Recovering Pearl: Utopian Projections in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter"

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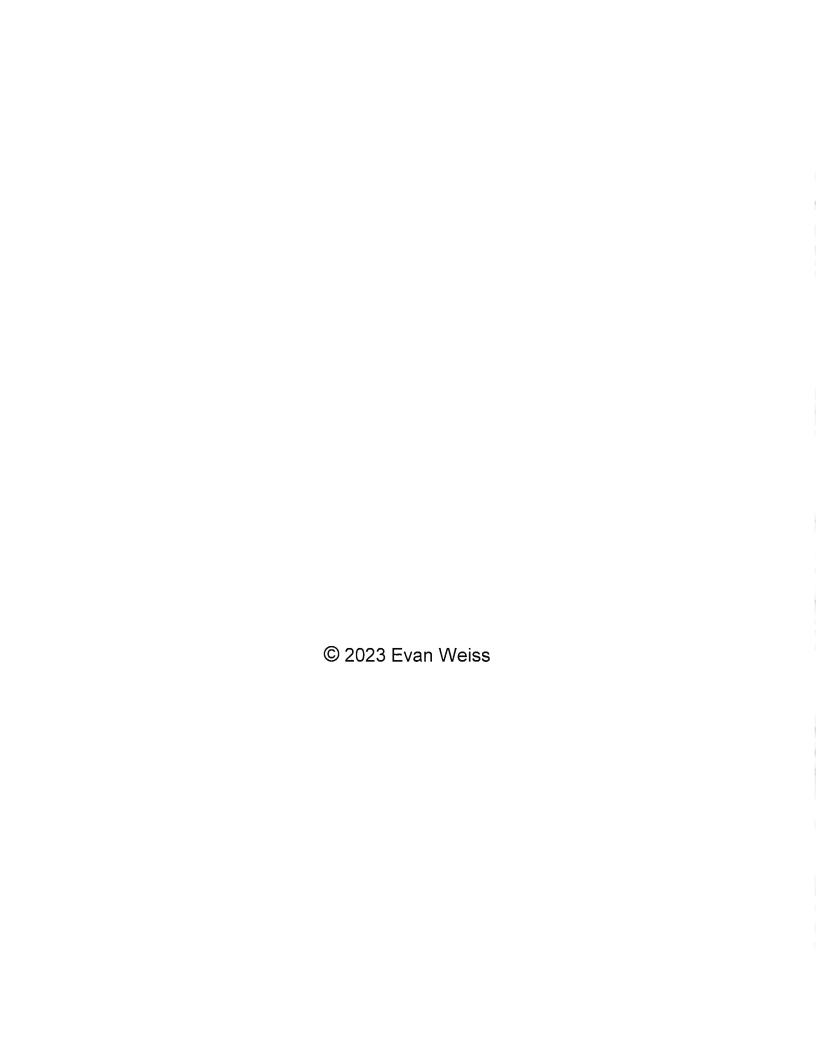
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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Master of Arts

in

The Department of English

Seton Hall University

South Orange, NJ

May 2023

SETON HALL UNIVERSITY.

1 8 5 6

College of Arts and Sciences

Department of English

APPROVAL FOR MASTER'S THESIS

Evan Weiss has successfully made the required modifications to the text of the master's thesis for the Degree of Master of Arts in English—Literature during this spring, 2023.

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Abstract

Much of the recent scholarly criticism of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* aims to demonstrate the novel's function as an allegory for Hawthorne's anti-reformist (and especially anti-abolitionist) views at the height of the antebellum crisis. This commitment to revealing Hawthorne's conservatism tends to cast the novel's major figures as pieces within a self-balancing paradigm of good (intentions) and evil (acts) that ultimately symbolizes the author's preference for inaction on the major political and humanitarian issue of his time—slavery. Curiously, however, the character of Pearl, Hester Prynne's "wild," "bird-like" child who dominates nearly every scene in which she appears, is almost universally passed over by the critics. Where she *is* discussed in the critical literature, she is usually reduced to a narrative device, a mere referent of her mother's moral agony and eventual redemption. This paper argues that Pearl's inability to be assimilated into most critical paradigms, rather than proving some sort of characterological limit, is evidence that she subverts Hawthorne's conservative framework. The paper goes on to employ Marxist political philosopher Fredric Jameson's theory of the "political unconscious" to demonstrate how the novel's conservative themes actually function as a "strategy of containment" for a totally contradictory—and *deeply repressed*—utopian impulse within Hawthorne, one that is evinced by Pearl's antagonism towards the underlying philosophical terms, or "ideologeme," of the narrative. Understood as the "langue" common to all sides in a given class conflict, the ideologeme undergirding the struggle over slavery in antebellum America is identified as the binary opposition of "self and other," often expressed by the ethical categories of "good and evil." This paper contends that Pearl projects a radical vision of utopia, or what Jameson describes as "a transindividual perspective of collective life," by refusing categorization within this binary. The final few sections of the paper engage with one of

Jameson's primary interlocutors, French psychoanalytic thinker Jacques Lacan, whose theory of the Symbolic Order maintains that "language acquisition," symbolized by the introduction of the father figure and the resulting destruction of the child's "dyadic unity" with the mother, leads to the catastrophic "self"/ "other" divide and initiates the newly formed subject's elusive desire for "wholeness." With Lacan in mind, the paper concludes by arguing that Pearl's radical transcendence of the ideologeme of good (self) and evil (other) is shown by her destabilization, and in some instances her outright rejection, of the Symbolic father figure, Reverend Dimmesdale.

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Thesis II - Final Draft

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1 May 2023

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> The artist usually sets out—or used to—to point a moral and adorn a tale. The tale,
> however, points the other way, as a rule. Two blankly opposing morals, the artist's and
> the tale's. Never trust the artist. Trust the tale.
> D.H. Lawrence, 1923
> *Studies in American Literature*

Discarded Pearl

It is a remarkable feature of most serious criticism of *The Scarlet Letter* that the figure of

Pearl is almost universally reduced to a narrative device, a mere marker of another character's,

Hester Prynne's, positionality in the text. Arguably, few other characters in all of early American

literature have given so much and received so little, have been so passionately evoked yet so

crudely translated, have suggested such radical interpretive pathways but been so mischievously

obscured, as little Pearl. Early reviews of the novel tended to focus on the theme of Puritan

morality, alternately censuring Hester's adulterous behavior and commending her stoicism, but

in most cases clearly centering her (Bercovitch, *Office* 120). While the emergence of American

literary studies as a recognized academic discipline in the 1940's encouraged wider and more

serious engagement with the novel, little changed for Pearl specifically. Around this time, the

existential threat posed by fascism offshore spurred the creation of an American literary canon,

comprising such works as Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, and

The Scarlet Letter to rival the European literary tradition. Not surprisingly, the anointers of these

so-called masterworks offered them up as examples of a transcendent Americanism, a theory so singularly committed to portraying a stable American type that it could not accommodate Pearl's puckishness other than to dismiss her as a symbol of what oppresses the *actual* protagonist of the story.

After the defeat of the Nazis in World War II, literary critics recast the American canon as a defense of free market individualism to counter the emerging influence of Soviet totalitarianism. This early iteration of the "liberal consensus" is detected in the writings of critics like Leslie Fiedler, whose psychoanalytic reading of *Moby Dick*, as only one example, juxtaposes "the polar aspects of the id" represented by Queequeg and Fedallah and in so doing conjures the struggle between the "beneficent and destructive" forces of America and the Soviet Union respectively (530). The same logic determines Fiedler's analysis of *The Scarlet Letter* and ultimately leads him to shove Pearl to the margin. In Fiedler's view, Dimmesdale's penance relieves Pearl of her sole office as the symbol of her mother's "moral agony" and eventual redemption, and renders her so useless as to justify the little girl's full flight from Puritan society (437).

