lind, *The Next American Nation: The New Nationalism and the Fourth Revolution* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 17-54, 97-137, 134-245. See also Salins' discussion of the tradition of immigrant assimilation into a dominantly white Protestant America, in which immigrants were expected to conform to the dominant society and divest themselves of their cultural peculiarities: Peter D. Salins, *Assimilation American Style* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 43-142.

<sup>10</sup> For James Fenimore Cooper's warnings of democratic excesses, see *The American Democrat* (1838; Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Classics, 1991), 45-66, 80-86.

<sup>11</sup> Several critics have noted the fragmentation of early nineteenth-century American life. See especially Robert M. Greenberg, *Splintered Worlds: Fragmentation and the Ideal of Diversity in the Work of Emerson, Melville, Whitman, and Dickinson* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993), 23-50 and Donald M. Pease, *Visionary Compacts: American Renaissance Writings in Cultural Context* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 3-48. Pease argues that America was fragmented because of the ideology of individualism which dominated American society. While this ideology certainly encouraged a certain amount of divisiveness, it functioned even more importantly and paradoxically as a unifier. As Patterson notes, this unifying effect of the American Way put the artist in a precarious position, reliant upon a mass market which was intolerant of dissent. See Mark R. Patterson, *Authority, Autonomy, and Representation in American Literature, 1776-1865* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

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**CHAPTER 5**

<sup>1</sup>The following abbreviations are used to cite parenthetically from Emerson's texts: *CW*, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Robert E. Spiller, et al (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971-); *JMN*, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William Gillman, et al, 16 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966-82); *L*, *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ralph Rusk, 9 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939-94); *EL*, *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Stephen E. Whicher, et al, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959-72); *W*, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Centenary Edition, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson, 12 vols. (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1903-4).

For a study of Emerson's ambivalence toward capitalism, see Michael T. Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 18-34.

<sup>2</sup> Emerson's optimism, a confidence as misunderstood as Calvin's doctrine of human depravity, should be viewed against the background of his deep pessimism. See Newton Arvin, "The House of Pain: Emerson and the Tragic Sense," *American Pantheon*, ed. Daniel Aaron and Sylvan Schendler (New York: Delacorte Press, 1966): 16-38; and Stephen E. Whicher, "Emerson's Tragic Sense," in *Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Milton Konvitz and Stephen E. Whicher (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962): 39-45. Emerson's optimistic utterances were not, as Arvin observes, acts of perception, but of will or faith, "an achievement both of intellectual and emotional discipline" (23). As Whicher maintains, Emerson's "serenity was a not unconscious answer to his experience of life, rather than an inference from it (even when presented as such). It was an act of faith, forced on him by what he once called 'the ghastly reality of things.' Only as we sense this tension of faith and experience can we catch the quality of his affirmation" (43). For a study of Emerson's attempt to explain human fallenness, see B. L. Packer, *Emerson's Fall: A New Interpretation of the Major Essays* (New York: Continuum, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> For a study of Emerson's rise as an American prophet or neo-revivalist, see Mary Kupiec Cayton, "The Making of an American Prophet: Emerson, His Audiences, and the Rise of the Culture Industry in Nineteenth-Century America," *The American Historical Review* 92 (1987): 597-620; and Richard F. Teichgraeber III, *Sublime Thoughts and Penny Wisdom* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 175-221

<sup>4</sup> This brand of individualism is epitomized in the comic folk heroes of the day. See, for instance, "Fink's Brag," *A Treasury of American Folklore: Stories, Ballads, and Traditions of the People*, ed. B. A. Botkin (New York: Crown Publishers, 1944), 57:

I'm a Salt River roarer! I'm a ring-tailed squealer! I'm a reg'lar screamer from the ol' Massassip! WHOOP! I'm the very infant that refused his milk before its eyes were open, and called out for a bottle of old Rye! I love the women an' I'm chockful o' fight! I'm half wild horse and half cock-eyed alligator and the rest o' me is crooked snags an' red-hot snappin' turtle. . . . I can out-run, out-jump, out-shoot, out-brag, out-drink, an' out-fight, rough-an'-tumble, no holts barred, ary man on both sides the river from Pittsburgh to New Orleans an' back ag'in to St. Louiee (57).

For a study of Emerson's redefinition of self-reliance from rugged individualism into moral idealism and the renewal of culture, see Pease, 203-234.

<sup>5</sup> Note, however, that while Emerson redefines such terms as individualism, never does he advocate the submission to society that Newfield finds.