Most tellingly, however, Pearl has even managed to evade the intense scrutiny of the New Americanists, who, since their emergence in the late-1980's, have been committed to replacing the opinions of the "dominant male networks of literati" responsible for the canonical status of works like *The Scarlet Letter* with perspectives rooted in the cultural contexts of the texts themselves (Jung 213-214)—in other words, to countering the unifying myth of American exceptionalism attributed to the country's foundational literature with approaches that reveal the elements of "frontier violence, government theft, land devastation, class cruelty, racial brutality, and misogyny" endemic to these texts (Pease, "New Americanists" 13). The result of these

efforts is a robust body of criticism that demonstrates the centrality of Hawthorne's political conservatism to all of his major works of fiction. In regard to *The Scarlet Letter* specifically, the New Americanists have helped to shape a *new* consensus on the novel, one that foregrounds its function as an allegory for Hawthorne's staunch opposition to social reform—an opposition perhaps best epitomized by his disapproval of the rapidly growing abolitionist movement leading up to the Civil War.

Thus, New Americanist approaches to *The Scarlet Letter* benefit from a careful consideration of Hawthorne's personal and political views on the antebellum American situation. One of the key sources of these views is Hawthorne's now infamous campaign biography of his college friend, Presidential candidate Franklin Pierce, with whom he shared a preference for "slow, measured progress" (Lundberg, par. 10). In *The Life of Franklin Pierce*, Hawthorne juxtaposes the view held by members of the abolitionist movement with what is quite evidently his own stance on the "peculiar institution":

> [This view] looks upon slavery as one of those evils which divine providence does not leave to be remedied by human contrivances, but which, in its own good time, by some means impossible to be anticipated, but of the simplest and easiest operation, when all its uses shall have been fulfilled, it causes to vanish like a dream. There is no instance, in all history, of the human will and intellect having perfected any great moral reform by methods which it adapted to that end; but the progress of the world, at every step, leaves some evil or wrong on the path behind it. (113-114)

The innocuous phrase "human contrivances" replaces what Hawthorne describes more brusquely in his personal reflections as the "extreme doctrines" of the social reformers who (from his perspective) sought to upend American society overnight. Hawthorne believed that abolitionist

fervor was symptomatic of the "rapid innovation that was sweeping aside the ancestral institutions of nineteenth century America" (Trepanier 315). His anxiety over the supplanting of these institutions by the emerging emphasis on "human will and intellect" manifests in the recurrence throughout his fiction of the "mad scientist" character, described by Taylor Stoehr as "an isolated man whose mentality and special pursuits tear him away from the warmth of society until he hardens into a frozen petrified monster" (qtd. in Wardlaw, par. 4). This trope appears in many of Hawthorne's well-known works (e.g., Dr. Rappaccini in "Rappaccini's Daughter," Aylmer in "The Birth-Mark," and the titular Ethan Brand in "Ethan Brand"), but nowhere is the type more dramatically rendered than in Roger Chillingworth, whose monomaniacal determination to penetrate Reverend Dimmesdale's soul channels Hawthorne's disdain for the reformist belief that "moral reform," symbolized here by the discovery of Dimmesdale's sin, could be achieved by mere intellect, ingenuity, and human effort.

For the New Americanists, then, Hester is Hawthorne's quintessentially Edenic figure. The Eden she represents by the end of *The Scarlet Letter* is a pre-Revolutionary, Puritan-*esque* America in which will, intellect, and ego are sublimated into a civic compact premised on public responsibility and collective moral conscience. From this perspective, Hester's voluntary decision to continue wearing the scarlet "A" at the end of the novel symbolizes a political act of self-denial in the present that anticipates some ambiguous version of communal progress in the future. Her slow assimilation back into Puritan society following this sacrifice, the New Americanists contend, echoes Hawthorne's belief that his country's own repentance for the original sin of slavery could not be achieved through radical changes in policy, such as those advocated by the abolitionists and other social reformers of his day, but, rather, must be realized through a gradual process of moral awakening.

The historical commitments of the New Americanists are laudable, but they produce a perspectival limit of their own. I suppose it is curious that I should turn to Jane Tompkins, whose approach lies somewhere amidst the overlap between New Americanism and New Historicism, to clarify what I mean. In her discussion of the formation of Hawthorne's literary reputation over the years, Tompkins writes, "the modern critic typically does not pause to exclaim over the beauties of a single phrase but sees the tale as a whole as the illustration of a theme" (14). To be sure, Tompkins is referring to the progression of Hawthorne criticism from its nineteenth-century focus on aesthetics to the mid-twentieth-century habit of extolling the universal quality of his stories, be it the "psychological paradigm of human development" drawn out in "The Gentle Boy" or the psychoanalytic implications of the major novels (14), in service of a contemporary, most often political, mood or motive. But the essential structure of Tompkins' argument applies equally to the movement from the mid-century to her own school. If the early-to-mid-twentieth-century critics of *The Scarlet Letter* were constrained by the global politics of their times, then the New Americanists are similarly constrained by their commitment to the apparently unsurpassable theme of Hawthorne's conservatism. Indeed, they are so intent on proving and restating it that anything exceeding this delimitation, including and especially the figure of Pearl, is reconfigured or repressed altogether to serve their central premise.

For example, in his magnum opus, *Visionary Compacts: American Renaissance Writings in Cultural Context*, Donald Pease, arguably the most recognizable member of the New Americanists, dedicates two chapters to *The Scarlet Letter*, both of which, despite their originality and depth of analysis in *most* respects, depict Pearl through the same universalist lens used by her earlier handlers. To be sure, Pease begins his brief discussion of Pearl with an insightful analysis of her subversion of the proto-capitalist family structure: "In giving birth to

Pearl outside of the protection of the family, Hester refuses to socialize passion into home feelings. As if in response to Hester's refusal, Pearl addresses Hester with a sense of all the social consequences accompanying the force of a passion unprotected by the social form of the family" (95). It is a shrewd observation, and one to which I will eventually return, but this critique is noteworthy here for the way that Pease goes on to eschew its radical consequences in nearly the next breath: "But when she saw how illegitimacy 'unreferenced' Pearl, Hester reevaluated her own relation to the rest of the community. With Arthur she felt proud in her passion; through Pearl she experienced guilt—not for her passion with Arthur but for the suffering of a child whose communal welfare was betrayed by that passion." Instead of exploring the radical implications of Pearl's "illegitimacy," Pease regards the child merely as the source of Hester's guilt, exclusion, and, finally, her redemption, all of which the child's mother must experience in order to become the "community's way of extending the bonds of mutual sympathy beyond the sphere of the immediate family" (95). Put another way, for Pease, it matters not that Pearl subverts the nuclear family, that social bedrock of proto-capitalist society, only that her influence on Hester enables the latter to reinforce the traditional family system by reconstituting the whole of Puritan society in its exact image.

Pease's avoidance of Pearl's radical difference may be explained by the terseness of his chapter-length essays, but the same cannot be said for his contemporary, Sacvan Bercovitch,[1] who quite literally marginalizes Pearl in his nearly 200-page book about *The Scarlet Letter*, his

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[1] To be sure, Bercovitch is not usually classified as a New Americanist. In fact, in "New Americanists: Revisionist Interventions into the Canon," Pease accuses Bercovitch of being complicit in the liberal consensus by "[designating] all oppositional political forces [in his theory of the American Jeremiad] as figurations of the oppositioned structure" (28) and thereby reproducing the aforementioned binary opposition of the "beneficent and destructive" forces inherent to American exceptionalism. I have, if somewhat reductively, lumped Bercovitch in with the New Americanist school because, in a clear departure from the liberal consensus critics and the more avowed American exceptionalists before them, Bercovitch's work is founded on a questioning of the legitimacy of the revolutionary mythos.

only in-depth analysis of the character occurring in a footnote near the end of the first chapter. Granted Bercovitch's aside acknowledges Pearl's "'wild, desperate, defiant' proclivities," he nonetheless assimilates these aspects of her character into a familiar "symbolic structure" that is meant to emphasize "the demands of social conformity" on Hester (*Office* 9-10). In one of the rare instances in which Pearl appears in the body of Bercovitch's analysis, he struggles to assimilate the little girl into what he perceives to be Hawthorne's allegory for a compromise on the issue of slavery:

> [T]elling lies is the donnée of the novel as for the Puritans prison is the donnée of their venture in utopia. It establishes the terms of human possibility in an adulterated world. Directly or indirectly—as deception, concealment, or hypocrisy, through silence (in Hester's case), cunning (in Chillingworth's), eloquence (in Dimmesdale's), or perversity (in Pearl's)—lies constitute the very texture of community in *The Scarlet Letter*. (*Office* 15)