<sup>6</sup> For a study of Emerson's intellectual elitism and its implications for social change, see David Leverenz, "The Politics of Emerson's Man-Making Words," *PMLA* 101 (1986): 38-56.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, George Santayana, "Emerson," in *Essays in Literary Criticism of George Santayana*, ed. Irving Singer (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), 224-233; George Santayana, "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy" in *The Genteel Tradition: Nine Essays by George Santayana*, ed. Douglas L. Wilson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 37-64; Perry Miller, "From Edwards to Emerson"; Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> For a study of the connection between Emerson, his family, and their Puritan heritage, see Phyllis Cole, "From the Edwardses to the Emersons," *CEA Critic* 49 (1986): 70-78. See also Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 10: 371-404.

For a list of Emerson's periodical reading, see Kenneth Walter Cameron, *Emerson's Workshop*, 2 vol. (Hartford, CT: Transcendental Books, 1964), 1: 9-120. For Emerson's library borrowing, see Kenneth Walter Cameron, *Ralph Waldo Emerson's Reading* (New York: Haskell House, 1966). For a list of Emerson's personal library, see Walter Harding, *Emerson's Library* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1967).

For a study of the dialogue between Carlyle and Emerson, see Kenneth Marc Harris, *Carlyle and Emerson: Their Long Debate* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), especially their underlying Calvinism, 59-63.

<sup>9</sup> See especially Charles Feidelson, Jr., *Symbolism and American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953): 77-118; and Ursula Brumm, *American Thought and Religious Typology*, trans. John Hoaglund (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1970): 86-108.

<sup>10</sup> There have been numerous studies of Emerson's indebtedness to German thinkers in general and Kant in particular. See especially David Van Leer, *Emerson's Epistemology: The Argument of the Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). Also useful is Frank T. Thompson, "Emerson's Indebtedness to Coleridge," *Studies in Philology* 23 (1926): 55-76.

<sup>11</sup> For studies of visual imagery in Emerson's works, see Alan D. Hodder, *Emerson's Rhetoric of Revelation: Nature, the Reader, and the Apocalypse Within* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989); Sherman Paul, *Emerson's Angle of Vision: Man and Nature in the American Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952); and Kenneth Burke, "I, Eye, Aye—Emerson's Early Essay 'Nature,'" in *Transcendentalism and its Legacy*, ed. Myron Simon and Thornton H. Parsons (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966), 3-24.

<sup>12</sup> Herder is the most obvious example of this drive to empathize completely with the author. His concept of *Einfühlung* (empathy) was popularized in the United States by George Allen during the 1830s. For Herder's influence on American critical theory, see Walhout, 691. For a study



of Herder's thought, see Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), 145-216.

<sup>13</sup> A similar tension is apparent in Emerson's neo-Calvinistic counterpart in Great Britain, Thomas Carlyle. See Suzy Anger, "Carlyle: Between Biblical Exegesis and Romantic Hermeneutics," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 40 (1998): 78-96. As Anger observes, Carlyle held that we must try to empathize with the author *and* employ our own interests and partiality in order to understand a text, resulting in a "paradoxical position that locates meaning (for humans) somewhere in between authorial intention and interpreter's understanding" (84).

<sup>14</sup> Like Calvin, Emerson frequently thought in terms of dualities: "Polarity, or action and reaction, we meet in every part of nature. . . . An inevitable dualism bisects nature, so that each thing is a half, and suggests another thing to make it whole; as, spirit, matter; man, woman; odd, even; subjective, objective; in, out; upper, under; motion, rest; yea, nay" (*Essays* 286-7). For a study of the dialectical structure of Emerson's essays, see R. A. Yoder, "Emerson's Dialectic," *Criticism* 11 (1969): 313-28; and Harold Kaplan, "Emerson: The Double Consciousness," in *Democratic Humanism and American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 49-78.

<sup>15</sup> Because of his statements which extol the subjective, Emerson has been labeled a descendent of the antinomians. See Perry Miller, "From Edwards to Emerson." This portrayal stems largely from the polar vision of dogmatic Puritan vs. antinomian radical which has dominated studies of Puritan thought. I would suggest that Calvin's open hermeneutic offered Emerson an alternative to either form of dogmatism.

<sup>16</sup> Even as astute a critic as Cavell, for instance, privileges Emerson's doctrines of receptivity over his prominent emphasis on creativity and the active powers of the imagination. See, for instance, Stanley Cavell, "Aversive Thinking: Emersonian Representations in Heidegger and Nietzsche," *New Literary History* 22 (1991): 129-160: "I have implied that in being an act of creation, [writing] is the exercise not of power but of reception" (174). Of course, for Emerson, this is a false dichotomy: both creative power and receptivity are crucial elements in thinking, acting, and writing.