In a purportedly civil society adulterated by evil slaveowners, complicit politicians, and ambivalent neighbors, deception, concealment, and hypocrisy are the negative preconditions for an eventual compromise. But the problematic association of Pearl's particular "perversity" with the notion of "lies" demonstrates Bercovitch's helplessness to integrate Pearl into the structure of such a compromise. This false association no doubt derives from an oversimplification of Hawthorne's description in Chapter 8 of "that perversity, which all children have more or less of, and of which little Pearl had a tenfold portion." It is this "perversity," for instance, that compels Pearl to announce, in response to Mr. Wilson's inquiry as to the identity of her creator, that "she had not been made at all, but had been plucked by her mother off the bush of wild roses, that grew by the prison door" (72). I allow Bercovitch that Pearl's statement is a lie in the literal

sense that it conceals the fact of her birth, but deception is only the ostensible function of Pearl's perversity in this exchange. Its actual effect is to mock a more pernicious falsehood: the unquestioned legitimacy of the Puritan moral order. Thus, Pearl's perversity, her opposition to what is deemed right or reasonable by Puritan society, is, in a total reversal of Bercovitch's theory, revelatory. Bercovitch, for his part, recognizes the untenability of his claim and responds by abruptly abandoning Pearl in the next phase of his analysis: "But the texture itself is not simply evil. All of Hawthorne's main characters are good people trapped by circumstance, all are helping others in spite of themselves, and all are doing harm for what might justifiably be considered the best of reasons: Hester for love, Dimmesdale for duty, and the Puritan magistrates for moral order" (*Office* 15)—and Pearl for no reason whatsoever, it would appear. Slavery is not mentioned in either of the preceding quotes, but it is clearly signified by the "harm" that Hawthorne's "good people" tolerate in themselves and each other for "the best of reasons." Bercovitch's point, then, is that the novel's central characters, save for one evidently, exist within a self-balancing paradigm of good (intentions) and evil (acts) that allegorizes Hawthorne's inertness, and ultimately his preference for inaction, on the crucial political and humanitarian issue of his time. Pearl's conspicuous disappearance from this formulation suggests that where the critic's singular focus on Hawthorne's conservative agenda is concerned, the child simply will not comply.

Lest I be accused of cherry-picking occurrences of this phenomenon, I point the reader's attention to an unmistakably identical repression of Pearl by Jonathan Arac in his essay "The Politics of *The Scarlet Letter*," which, unsurprisingly, first appeared in a collection of writings co-edited by Bercovitch and New Americanist Myra Jehlen titled *Ideology and Classic American Literature*. Arac mostly concurs with Bercovitch, arguing that "the organization of (in)action" in

The Scarlet Letter "works through a structure of conflicting values related to the political

impasse of the 1850's" (259). The concept of "conflicting values" here echoes Bercovitch's

analysis of the "lies" comprising the texture of the Puritan community. And, significantly, Arac's

scheme for reconciling these conflicting values also entirely omits Pearl:

> Dimmesdale is the character defined by passion and no principle; opposed to him the
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> "iron framework" of Puritanism, defined by principle without passion. In the double
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> negative place, possessing neither passion nor principle, is Chillingworth. He "violated,
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> in cold blood, the sanctity of a human heart"—violation negating principle and cold
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> blood negating passion. At times, however, the text marks Chillingworth with "dark
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> passion," thus making him a double of Dimmesdale…Finally, the double positive, uniting
>
> passion and principle, projects the ideal Hester. (258-59)

Bercovitch handles the clear distinction between Pearl and the Puritan community in the first half

of his analysis quoted earlier (though this distinction is quite apparent in Hawthorne's text itself:

"Pearl…was in one of those moods of perverse merriment which…seemed to *remove her*

entirely out of the sphere of sympathy or human contact"; "There is no law, nor reverence for

authority, *no regard for human ordinances* or opinions, right or wrong, mixed up with that

child's composition" [emphasis mine] [84]). Thus, any attempt to justify Pearl's omission from

Arac's scheme on the grounds that she is ancillary—in other words, that her meaning is

subsumed within the symbolic function of Puritan society—is untenable. It must be the case,

then, that Pearl is a major character in the novel who still figures outside of Arac's system for

"interpreting characters as projections of ideological possibilities" (258).

By emphasizing this idea that Pearl troubles the ideological boundary of the novel, I

mean to point out an obvious tension between the manifest political content of *The Scarlet Letter*

and what lies beneath this surface. The obvious interlocutor for such an analysis of Hawthorne's

unconscious machinations is Marxist literary critic and political philosopher Fredric Jameson,

whose theory of the "political unconscious," first introduced in his landmark book *The Political

Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, posits that: (1) all narratives reveal

historically specific instances of class conflict, class struggle, and competition between existing

modes of production; and (2) this manifest political content usually functions as a "strategy of

containment" for a contradictory political impulse. Put another way, in Jameson's view,

"ideological manipulations and recontainment operations," such as Hawthorne's interpolation of

the Puritan errand into an antebellum conservative consensus, "are accompanied by deep utopian

longings for a radically other form of existence" (Wegner 60). In fact, Jameson asserts, such

operations "cannot manipulate unless they offer some genuine shred of content as a fantasy bribe

to the public about to be so manipulated" (Jameson qtd. in Wegner 60). The reader may have

discerned by now my own hypothesis that Pearl *is* this "genuine shred of content" in *The Scarlet

Letter*—that, in a text which attempts to contain revolutionary impulses through a process of

consensus-formation, Pearl emerges as a repressed utopian seedling, a radical counterinfluence

to her creator's conservative design.[2] In order to substantiate this claim, it will be necessary for

me to review Jameson's framework for unmasking "recontainment operations" such as the one

performed by Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter*, and, following this, to describe Jameson's unique

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[2] I have perhaps given the impression that the New Americanists are not aware of or concerned with Jameson's theory of the political unconscious. On the contrary, the political unconscious, in particular the notion of symptomatic reading, is central to New Americanist approaches. In fact, Pease and Arac reference Jameson directly in their work on *The Scarlet Letter*. But, while they regard themselves as having evolved from Jameson, their shifting of the analytical landscape from the traditional Marxist domains of economics and class struggle to, specifically, antebellum American culture (and, even more specifically, American imperialism) results in their failure to fully operationalize Jameson's tool. As I hope to demonstrate in the sections to follow, a more doctrinal application of Jameson's theory to *The Scarlet Letter* enables us to access dimensions of the text's political unconscious that are routinely overlooked by the New Americanists, including Pearl's projection of a radical utopian impulse that transcends Hawthorne's retrograde vision of a return to pre-revolutionary America.

theory of utopia. In the final few sections of this paper, I will turn my attention directly to Pearl's

relationship to Jameson's vision of utopia, attending to the subtle ways in which her

"uncanniness" subverts Hawthorne's overt political symbolism and demonstrates the author's

deeply repressed desire, *not for compromise, but for revolutionary transformation.*

The Political Unconscious of The Scarlet Letter

Jameson's model of the political unconscious enjoins the reader to look beyond, or rather

beneath, the text's overt political symbolism—that is, to reconsider the text in terms of its "rifts,"

"discontinuities," and "contradictions"—in order to ascertain its true historical DNA. This

diagnosis occurs across three mutually reinforcing analytical horizons, defined by Jameson as the

political, the *social,* and the *historical.* In simplest terms, these operations require the text to be

"re-coded" first as an imaginary resolution of an irreconcilable political contradiction (the

novel's manifest political symbolism discussed above), then as a description of the social or class

conflict that generates this contradiction, and, finally, as an expression of the competing or

overlapping modes of production that determine the organization of society as a whole.