<sup>17</sup> This relentless perfectionism is most apparent in Emerson's moral idealism. Emerson urges his readers, "There is no sleep, no pause, no preservation, but all things renew, germinate, and spring. . . . In nature every moment is new; the past is always swallowed and forgotten; the coming only is sacred. Nothing is secure, but life, transition, the energizing spirit. . . . People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them (*Essays*, 412-413).

## Chapter 6

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all references to Hawthorne in this chapter are from Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Tales and Sketches*, ed. William Charvat et al. (New York: Literary Classics of The United States, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> For an extended study of Hawthorne as a writer of allegories, see John E. Becker, *Hawthorne's Historical Allegory, an Examination of the American Conscience* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1971). See also Richard Harter Fogle, *Hawthorne's Fiction: The Light and the Dark* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1952), 41-43; Yvor Winters, "Maul's Curse, or Hawthorne and the Problem of Allegory," in *Hawthorne: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. A. N. Kaul (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 11-24;

and H. J. Land "How Ambiguous Is Hawthorne?" in *Hawthorne: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. A. N. Kaul (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 86-98.

<sup>3</sup> For a view of Hawthorne as an early feminist, see Nina Baym, *The Shape of Hawthorne's Career* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1976); Richard Brenzo, "Beatrice Rappaccini: A Victim of Male Love and Horror," *American Literature* 48 (1976): 152-64; and Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1978), 1-45. Hawthorne is depicted as anti-Puritan in Thomas E. Connolly, "Hawthorne's 'Young Goodman Brown': An Attack on Puritanic Calvinism," *American Literature* 28 (1956): 370-75; Paul W. Miller, "Hawthorne's 'Young Goodman Brown': Cynicism or Meliorism?" *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 14 (1959): 255-64; and Robert Morsberger, "The Woe That Is Madness: Goodman Brown and the Face of Fire," *Nathaniel Hawthorne Journal* (1973): 177-82. For a view of Hawthorne as a qualified transcendentalist, see Darrel Abel *The Moral Picturesque: Studies in Hawthorne's Fiction* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1988), 37-43, and Marjorie J. Elder, *Nathaniel Hawthorne: Transcendental Symbolist* (Columbus, OH: Ohio University Press, 1969), 49-88. Among the many studies which portray of Hawthorne as a Christian moralist, see Frank Davidson, "'Young Goodman Brown': Hawthorne's Intent," *Emerson Society Quarterly* 31 (1963): 68-71; Joe Davis, "The Myth of the Garden: Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'Rappaccini's Daughter,'" *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 2 (1969): 3-12; Sidney P. Moss, "A Reading of 'Rappaccini's Daughter,'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 2 (1965): 145-56; and the "crime-and-punishment" critics mentioned throughout chapter 6.

<sup>4</sup> Among the studies which emphasize the indeterminacy of Hawthorne's meaning, some of the most notable are Nicholas Ayo, "The Labyrinthine Ways of 'Rappaccini's Daughter,'" *Research Studies* 42 (1974): 56-69; W. B. Carnochan, "'The Minister's Black Veil': Symbol, Meaning and the Context of Hawthorne's Art," *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 24 (1969): 182-92; John B. Humma, "'Young Goodman Brown' and the Failure of Hawthorne's Ambiguity," *Colby Library Quarterly* 9 (1971): 425-31; and Christopher Morris, "Deconstructing 'Young Goodman Brown,'" *American Transcendental Quarterly* 2 (1988): 23-33. See also my introductory discussion of *The Scarlet Letter* in chapter 7.

<sup>5</sup> Other theories of Hawthorne's self-division include Agnes McNeill Donohue, *Hawthorne's Ironic Stepchild*, 1-34; Agnes McNeill Donohue, "'From Whose Bourne No Traveller Returns': A Reading of 'Roger Malvin's Burial,'" *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 18 (1963): 1-19; D. H. Lawrence *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923, New York: Viking Press, 1964), 83-100; Rudolph Von Abele, *The Death of the Artist: A Study of Hawthorne's Disintegration* (The Hague: Martinus Hijhoff, 1955); J. Golden Taylor, *Hawthorne's Ambivalence Toward Puritanism* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1965); Fredrick C. Crews, *The Sins of the Fathers: Hawthorne's Psychological Themes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966); Victor Strandberg, "The Artist's Black Veil," *New England Quarterly* 4 (1968): 567-74; and Brian Way, "Art and the Spirit of Anarchy: A Reading of Hawthorne's Short Stories," in *Nathaniel Hawthorne: New Critical Essays*, ed. A. Robert Lee (London: Vision Press, 1982), 11-30.