Crucially, it is within the second level of analysis, the social horizon, that we begin to perceive

the "philosophical concept" or "protonarrative"—what Jameson finally terms the "ideologeme"

—that serves as the unifying "langue" of class conflict in a given epoch and therefore the

ultimate ground (or "raw material") of the text in question's ideological design. This concept is

critical, for the unconscious utopian energies contained within a given text are felt as a kind of

antagonism towards the basic philosophical terms of the narrative.[3] As elaborated in the analysis

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[3] A helpful review of the history of the use of the term "ideologeme" in cultural studies is provided by Taras Lylo in his 2016 essay, "Ideologeme as a Representative of the Basic Concepts of Ideology in the Media Discourse." Based on this history, the definition nearest to Jameson's comes from Julia Kristeva in *Le Texte du Roman.* Lylo paraphrases Kristeva's understanding of the ideologeme as "the natural locus of the ideological content" (15). In other words, the ideologeme refers to a philosophical sign system, or metaphor, that explains the "dominant way of thinking" shared by *all* parties in a given political or ideological conflict, notwithstanding the vehemence of their opposition to one another. In the analysis to follow, we will see how, essentially, all positions in the American antebellum political context can be traced back to the metaphor of "good (self) and evil (other)."

to follow, Pearl's refusal of categorization within most of the critical paradigms applied to *The Scarlet Letter* urges us to explore how her character challenges the fundamental ideological unit, or "lens," generative of *all* forms of political thought in Hawthorne's time.

The Social Horizon

Having already described the political conflict that generates Hawthorne's narrative, Jameson's model prompts us now to perceive the political symbolism of *The Scarlet Letter* as a metanarrative of social or class struggle. Broadly speaking, the political impasse of the 1850's was generated by the opposition of "two different economic systems; one of free, or wage, labor, the other of semi-feudalistic chattel slavery" (Mintz, para. 1). Another way of expressing this binary is the confrontation between an entrenched planter aristocracy and an ever-growing, increasingly specialized industrial workforce. It is significant to note that to the degree that this explanation is dissolved into the broader binary of North (industrial wage labor) verses South (agrarian economy), it tends to obscure important sub-categories of southern labor, including southern peasant farmers and especially enslaved workers, while also downplaying the tensions, particularly prevalent in Hawthorne's home state of Massachusetts, between traditional agrarian economies in the North and the modernizing labor force that began to threaten their existence. Karl Marx himself viewed the situation in antebellum America as an opportunity for socialist revolution that would aim to restore the rights of disenfranchised workers across the nation, famously declaring that "labor in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin" (Marx qtd. in Anderson 5). It follows from my analysis in the preceding sections that Hawthorne outwardly opposed any such revivification of the "revolutionary mythos" (Pease 52). Though his anti-revolutionary stance was ostensibly based on moral and philosophical commitments, its practical implications were economic. That is to say, insofar as Hester's return

to New England re-establishes her "link to aristocracy" (Reynolds 494), Hawthorne's obvious

sympathy with her decision supports the antebellum political and economic status quo centered

on the exploitation of slaves, peasant laborers, and the growing number of wage workers by a

politically powerful agrarian class.

This abstraction of the text's political symbolism into a metanarrative of class struggle

may seem like a tautology, but this maneuver is necessary in order to grasp the "fundamental

unit of ideology" (Lylo 15), or ideologeme, undergirding the conflict that the text sets out to

resolve in the first place. In the case of *The Scarlet Letter*, the opposition of multiple antagonistic

economic modalities rather directly suggests the organizing structure of ideological thought in

Western culture since (at least) the beginning of the nineteenth century: "the ethical binary

opposition of good and evil" (*The Political Unconscious* 88), or the opposition of one's own

position to "whatever is radically different from me, whatever by virtue of precisely that

difference seems to constitute a real threat to my own existence" (115). Jameson locates the

origin of this ideologeme in the "master code of theocentric power societies," wherein the

worldview and value systems of people were shaped by an essential, if unconscious, belief in

"the centrality of a dominant term by means of the marginalization of an excluded or inessential

one" (qtd. in Von Boeckmann 37-38). He characterizes this original binary as *metaphysical*

insofar as it was "[informed] by the categories of presence and absence," as in Plato's famous

prioritization of speech (presence) over writing (absence) (Von Boeckmann 38). The content of

the original binary, Jameson argues, has been dramatically modified by the "decentered and

serialized society of consumer capitalism" (qtd. in Von Boeckmann 38). More specifically, the

emergence of the self, or "ego," as the primary category of philosophical consideration in the

West, coeval with the rapid expansion of consumerism in the nineteenth century, has over time

transformed the *metaphysical* categories of the binary into *ethical* ones. That is to say, the basic

unit of ideology in Western thought has become the distinction between "one's own position (as

good) and the other's (as evil)" (Von Boeckmann 38).

The deep, irreconcilable divisions over American slavery during the antebellum period

help us to more clearly perceive how the ideologeme of good (self) and evil (other) underwrites

all positions in any instance of class or ideological struggle. It may be obvious to suggest that all

parties to the conflict over slavery considered themselves to be in the position of putative

"good," a term which, for these purposes, refers not to the notion of altruism per se, but, instead,

to a deeply felt sense of "rightness" in the face of staunch opposition. Even manifestly bad

actors, such as the many who supported slavery, and especially those who supported the

institution on the grounds of theories of racial superiority, believed, or at any rate imagined,

themselves to be acting on principle. Indeed, many of their perverse racial justifications were

couched in Judeo-Christian notions of "paternal benevolence." What's more, in some cases, the

sense of moral or intellectual superiority, of "rightness," held by parties who were violently

opposed to each other was generated by a common philosophical germ emanating from the

juxtaposition of "self" and "other." In fact, one of the essential political contradictions shaping

the narrative of *The Scarlet Letter* is the reality, eloquently summarized by Pease, that the same

emphasis on self-determination that drove the abolitionist movement was also used to justify

support for Southern secession. Without an oppressive monarchy against which to array

themselves and still hungover from the institutional abuses of the Jacksonian patronage system,

Pease explains, the citizens of antebellum America accepted a re-definition of freedom that did

not require "social compaction" but instead cast freedom as "freedom from institutions *of any*

kind" (*Visionary Compacts* 74). Cleverly exploiting the juxtaposition of institutional life with a

life lived in nature, the South, "where an agrarian economy flourished, [used] as its rationale for

secession the same sacred notion of 'Nature's Nation' that guaranteed the rights of American

political virtue" (74-75). In effect, the Southern colonies succeeded in "transforming the political

small print of the common pursuit of *self*-interest," so influential to the abolitionists' opposition

to slavery, and so disagreeable to Hawthorne, "into the large print of secession from the Union"

(75). In other words, however far apart the Northern and Southern colonies were on the political

reality of slavery, their justifications for either its expansion or abolition were united by an

implacable defense of individual will, which both sides employed to some degree in their

fundamental claim on the position of "good."[4]

To complicate matters only slightly, Jameson turns to Friedrich Nietzsche's re-working

of the ideologeme of good (self) and evil (other) in his theory of "ressentiment" to more

precisely delineate the complex power dynamics inhering in contemporary class conflict.

Nietzsche's theory of ressentiment posits, with Hegel and Marx, that all human relations assume

the form of a master-slave relationship. It is distinguished from classical dialectics, however, by

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[4] Lest this argument be misinterpreted as some sort of nihilistic attempt to eliminate the obvious moral distinctions between slavery and abolition, I wish to emphasize that I regard the antebellum abolitionist movement as an unequivocal positive force and a true historical urgency. My point, however, is that insofar as any abolitionist program remains locked into the positional thinking of good (self) and evil (other), it is, from the Marxist perspective at least, incapable of redressing the structural determinants of racial inequality under capitalism. Another antebellum text, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, is exemplary of this point. Stowe's opposition to slavery (evil/other) on the grounds of Christian moral authority, and more specifically of a kind of antinomian free will (good/self), ends up reproducing the binary logic of good and evil as the relationship between the abolitionist-as-benevolent paternalist and the freed slave as an infantilized and totally dependent "other." I allude to this in an earlier essay titled "Sinister Designs: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* Reconsidered": "This much is proven when the literal mouthpiece for Stowe's vision, the pious George Shelby, attempts to free his newly inherited slaves after acquiring his deceased father's plantation. They clamor to '[tender] back their free papers' and declare, seemingly in unison, 'We don't want to be no freer than we are. We's allers had all we wanted. We don't want to leave de ole place,' to which George confidently replies, as if anticipating their resistance, '...there'll be no need for you to leave me. The place wants as many hands to work as it did before...But, you are now free men and free women. I shall pay you wages for your work, such as we shall agree on.' He, of course, qualifies their offer of employment with the admonition that he '[expects them] to be good, and willing to learn' (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* 616). Through this local act of abolition, then, George synthesizes Stowe's entire ideological project; he replaces the true source of the author's protest, legal coercion to labor, with a system of voluntary wage labor, while leaving totally untouched the infantilizing racial hierarchy of the plantation system" (5-6).

the proposition that the oppressed person, or class of people, derives power from its very domination. In this way, the political traces of ressentiment, and more broadly of the ideologeme of good (self) and evil (other), in nineteenth-century literature can be seen clearly in depictions of the powerfully "destructive" forces of the "have-nots" in their uprisings against hierarchical systems of governance (201-202). Conversely, in certain *counter*-revolutionary texts, such as *The Scarlet Letter*, the theme of ressentiment is revealed by the presence of its opposite—that is, by the "expression of annoyance at [this] seemingly gratuitous lower-class agitation, at the apparently unnecessary rocking of the social boat" (202).

Hawthorne's tendency to deliberately shift his sympathies away from characters who indulge their rebellious impulses exemplifies this reverse-ressentiment. Larry J. Reynolds points out the author's increasing "antipathy" towards Dimmesdale as the minister "becomes radicalized and anticipates Hester's ventures into the realm of speculative and revolutionary thought." As Reynolds sees it, "The central scene of the novel, Arthur's 'vigil' on the scaffold, is inspired by the liberal views [Dimmesdale] has begun to entertain," and the revelation of the "blazing A in the sky," which the townspeople associate with Governor Winthrop's death, "emphasize[s] (by its reference to Winthrop's famous leadership and integrity) the nadir Arthur has reached by his indulgence in defiant thought and behavior" (495). Significantly, though, while Hawthorne's treatment of Dimmesdale reinforces the author's conservative design by straightforwardly "othering" a potentially revolutionary figure, his handling of *Hester*'s "defiant thought and behavior" suggests ambiguity in the novel's representation of antebellum social and class struggle. Reynolds astutely observes that even though Hester "loses the narrator's sympathies" when "she too becomes, like the French revolutionaries of 1789 and the Italian revolutionaries of 1849, a radical thinker," she at any rate gains the *reader's* sympathies (496). In

this instance, Hawthorne manages a contradictory, which is to say anti-conservative, impulse by channeling it through the audience (as opposed to his narrator), eliciting a discontinuity in the social horizon of the novel that, as we will see in the section to follow, manifests even more clearly in its formal aspects, or its various "modes of production."

The Historical Horizon

In the final phase of Jameson's model, the "[politically] symbolic act" and the "ideologeme…of class discourse" revealed by the first two horizons are able to be "restructured" as a "field of force" in which the characteristics, or "sign systems," of the extant modes of production (the very modes of production that determine the conflict which the text seeks to resolve) can be registered (98). These registers are shown in the formal elements of the novel, which constitute modes of production themselves. Hence Jameson's name for this phenomenon: the "ideology of form." Chief among these formal elements in *The Scarlet Letter* is the bold act of authorial intervention that Hawthorne performs in the "The Custom House." The unmasking of the author within the text proper, uncommon to the genre of romance, is, in one sense, an expression of the "emergence of the ego or centered subject" brought on by "the universal commodification of the labor power of individuals and their confrontation as equivalent units within the framework of the [antebellum American commercial] market" (Jameson 154). Yet this maneuver also constitutes a form of storytelling, and in so doing it enacts an entirely contradictory mode of literary production: the oral tradition, important here for the fact of its increasingly outmoded quality and its attempt to resist commodification by market forces. Thus, the "intrusive author" of "The Custom House" registers not only a basic tension within Hawthorne himself (*The Scarlet Letter* 8), but also an irreconcilable conflict between a traditional mode of production centered on "organic or hierarchical" values (Jameson 154) and

an emergent one premised on specialized industrial labor. Returning to our earlier discussion of

the ideologeme that makes class struggle and conflict between existing modes of production

intelligible on the most fundamental linguistic level, this clash of economic systems can be

traced back to the binary opposition of good (self) and evil (other), here manifesting as a mutual

struggle for dominance between traditional and modernizing forces of production with equally

trenchant claims to superiority and moral authority. Ultimately, then, the traces of disjunction in

Hawthorne's political commitments, and more broadly in his response to the shifting economic

landscape of antebellum America, express an unconscious, or at any rate repressed,

dissatisfaction with the fundamental ideologeme of political thought in antebellum America.

Jameson's Theory of Utopia

As mentioned above, my aim is to recover Pearl from her critical marginalization by

demonstrating that she embodies a projection of utopia, of some as yet unimagined alternative to

the scene of historical conflict described in the preceding section. It perhaps goes without saying

that my point of reference for this claim is Jameson's unique vision of utopia. But a final

abstraction of the ideologeme needs to be performed in order to adequately conceptualize this

vision. That is, the binary opposition of good (self) and evil (other) that emerges from my

analysis of the novel's political, social, and historical horizons must now be grasped as more

than just a framework for perceiving Hawthorne's opposition to social reform (the *political*), or

for conceptualizing the conflict between various social classes, political groups, and modes of

production (the *social* and *historical*) in the author's time: it must now become the basis for our

understanding of the *individual* in relation to *all* modes of production.

In her analysis of the concept of utopia in Jameson's work, Staci L. Von Boeckmann

observes that, for Marx and Engels, the fundamental contradiction of contemporary society, and

indeed the quintessential expression of the ideologeme of good (self) and evil (other) in our time,

is the alienation of the private individual from the products of her or his own labor under

commodity production. In the same way that the physical commodity is returned to the gaze of

its producer as some mystical "thing" so clearly estranged from the material conditions of the

laborer, "ideas," too, "become separated from the material conditions which made them

possible" (Von Boeckmann 33). Morality itself "becomes transformed into social relations, into a

series of powers which determine and subordinate the individual, and which, therefore, appear in

the imagination as 'holy powers'." (Marx & Engels qtd. in Von Boeckmann 33). Thus

conceived, good (self) and evil (other) become the basis for the antagonism between "personal

and general interest," or between the "material conditions of social being" and the

"epiphenomena" of ethics and morality that ultimately subsume these conditions (Von

Boeckmann 33).

      Jameson argues that narrative is, at its most fundamental (which is to say *unconscious*)

level, an expression of desire for resolution of this antagonism. But, he emphasizes, narrative

also *prohibits* this resolution by reinforcing the "hold of ethical categories on our mental habits."

The "irresistible temptation" of "positional thinking" manifests in symbolic resolutions that

appear as collective praxis—as the joining of the personal and the general interest—but which

ultimately reinforce the ideologeme of good (self) and evil (other) (Jameson qtd. in Von

Boeckmann 38). This is especially true of romance, with its channeling of revolutionary energy

into an idealized vision of the past. To return for a moment to our earlier discussion of the

political and social horizons of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne's revivification of the civic

compact of the early Puritan settlers, far from refusing the temptation of positional thinking,

approximates the "Marcusean notion of utopia as anamnesis, 'of memory as a return to a lost

source of plenitude'" (Jameson qtd. in Wegner 59) and thus remains locked into the binary terms of "nostalgia": *the old way of life (good/what **I** advocate) was better than the new way life (evil/what **others** advocate)*. Jameson's utopia, on the other hand, is future-oriented, entailing an "allegorical or indirect pre-figuration…of an unimaginable other existence" (Wegner 60). Crucially, what is unimaginable about this existence is its transcendence of positional thinking, of the ideologeme of good (self) and evil (other), altogether. Von Boeckmann sees this vision as an extension of the original Marxist project of "going beneath morality" in order to dissolve self-consciousness into the ultimate end of collective thinking, or *class consciousness* (33-34).