<sup>6</sup> Other positive views of Hawthorne's middle ground can be found in Hyatt H. Waggoner, *Hawthorne: A Critical Study*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 71-77; James K. Folsom, *Man's Accidents and God's Purposes: Multiplicity in Hawthorne's Fiction* (New Haven, CT: College and University Press, 1963), 71-93; Terence Martin, *Nathaniel Hawthorne*,

Twayne's United States Author Series, ed. Sylvia E. Bowman (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1965), 61-65; and Michael Davitt Bell, *The Development of American Romance: The Sacrifice of Relation* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980), 127-155.

<sup>7</sup> Hawthorne's symbolic misdirection is treated by a number of critics. See Robert Shulman, *Social Criticism and Nineteenth Century American Fiction* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1987), 176-196; Fredrick Newberry, *Hawthorne's Divided Loyalties: England and America in His Works* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1987), 25-133; and Richard H. Millington, *Practicing Romance: Narrative Form and Cultural Engagement in Hawthorne's Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1992), 15-25.

<sup>8</sup> For patriotic readings of "The Gray Champion," see Michael Davitt Bell, 169; and Daniel G. Hoffman, *Form and Fable in American Fiction* (New York: Oxford UP, 1961), 124. Among the few critics who see irony in the story is Fredrick Newberry in "'The Gray Champion': Hawthorne's Ironic Criticism of Puritanic Rebellion," *Studies in Short Fiction* 13 (1976): 363-70.

<sup>9</sup> Studies which highlight Hawthorne's alleged "dark Calvinism" in "Young Goodman Brown" also include the following: Madison Jones, "Variations on a Hawthorne Theme," *Studies in Short Fiction* 15 (178): 277-283; Donahue, *Calvin's Ironic Stepchild*, 163-168, 178-180; and Reginald Cook, "The Forest of Goodman Brown's Night: A Reading of Hawthorne's 'Young Goodman Brown,'" *The New England Quarterly* 43 (1970): 473-481.

<sup>10</sup> Other critics who believe Brown produces sinful images out of his own guilty conscience include the following: Terry Martin, "Anti-Allegory and the Reader in 'Young Goodman Brown,'" *Mid-Hudson Language Studies* 11 (1988): 31-40; Paul J. Hurley, "Young Goodman Brown's 'Heart of Darkness,'" *American Literature* 37 (1966): 410-419; and Neal Frank Doubleday, *Hawthorne's Early Tales, a Critical Study* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1972), 200-212. The same point with a Freudian slant is argued by Frederick C. Crews, 98-106.

<sup>11</sup> Historically, the Puritans viewed the wilderness which surrounded them with great apprehension. Though they sought to tame the wilderness, they feared the sinister darkness of the wilderness and dreaded contamination and degeneration from the wilderness. See John Canup, *Out of the Wilderness: The Emergence of American Identity in Colonial New England* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 29-87.

<sup>12</sup> While critics have rightly recognized the important historical and theological elements of the story, most of these critics have focused on elements which are less central to Calvinist-Puritan tradition and less relevant to Hawthorne's contemporaries than the conflict between personal authenticity and social order. Studies of the Puritan and Calvinist elements in "Young Goodman Brown" include the following: Connolly, 370-375, which sees the story as a criticism of the doctrine of predestination; Paul W. Miller, 255-264, which identifies Puritanism as a faith inadequate to deal with hypocrisy; David Levin, "Shadows of Doubt: Specter Evidence in Hawthorne's 'Young Goodman Brown,'" *American Literature* 34 (1962): 344-352, which excavates the concept of specter evidence employed in the witch trials; Becker, 13-21, which criticizes the black-and-white perspective of the Puritans; and Jane Donahue Eberwein, "My Faith is Gone!": 'Young Goodman Brown' and Puritan Conversion," *Christianity and Literature* 32 (1982): 23-32, which highlights the pressure of the conversion experience in Puritanism. While many of

these studies throw valuable light on the story, I believe it is the tension between authenticity and social order, especially as it relates to hermeneutics, which drives the story and makes it relevant to Hawthorne's contemporaries.

<sup>13</sup> Though we have no definitive evidence that Hawthorne read Calvin, he certainly would have encountered Calvinist ideas through a number of media. He read Puritan tracts, sermons, and biographies extensively, including the works of Andrew Baxter, Samuel Willard, Samuel and Cotton Mather, and Nathaniel Ward. See Kesselring, 44, 53, 56-7, 62, 64. Hawthorne also would have been exposed to conservative Protestant thought during his college days at Bowdoin. For a study of Bowdoin college as a "as a bastion of evangelical religion," see Michael Colacurcio, *The Province of Piety: Moral History in Hawthorne's Early Tales* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press): 25. Hawthorne would have been exposed to attenuated forms of Calvinist ideas through his reading of Bushnell and his interactions with Emerson and the Transcendentalists.

<sup>14</sup> For a study of Calvin's anxiety regarding the confusion or "mixture" which pervades the fallen world and his compensating desire for order, see Bouwsma, *Sixteenth Century Portrait*, 33-36.

<sup>15</sup> Other studies from the crime-and-punishment school include the following: Donahue, *Hawthorne*, 21-2, 180-186; Sheldon W. Liebman, "'Roger Malvin's Burial': Hawthorne's Allegory of the Heart," *Studies in Short Fiction* 12 (1975): 253-60; Hideo Masuda, "Roger Malvin's Burial': Sin and Its Expiation in Hawthorne," *Hiroshima Studies in English Language and Literature* 31 (1986): 39-48; Tsutomu Takahashi, "Triangles of Sin: Soseki's 'Kokoro' and Hawthorne's 'Roger Malvin's Burial,'" *Hiroshima Studies in English Language and Literature* 43 (1993): 89-100.

<sup>16</sup> Several critics have argued that Hawthorne's characters should be sharply distinguished based on historical time periods, arguing that there are crucial differences between each generation in American history. For instance, Jordan argues "that Hawthorne carefully plotted the course of American history, generation by generation, that he illuminated each of these generations by at least one tale, and that none of these tales could be lifted out of its own generation without violating its essential meaning" (124): Gretchen Graf Jordan, "Hawthorne's 'Bell': Historical Evolution through Symbolism," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 19 (1964): 123-139. See also John P. McWilliams, Jr., *Hawthorne, Melville, and the American Character: A Looking Glass Business* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 25-106. While historical environment is important to Hawthorne, we should not historically petrify his stories. The ideologies to which Hawthorne's characters are subject depends on historical circumstances; however, the way that ideology functions in each of these time periods is remarkably consistent—entrapment, alienation, and guilt. It is this similarity which made Hawthorne's treatment of arcane historical material relevant to his contemporaries.

<sup>17</sup> For a study of Hawthorne's ironic treatment of the myth of the West, see Robert E. Abrams, "Critiquing Colonial American Geography," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 36 (1994): 357-80; James McIntosh, "Nature and Frontier in 'Roger Malvin's Burial,'" *American Literature* 60 (1988), 188-204; and Manfred Mackenzie, "Hawthorne's 'Roger Malvin's Burial': A Postcolonial Reading," *New Literary History* 27 (1996): 459-72.

<sup>18</sup> For a study of the role of urban centers in early capitalist development during the Middle Ages, see Nathan Rosenberg and L. E. Birdzell,

Jr., *How the West Grew Rich: The Economic Transformation of the Industrial World* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 49-60.

<sup>19</sup> For studies which argue that Robin is transformed, with some necessary pain, from childish naif to mature adult, see Doubleday, 227-238; Waggoner, 56-64; Roy R. Male, *Hawthorne's Tragic Vision* (1952; New York: W. W. Norton, 1964), 48-53; Simon Lesser, "Conscious and Unconscious Perception," *Partisan Review* 22 (1950): 370-390; Franklin Newman, "'My Kinsman, Major Molineux': An Interpretation," *The University Review (Kansas City)* 21 (1955): 203-212; William Bysshe Stein, "Teaching Hawthorne's 'My Kinsman, Major Molineux,'" *College English* 20 (1958): 83-86; and Edward M. Holmes, "Hawthorne and Romanticism," *New England Quarterly* 33 (1960): 476-488. For studies which link Robin's supposed maturity with the political maturity of America from colony to nation, see Richard P. Adams, "Hawthorne's 'Provincial Tales,'" *New England Quarterly* 30 (1957): 39-57; Terence Martin, "The Method of Hawthorne's Tales," in *Nathaniel Hawthorne: A Collection of Criticism*, ed. J. Donald Crowley (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), 11-25; Eugene England, "Hawthorne and the Virtue of Sin," *Literature and Belief* 3 (1983): 109-120; Max L. Autrey, "'My Kinsman, Major Molineux': Hawthorne's Allegory of the Urban Movement," *College Literature* 12 (1985): 211-221; and Robert C. Grayson, "Thomas Hutchinson and Robin's Molineux Problem," *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1992): 177-194.