Pearl's "pre-figuration" of this as yet unlived experience of collective life may explain the tendency (of those few critics who handle her directly) to misinterpret her "apartness" as evidence that she cannot possibly represent a whole human being and therefore *must* be a symbol in Hawthorne's allegory. Darrel Abel's description of Pearl as an "Undine—a beautiful half-human child who instinctively aspired to possession of a soul," for example, presupposes that she traffics in moral currency in the same way that Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth most certainly do (63). This common reflex to "fill out" Pearl, to imbue her with ethical sensibilities that are simply not borne out by the text, echoes Von Boeckmann's description of the central thrust of Jamesonian ideology critique: that "even where there is nothing indicative of such positions as good and evil, our habits of mind ascribe them" (38). Conversely, Jameson's utopia prompts us to think of this condition "where there is nothing" as a constitutive ontological category, which he describes in *The Political Unconscious* as a "transindividual [perspective] of collective life" (116). This concept is given even fuller expression by way of engagement with one of Jameson's primary interlocutors: Jacques Lacan.

In her discussion of the influence of Lacanian psychoanalysis on Jameson, Von Boeckmann equates the irresistible pull of the ideologeme of good (self) and evil (other) to Lacan's theory of the Symbolic order,[5] wherein "language acquisition" leads to awareness of "identity and difference" (i.e., the subject/self - object/other divide well known to psychoanalytic theory), thus destroying the child's "dyadic unity with the mother." Significantly, Lacan's principal metaphor for language acquisition is the introduction of the father figure, whose prohibition on the child's possession by (or of) the mother symbolizes the way in which the gap between the *signified* and the linguistic *signifier* creates a perpetually unfulfilled desire for a return to a previous state of wholeness. The significance of the comparison between Jameson and Lacan, then, lies in the latter's apprehension of repression as a function of language, so that what is repressed is the desire to abolish "the system of signs," the most basic of which, for Jameson, are the categories of good (self) and evil (other) (36-38). The symptom of this repression, and thus the key to unlocking a text's utopian energy, is precisely the experience of resistance to classification within this system of ethical-linguistic signifiers.

Beyond Good and Evil

A fitting starting point for analysis of Pearl's relationship to such a "pre-" or "non"-ethical condition is Hawthorne's eye-catching reference in Chapter 14 to the "little chaos of Pearl's character" (109). It is unlikely that Hawthorne intends the contemporary colloquial use of

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[5] A useful summary of Lacan's three "orders" of the human psyche is provided by Leitch et al. in their introduction to Lacan in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism, Third Edition*. For our purposes, a cursory review of the Real and the Imaginary as they relate to our primary subject, the Symbolic, will suffice. The Real refers to that which is repressed and therefore cannot be fully conceptualized. In this way, the Real can be thought of as the condition of wholeness never actually experienced by the subject (and thus the source of all desire). The Imaginary, often associated with Lacan's theory of the "mirror stage," is the stage of development in which the child first perceives its own body as a totality. This realization is based on the child's awareness of the "image" of its whole body, or "the newly-fashioned *specular* 'I'" (emphasis mine) ("Jacques Lacan" 1108). The distance between the child itself and the image in the metaphorical mirror precedes the catastrophic divide between "self" and "other" that is caused by language acquisition in the Symbolic order.

the term "chaos," meaning essentially "disorder," packed as it is with obvious ethical

implications. Rather, it is almost certain that he intends something closer to the Miltonian

conception of chaos, given its fullest expression in *Paradise Lost* and referring to that amorphous

realm "comprised of pre-elemental mater" that is "earlier in origin than our world" (Chambers

1963). While scholars continue to offer vague evidence of an ethically-determined chaos—some

insisting that all matter, even pre-elemental matter, is necessarily good, or that goodness inheres

in chaos because of its "fecundity as a womb" (Leonard xx)—what is absolutely certain is that

Milton's chaos exists prior to the inception of Hell, Heaven, and Earth, and thereby troubles the

neat binary of good and evil that has structured Western philosophy beginning, arguably, with

the story of the Creation. A.B. Chambers points to this relationship between chronology and

ethical ambiguity in Milton's depictions of chaos:

> This disordered region clearly existed before the creation of Hell and Earth…Milton's
>
> Christian Doctrine unequivocally states that matter is good; the material chaos of
>
> *Paradise Lost* is unmistakably opposed to God. This chaos is said to be the "womb of
>
> nature" and to contain "pregnant causes"; one would like to know the meaning of those
>
> terms. Chaos has for its dark consort the figure of ancient Night, but the nature of this
>
> companionship is far from clear. (55)

Not coincidentally, the passage alluded to earlier in which Hester ponders Pearl's chaotic nature

effectively mirrors Chambers' ordering of Miltonian chaos. Noticeably, it is *from* "the little

chaos of Pearl's character" that "there might be seen emerging…the…principles of an

unflinching courage,—an uncontrollable will,—a sturdy pride, which might be disciplined into

self-respect—and a bitter scorn of many things, which…might be found to have the taint of

falsehood" (109). The space represented by my insertion of the conjunction "that" signifies a

liminality between that which is prior to creation and the ethical order inherent in worldly concepts like "courage," "will," and "self-respect." Thus, it would seem Hawthorne intends us to understand that Pearl has not yet transcended, that she exists within, this liminality, as evidenced by the thrice repeated "might be."

At the same time, his careful placement of Pearl in this liminal region comports with Jameson's implicit rejection of the possibility of a purely pre-ideological condition and his understanding of utopian projection as a kind of dialectical reflexivity between the worldly (or the ethical) and the liminal (or the chaotic). This reflexivity is reinforced in nearly every narratorial intervention around Pearl. Hawthorne is exacting in his use of terms that tempt the reader toward ethical judgment but ultimately defy intelligible organization within the binary of good (self) and evil (other): "that wild and flighty elf...stole softly towards him" (74); "[s]he now skipped irreverently" (84); "Pearl lost, for an instant, the restless agitation that had kept her in continual effervescence throughout the morning" (140); "[her irregular movement] indicated the restless vivacity of her spirit"; "[w]henever she saw anything to excite...her active and wandering curiosity she flew thither-ward" (145). Pearl's liminality is further evinced by the other characters' replies to her unassimilable nature. Observing Pearl as she dances upon the "broad flat, armorial tombstone of a departed worthy," Chillingworth remarks aloud, "There is no law, nor reverence for authority, no regard for human ordinances or opinions, right or wrong, mixed up with that child's composition," concluding his colloquy with Dimmesdale by asking, "Is the imp altogether evil? Hath she affections? Hath she any discoverable principle of being?" Chillingworth's deliberate reference to the binary of "right and wrong" interpolates Pearl into a realm defined by ethical categories, but his befuddlement at her lack of "reverence" for such "human ordinances" creates a revolutionary space in which to contemplate a subjectivity beyond

good and evil. Certainly, it is not lost on the discerning reader that when Chillingworth asks, albeit rhetorically, if the child is "altogether evil," Hawthorne has Dimmesdale respond with, "Whether capable of good, I know not" (84). To oversimplify Chillingworth's and Dimmesdale's allegorical functions in the novel, the exchange intentionally juxtaposes cold intellect (evil/negative) and passionate principle (good/positive), simulating the ethical-linguistic framework of contemporary society while emphasizing Pearl's utter refusal of it.

Family Matters

But Milton's, and by extension Hawthorne's, idea of chaos entails more than just liminality or indeterminacy. Regina Schwartz demonstrates this point by more precisely elaborating the Lacanian resonances in the chaos of *Paradise Lost*. In her essay, "Milton's Hostile Chaos: '...And the Sea Was No More,'" Schwartz describes the Creation first and foremost as an act of "separation," arguing that it is only through the *division* and *distinction* of Earth from chaos that God "puts forth his goodness" in the newly formed world (339; Milton qtd. in Schwartz 342). This goodness, she goes on, derives precisely from "obedience to the law," symbolized in the beginning of Creation by God's subsequent "distinction between forbidden and permitted food" (344), just as, for Lacan, the opposition of good (self) and evil (other) results from the child's recognition of the Symbolic father, whose destruction of the original dyad marks the first instance of external control, or "law," in the newly formed *subject*'s life. In this way, through Lacan, chaos is transformed from an undefined "liminal space," or simple pre-condition of the Creation, to the realm of the repressed, or, rather, to the expression of the return of what has been repressed. What's more, Lacan enables us to perceive that for Milton, as for Hawthorne, the return of the repressed is often, if not always, shown as a rebuke of the Symbolic father figure.