<sup>20</sup> For a helpful study of the role of light imagery in Robin's failed initiation, see Sheldon W. Liebman, "Robin's Conversion: The Design of 'My Kinsman, Major Molineux,'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 8 (1971): 443-57.

<sup>21</sup> Calvin's description of sin as powerlessness and virtue as power is treated in Bouwsma, *Sixteenth Century Portrait*, 173-176.

<sup>22</sup> A useful study which argues a similar point from a different angle is Sidney Bremer, "Exploding the Myth of Rural America and Urban Europe: 'My Kinsman, Major Molineux' and 'The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids,'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 18 (1981): 49-57. Bremer argues that Hawthorne aims to puncture the inflated nationalistic historiography of the time, but rather than address classical liberalism, he focuses on the myth of America's cultural identity as nature's nation, a bastion of upright yeoman farmers withstanding the corrupt citified ways of Europe.

<sup>23</sup> For other studies which accept the dichotomy of the story, see Waggoner, 156-7; Becker, 21-30; Crews, 17-25; Fogle, 59-69; Chester E. Eisinger, "Hawthorne as Champion of the Middle Way," *New England Quarterly* 27 (1954): 27-52; John B. Vickery, "The Golden Bough at Merry Mount," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 12 (1957): 203-214; John C. Stubbs, *The Pursuit of Form* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970), 75-78; Robert Fossum, *Hawthorne's Inviolable Circle: The Problem of Time* (Deland, FL: Everett/Edwards, 1972), 59-64; Sheldon W. Liebman, "Moral Choice in 'The May-pole of Merry Mount,'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 11 (1974): 173-180; Joseph J. Feeney, "The Structure of Ambiguity in Hawthorne's 'The May-pole of Merry Mount,'" *Studies in American Fiction* 3 (1975): 203-14; and John F. Birk, "New Roots for 'Merry Mount': Barking up the Wrong Tree?" *Studies in Short Fiction* 28 (1991): 345-54.

<sup>24</sup> Calvin's dread of "mixture," noted above (180-181), was especially vehement toward those who cross sexual boundaries. See Bouwsma, *Sixteenth Century Portrait*, 35. Calvin's disgust with superstition is expressed throughout the *Institutes*. See especially I. iv. 1-3; I. v. 11-12; I. x. 1-3; III. xix. 7-8.

<sup>25</sup> A similar dynamic underlies other early stories of Hawthorne, most notably "The Gentle Boy." On the one side are the Puritans, and on the other side are the radical Quakers, and between them are crushed the Christ-like boy Illbrahim and his foster-parents Tobias and Dorothy.

<sup>26</sup> The most obvious examples are "Earth's Holocaust" and *The Blithedale Romance*.

<sup>27</sup> Hawthorne's early repudiation of radical individualism can be seen in such works as "Wakefield," "The Ambitious Guest," and "The Man of Adamant."

<sup>28</sup> For studies of Hawthorne's appreciation of domesticity, see Male, 38-53; and Terence Martin, "Hawthorne's Public Decade and the Value of Home," *American Literature* 46 (1974): 141-152. Alexis de Tocqueville's comments on the value of association can be found in *Democracy in America*, vol 1, trans. Phillips Bradley, ed. Alan Ryan (1835; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), 191-198.

## Chapter 7

<sup>1</sup> For other studies of indeterminacy in *The Scarlet Letter*, see Allan Gardner Lloyd Smith, *Eve Tempted: Writing and Sexuality in Hawthorne's Fiction* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), 9-27; and Allan Gardner Lloyd Smith, "The Elaborated Sign of *The Scarlet Letter*," *American Transcendental Quarterly* 1 (1987): 69-82.

<sup>2</sup> Unless stated otherwise, all references to Hawthorne in this chapter are from *The Scarlet Letter* (1850; Norwalk, CT: Easton Press, 1975).

<sup>3</sup> For other studies of indeterminacy in *The Scarlet Letter*, see Norman Bryson, "Hawthorne's Illegible Letter," in *Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter"*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 81-95; Ralph Flores, "Ungrounding Allegory: The Dead-Living Letter in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*," *Criticism* 29 (1987): 313-340; Richard Hull, "'I Have no Heavenly Father': Foucauldian Epistemes in *The Scarlet Letter*," *American Transcendental Quarterly* 3 (1989): 309-323; and Samuel Chase Coale, *Mesmerism and Hawthorne: Mediums of American Romance* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1998), 69-90.

<sup>4</sup> For another existentialist reading, see Paula K. White, "'Original Signification': Post-Structuralism and *The Scarlet Letter*," *Kentucky Philological Association Bulletin* (1982): 41-54.

<sup>5</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch's argument is stated in a number of his works: "The A-Politics of Ambiguity in *The Scarlet Letter*," *New Literary History* 19 (1988): 629-654; "Hawthorne's Amorality of Compromise," *Representations* 24 (1988): 1-27; *The Rites of Assent*, 194-245; and *The Office of the Scarlet Letter* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993). Bercovitch's influential critique was presaged by Jonathan Arac in "The Politics of *The Scarlet Letter*," in *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 247-266 and it occasioned two more studies along a similar line: Sylvia Mathe, "The Reader May Not Choose: Oxymoron as Central Figure in Hawthorne's Strategy of Immunity from Choice in *The Scarlet Letter*," *Style* 26 (1992): 604-34; and Jennifer Fleischner, "Hawthorne and the Politics of Slavery," *Studies in the Novel* 23 (1991): 96-103. For other versions of Hawthorne as complicit with the dominant society, see Larry J. Reynolds, "*The Scarlet Letter* and Revolutions Abroad," *American Literature* 57 (1985): 44-67; and Elizabeth Aycock Hoffman, "Political Power in *The Scarlet Letter*," *American Transcendental Quarterly* 4 (1990): 12-39.

<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in combining religious, military and political authority within a mutually supportive clique of men, the Puritans recreate the same pattern of rule for which Protestants had long castigated Catholics. For a study of fears of Catholicism in antebellum United States, see Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 3-161.

<sup>7</sup> Significantly, one of the prime texts for Ann Hutchinson was 2 Corinthians 3: 6: "The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life." See Hall, ed., 325-6.

<sup>8</sup> See also Frederick Newberry, *Hawthorne's Divided Loyalties*, 168-9; Amy Schrager Lang, *Prophetic Woman: Ann Hutchinson and the Problem of Dissent in the Literature of New England* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987), 165-6; Larry Reynolds, *European Revolutions and the American Literary Renaissance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 79-96; and Sarah I. Davis, "Another View of Hester and the Antinomians," *Studies in American Fiction* 12 (1984): 189-198.

<sup>9</sup> Such fanaticism links Ann Hutchinson not with Hester Prynne, but with the Quaker Catharine in "The Gentle Boy," both of whom Hawthorne clearly views in an unfavorable light.

<sup>10</sup> As this section of the novel indicates, Hester similarly wanders in uncertainty in her attitude toward her adultery. Entwined with her self-reliant individualism is the pervasive theme of Hester's entrapment within Puritan thought—its norms, its symbols, its entire edifice of meaning. We should not assume, with Nina Baym, that Hester has never truly bought in to the Puritan community, that "she is in many ways an outsider even before" the action of the novel begins, and that "her own will is not implicated in her residence in the community" [Nina Baym, *The Shape of Hawthorne's Career* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1976), 128]. Hester's early actions indicate that the opinion of the Puritans is important to her, for accompanying her "haughty smile" is "a burning blush" (57). More importantly, even while she forces herself to oppose the Puritans, she repeatedly acknowledges her own guilt and hence accepts Puritan ideology. For instance, she admittedly feels that it is not "fit that such as I should pray for anything" (78). Likewise, in deceiving herself about her motives for staying in New England, she appeals to Puritan norms: "Here, she said to herself, had been the scene of her guilt, and here should be the scene of her earthly punishment" (85-6).

<sup>11</sup> Perhaps it is significant that, just as Emerson's dissent moved from radicalism in the 1820s and 1830s to an ungrounded pragmatism in the 1850s, Hawthorne's dissenters transform from the fanatical Mrs. Hutchinson (1830) and Catharine in "The Gentle Boy" (1832) to an ungrounded Hester Prynne in 1850.

<sup>12</sup> This view of Hawthorne's program coheres nicely with contemporary view of his romance as an art form that balances the liberating elements of fantasy or imagination with the grounding elements of reality. See Michael Davitt Bell 7-36, 127-142; and Evan Carton, *The Rhetoric of American Romance: Dialectic and Identity in Emerson, Dickinson, Poe, and Hawthorne* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 151-264.

<sup>13</sup> For a study of the communitarian elements in Bushnell's thought, see David L. Smith, 49-57.

<sup>14</sup> Significantly, Ann Hutchinson's daughters died in Boston in 1630, shortly before the outbreak of her enthusiasm. See Bettis, 49.