That the singular act of passion which generates the plot of *The Scarlet Letter* occurs in some amorphous past is, in and of itself, an act of repression. As a symbolic originary event, this first rejection of libidinal energy by Hawthorne helps to explain the infusion of erotic subtext and sexual innuendo throughout the novel. Consider, for instance, Hawthorne's description of the appeal Dimmesdale derives from the enormity of his secret burden:

> It kept him down, on a level with the lowest; him, the man of ethereal attributes, whose voice the angels might else have listened to and answered! But this very burden it was, that gave him sympathies so intimate with the sinful brotherhood of mankind; so that his heart vibrated in unison with theirs, and received their pain into itself, and sent its own throb of pain through a thousand other hearts, in gushes of sad, persuasive eloquence.
> (89)

It would be naïve to perceive Hawthorne's reference to the penetration of the minister's heart and the "throb" of pain following the "gushes" of words from his mouth as anything other than the channeling of blocked sexual desire. When Hawthorne declares in the next breath that "[t]he people knew not the power that moved them thus," the reader wonders if the author is referring to the power of persuasion generated by Dimmesdale's secret burden or if it is the intensity of the congregation's displaced sexual longing that actually interests him. This interpretation is confirmed by Hawthorne's subsequent description of the fealty of the "virgins of the church" who "grew pale around [Dimmesdale], victims of a passion so imbued with religious sentiment that they imagined it to be all religion" (89).

Pearl's function as a projection of utopian potential, which is in part to say her recovery of the preternatural libidinal impulses crushed beneath the novel's structure of repression, is understood not in direct relation to these moments of obvious displacement, but, rather, in

relation to the fundamental source of this repression: the political construct of the family, which

is made complete only by the introduction of the Symbolic father figure. It is no wonder that the

novel's displaced sexual energy is most visible in scenes of religious piety, as indeed the whole

of Christian theology is organized by the notion of the nuclear family, from its most obvious

manifestation in God's deliverance of His "Holy begotten son" to its enforced prohibition of sex

outside of the sacred covenant of marriage. The ideology of the nuclear family is certainly not

exclusive to religion; arguably, it is the centerpiece of the entire Western ethical-ideological

construct of good (self) and evil (other). Returning again to Lacan, the child's initial possession

by the mother and subsequent recognition of the father are, broadly speaking, preconditions for

the psychic split that generates the irreparable good (self/*subject*) and evil (other/*object*) rupture.

Familial identity is not only the impetus of this rupture, however; it is also the ethical-ideological

construct within which the division is artificially repaired. Lee Edelman's framework for

understanding how the political phenomenon of "reproductive futurism" attempts to mend this

rupture can be generalized to explain how the ideologically constructed Western family, that

most reliable incubator of futurism, performs the same illusorily reparative function:

> [The] structural inability of the subject to merge with the self…necessitates various
>
> strategies designed to suture the subject…Politics names the social enactment of the
>
> subject's attempt to establish the condition for this impossible consolidation by
>
> identifying with something outside itself in order to enter the presence, deferred
>
> perpetually, of itself. Politics, that is, names the struggle to effect a fantasmatic order of
>
> reality in which the subject's alienation would vanish into the seamlessness of identity at
>
> the endpoint of the endless chain of signifiers lived as history. (8)

The "fantasmatic order of reality" to which Edelman refers is the system of signifiers that comprises, among other narrative allusions, the nuclear family as the site of a "promissory identity" intended to compensate, albeit only partially, for the perpetual desire for unity resulting from the psychic split caused by language acquisition (and the introduction of the father). The quest for this "impossible consolidation," what essentially amounts to a replication of the pre-Symbolic or pre-ideological condition—of *wholeness*—is precisely ethical insofar as it sustains a constantly forestalled hope through "intense metaphoric investments" (20), such as the church, the notion of futurity, or the construct of "family values" that underwrites them both. In the example at the beginning of this section, the preternatural sexual yearnings of the virgins of Dimmesdale's congregation are experienced as a confusion of prohibited libidinal impulses with admiration for a divine-like father figure. In a manner of speaking, then, what prohibits the expression, and certainly the fulfillment, of the virgins' desire is their acquired identity (as daughters) within the patriarchal family structure of the church.

In explaining Pearl's utopian potential through her subversion of the ethical-ideological concept of family, it is significant, though not entirely sufficient, to point out that her existence literally eviscerates two families: her birth makes visible and official Hester's violation of her legal covenant with Chillingworth, and the revelation of her true paternity effectively murders Dimmesdale. This point is insufficient insofar as it yields to Pease's observation that the destruction of Hester's private families ultimately strengthens the public family: "in sacrificing herself to the interpretive needs of the entire community, Hester includes the community…as appropriate recipients of her love" (89). Thus, more critical to the understanding of Pearl's utopian potential than the destruction of the private family is her particular effect on the

projection of the ethical binary of good (self) and evil (other) through the identities of the novel's

patriarchal models, the symbolic "heads of household," Chillingworth and Dimmesdale.

The reader will no doubt recall the scene of Pearl's supposed conversion, when, by

kissing her father, "[a] spell [is] broken" (151). It is easy to be swayed to ethical conclusions by

the totalizing effect of Dimmesdale's virtuous "sacrifice," putatively made on behalf of Hester

and Pearl. But preceding this miracle is a progressive muddying of Dimmesdale's "good" nature,

and through this a disassociation of ethics from paternity, which is another way of saying the

corrosion of the very concept of paternity. The minister's intense pathos, epitomized by his

"tremulously sweet, rich, deep, and broken" voice (47), disintegrates into a crude and pointless

self-abnegation "more in accordance with the old, corrupted faith of Rome, than with the better

light of the church in which he had been born and bred" (90). This deterioration culminates in

Dimmesdale's entirely "abstracted" form in the moments preceding his confession and death, a

form which "seemed so remote from [Hester's] own sphere, and utterly beyond her reach" (142).

When Mistress Hibbins remarks to Hester that "this minister" surely cannot be "the same man

that encountered [Hester] on the forest path," referring of course to the scene of Hester and

Dimmesdale's familial pact, she gives voice to Dimmesdale's progressive de-signification as the

Lacanian Symbolic father (143). For the aforementioned Fiedler, the minister's transformation

marks the replacement of one child (Pearl) by another (her own father):

> [the] minister, become a child, embraces innocently that outcast, sanctified by
>
> motherhood. "They beheld the minister, leaning on Hester's shoulder and supported by
>
> his arm around him…Hester partly raised, and supported his head against her bosom…"
>
> At the last moment of his life, Dimmesdale, the eternal son, has found his way back to
>
> the breast." (237)

To carry Fiedler's point a bit further, Pearl's abdication of maternal dependence simultaneously orphans her from the familial triad and enables Dimmesdale's final conversion from the Symbolic father to the "eternal son." Certainly, it is no coincidence that, only moments later, Mistress Hibbins comments on Pearl's true lineage: "Thou thyself will see it, one time or another. They say, child, thou art lineage of the Prince of the Air"[6] (144). As for Chillingworth, absent an object of putative good upon which to exercise his evil machinations, the balance of good and evil at the center of the novel thus thrown off, he "[withers] up, [shrivels] away, and almost [vanishes] from mortal sight" (153), completing the symbolic negation of Hawthorne's ethical binary and revealing Pearl's true office as the obliterator of paternal identity.