<sup>15</sup> For the classic statement of the public nature of language, see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1958), ¶ 243-315. See also R. Rhees, "Can There be a Private Language?" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 28 (1954): 77-94; and John W. Cook, "Wittgenstein on Privacy," *The Philosophical Review* 74 (1965): 370-375. In essence, Wittgenstein argues that every purely private language lacks a stable standard of definition. As a result, the user of such a language is left with arbitrary definitions, a situation which results in meaninglessness. This problem of the lack of a stable standard is, I believe, the basis of the communal turn in *The Scarlet Letter* and of Hawthorne's revision of Emersonian hermeneutics.

<sup>16</sup> The failure to distinguish between Hawthorne and the narrative voice has led to numerous problems in Hawthorne criticism. As we have seen, it leads to the simplistic, crime-and-punishment interpretation of his short stories. In contemporary criticism of *The Scarlet Letter*, such confusion leads to the view that the narrator's criticism of Hester was really Hawthorne's, and consequently that Hawthorne was anti-feminist or complicit in the dominant political agenda. See, for example, Myra Jehlen, "The Novel and the Middle Class in America," in *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 125-144; and Bercovitch, *Rites of Assent*, 198-200.

<sup>17</sup> This sense of limitation underlies Schleiermacher's belief in the necessity of misunderstanding. For a useful summary of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, see Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 67-75.

<sup>18</sup> While critics have differed as to whether Hester's independence is laudable, there has been a powerful consensus that she is indeed independent of society, its norms, and its modes of thought. For two early reviews which disagree about Hester's virtue but agree about her independence, see George B. Loring, "Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*," in *Nineteenth-Century Literary Criticism*, ed. Laurie Lanzen Harris and Emily Tennyson, vol. 10 (Detroit: Gale Research, 1985), 272-274; and Orestes A. Brownson, "Literary Notices and Criticisms: *The Scarlet Letter*," in *Nineteenth-Century Literary Criticism*, ed. Laurie Lanzen Harris and Emily Tennyson, vol. 10 (Detroit: Gale Research, 1985), 274-276. According to Loring, Hester thrives independently from society: "Without deceit before the world, she stands forth the most heroic person in all that drama" (274), while Brownson criticizes the amorality of both Hester and Dimmsdale: "Neither ever really repents of the criminal deed; nay, neither ever regards it as really criminal, and both seem to hold it to have been laudable, because they *loved* one another,—as if the love itself were not illicit, and highly criminal" (275). For two modern studies which follow Loring and Brownson, see Frederic Carpenter, "Scarlet A Minus," in *Nineteenth-Century Literary Criticism*, ed. Laurie Lanzen Harris and Emily Tennyson, vol. 10 (Detroit: Gale Research, 1985), 629-44; and Ernest Sandeen, "*The Scarlet Letter* as a Love Story," in *Nineteenth-Century Literary Criticism*, ed. Laurie Lanzen Harris and Emily Tennyson, vol. 10 (Detroit: Gale Research, 1985), 302-304. Carpenter follows Loring in praising Hester's bold independence: "Hester Prynne embodies the authentic American dream of a new life in the wilderness of the new world, and of self-reliant action to realize that ideal" (287). Sandeen, in contrast, criticizes Hester's pre-human independence from society: "Hester's conviction that her love is self-sufficient, having a dedication of its own, independent of society and religion,



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stops short of the fully human condition" (304). All of these critics fail to see Hester's important turn toward community and the limits of her independence from society.

<sup>19</sup> See also Calvin's commentaries on 1 Corinthians 7:1 and 13:3: *Commentary on the First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, trans. John W. Fraser, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960). For a study of Calvin's concept of marriage as a mode of mutual accountability, see Claude-Marie Baldwin, "Marriage in Calvin's Sermons," in *Calviniana: Ideas and Influence of John Calvin* (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1988), 121-129. See also Thompson's observations on the increased esteem which reformers, and Calvin in particular, had for the institution of marriage: John Lee Thompson, *John Calvin and the Daughters of Sarah* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1992), 7-16.

<sup>20</sup> For a helpful response to Bercovitch's thesis in light of "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," see Peter J. Bellis, "Representing Dissent: Hawthorne and the Drama of Revolt," *ESQ* 41 (1995): 97-119. For more general critiques, see two works by Richard H. Millington: *Practicing Romance*, 101-2, and "The Office of the Scarlet Letter: An 'Inside Narrative?'" *The Nathaniel Hawthorne Review* 22 (1996): 1-8.

<sup>21</sup> For studies of language as imprisoning and deluding in *The Scarlet Letter*, see Michel Small, "Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*: Dimmesdale's Manipulation of Language," *American Imago* 37 (1980): 113-23; and Dennis Foster, "The Embroidered Sin: Confessional Evasion in *The Scarlet Letter*," *Criticism* 25 (1983): 141-163.

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