Pearl's Kiss of Death

According to the logic of my argument in the preceding section, Dimmesdale's decline and death ratifies Pearl's estrangement from the ideological construct of family. Yet, most interpretations of the conclusion of *The Scarlet Letter* imply that the opposite occurs: that Pearl is delivered into the ethical order of womanhood, with all of its implications for her own "reproductive futurity." Facile though they are, these conventional interpretations provide the groundwork, or more precisely the dialectical counterpoint, for further recovery of Pearl's subversion of the Symbolic father figure. To begin with, such readings usually commence with a dramatic oversimplification of Pearl's final interaction with Dimmesdale. For example, in "*The Scarlet Letter* and the New Ethic," Carmine Sarracino argues that Pearl finally enters the Symbolic order of the world of the novel when, by kissing Dimmesdale, she synthesizes the "old ethic" of Judeo-Christian authoritarianism embodied by her father and the "new ethic" of human will brought out by Hester's "self-[sufficiency]" and "invulnerability" (57; 52):

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[6] Mistress Hibbins's remark is clearly a reference to Milton. "Prince of the Air" is one of Satan's monikers in *Paradise Lost.*

> If real progress is to occur, Pearl must come to terms with Dimmesdale. When she does,
>
> at the close of the twentieth chapter, when she plants a kiss upon his lips, the past
>
> (Dimmesdale) and the future (Hester) are symbolically married, reconciled, synthesized
>
> within Pearl, in their moment of parting. And Pearl is transformed. Instead of an elf child
>
> disconnected from humanity, she becomes human and social. (58)

I have chosen to quote Sarracino's analysis at length because of how much it assumes about

Pearl based on such limited textual evidence. The commonly accepted notion that through the act

of kissing her father Pearl is suddenly transformed from an "elf child" into a human subject is

derived entirely from the single, curiously abstract passage in which Hawthorne explains Pearl's

reaction to the fateful kiss:

> Pearl kissed his lips. The spell was broken. The great scene of grief, in which the wild
>
> infant bore a part, had developed all her sympathies; and as her tears fell upon her
>
> father's cheek, they were the pledge that she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow,
>
> nor forever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it. Towards her mother, too,
>
> Pearl's errand as a messenger of anguish was all fulfilled. (151)

I intend the term "abstract" here in the sense of its use by Marx (and earlier in this paper) to

describe ideas that are so far removed from their material origins as to be nearly unrecognizable.

In other words, the suddenly transformed Pearl of Hawthorne's imagination, the one

miraculously imbued with "all the sympathies" previously absent in the little girl and whose tears

somehow confer upon her father an unequivocal "pledge" of womanhood, is alien to the

blankness of the character *on the page* at the crucial moment in question.

This discontinuity, to borrow Jameson's term for one of the key symptoms of textual

repression, is brought out by comparison to Hawthorne's rendering of literally every other

character present at the novel's climax. The others are drawn with such intense physicality that any doubt regarding their presence, let alone the effect of Dimmesdale's confession on each of them, is instantly removed. The "blank, dull countenance" of Chillingworth shows that "life seemed to have departed from him" upon the revelation of Dimmesdale's sin (and the latter's release from the mad scientist's control). Likewise, Hester's plea for assurance from Dimmesdale that the two will "spend [their] immortal life together" exudes a palpable anguish that is heretofore unseen in her character. Fittingly, Dimmesdale receives Hawthorne's most evocative physical portrayal: "There was a sweet and gentle smile over his face, as of a spirit sinking into deep repose" before his "bright dying eyes" give way to his "expiring breath." Even the physical reaction of the "horror stricken" multitude is *heard* and *felt* by the reader: "[They], silent till then, broke out in a strange, deep voice of awe and wonder, which could not yet find utterance, save in this murmur that rolled so heavily after the departed spirit" (151). It is only Pearl who begins to *disappear* at the exact moment when, according to the conventional criticism, she is supposed to have finally *appeared*. Hawthorne noticeably deprives her of voice, utterance, and expression, his mention of her tears providing the only evidence that *she* is not the "departed spirit" whose death the multitude mourns.

Pearl's disembodiment in the penultimate chapter of *The Scarlet Letter* reinforces Hawthorne's unconscious impulse towards what Jameson describes as the experience of "transindividualism," a move away from binary thinking towards the alternative of collective perspective. Accepting Sarracino's analysis of Dimmesdale's death as the symbolic synthesis of moral authoritarianism (past) and human will (future) (echoing my earlier remarks about Hawthorne's conservative nostalgia), but assaying a closer reading of Pearl at the moment in question, it becomes clear that Pearl's oft-overlooked vagueness actually unsettles Hawthorne's

conservative compromise. It does so by calling into question the author's certainty of his own design. It is as though Hawthorne, by awkwardly attributing "sympathies" to Pearl that her vanishing character is clearly incapable of integrating, attempts to recontain his unconscious yearning for a dramatically altered form of existence. Slavoj Žižek gives expression to this phenomenon in his analysis of Lacan's theory of the Freudian "return of the repressed." In "The Truth Arises from Misrecognition," Žižek writes:

> The dialectics of overtaking ourselves towards the future and at the same time of retroactive modification of the past—dialectics by which error is internal to the truth, by which misrecognition possesses a positive ontological dimension—has its limits. It stumbles onto a rock upon which it becomes suspended. This rock is of course the [Real], that which resists symbolization: the traumatic point which is always missed but which nonetheless always returns, although we try—through a set of different strategies—to neutralize it, to integrate it into the [S]ymbolic order. (Žižek qtd. in Budick 210-211).

The notion of "overtaking ourselves towards the future and at the same time [retroactively modifying the past]" aptly summarizes Hawthorne's nostalgic hope for a reinvigoration of the Puritan errand. And the "rock" upon which he stumbles at the dramatic climax of the novel is, of course, his own repressed desire to transcend these political terms. However, so discomfiting is this vision of an existence beyond the self-oriented logic of good (self) and evil (other) that Hawthorne attempts to neutralize it—that is to say, to neutralize Pearl—with a modulated storybook ending. The reified passage quoted above in which Hawthorne announces Pearl's conversion, in total contradiction to her actual behavior, is, I contend, the author's failed attempt

to incorporate Pearl into his conservative compromise, specifically, and into the Symbolic order of the world of *The Scarlet Letter* more generally.

        To focus only on Pearl's vanishing at the scene of her father's death, however, is to risk overlooking what is arguably the most important *action* Hawthorne permits her to take in the novel. I do not mean the kiss, but, rather, the silence that accompanies it. Indeed, I have yet to encounter a single analysis of the "spell-breaking" kiss that so much as mentions Pearl's refusal of Dimmesdale, whose last words to his daughter are offered in the form of a question: "dear little Pearl, wilt thou kiss me now? Thou wouldst not, yonder, in the forest! But now thou wilt?" (151). The reverend's plea is as much a request to be *addressed* by his daughter as it to be kissed by her, and Pearl's refusal to speak, drowned out though it is by Hester's passionate exchange with Dimmesdale moments later, finalizes her disassociation from what remains of the novel's Lacanian paternal figure. The significance of Pearl's silence towards Dimmesdale is made even more obvious by comparison to the directness and sheer vitality of her exchange with the unnamed shipmaster moments earlier. Significantly, this interaction is an almost exact *inversion* of Pearl's interaction with her own father. Though she eludes the seafaring man's attempt to "snatch a kiss," she addresses him in all of her uncontained exuberance. It is no coincidence that the shipmaster, who wishes for Pearl to convey Chillingworth's intentions to Hester, concludes his request with a question similar to Dimmesdale's final entreaty: "*Wilt thou* tell her this, though witch-baby?" (145; emphasis mine). Taking offense at the man's chiding, Pearl responds with an eerie acknowledgement of her "true" father, Milton's chaos incarnate: "Mistress Hibbins says my father is the Prince of the Air[...] If though callest me that ill name, I shall tell him of thee; and he will chase thy ship with a tempest" (145). By not only permitting Pearl's final verbal utterance in the novel to be directed at an ambiguous (and unnamed) male figure, a kind of *anti-*

father, but by also dedicating it to a tongue-in-cheek disavowal of her biological father, Hawthorne seems to be preparing the reader, and indeed himself, for Pearl's complete withdrawal from the Symbolic order of the world of the novel in her final appearance alongside Dimmesdale.

Supporters of the conventional transformation narrative are apt to argue that the physical gesture of the kiss outweighs Pearl's silence—that, as it were, *actions* speak louder than *words* (or in this case, the *absence of words*). But this position ignores compelling, albeit subtle, textual evidence to the contrary. To begin with, I posit that Pearl's threatening of the shipmaster with a "tempest" is no mere turn of phrase. On the contrary, that her last word in the novel should so clearly echo Shakespeare, an influence on Hawthorne to rival Milton, suggests a fresh interlocutor for analysis of Pearl's final interaction with Dimmesdale, and in particular of the meaning of the kiss that has come to define it. With Shakespeare now in mind, it is difficult to ignore the obvious parallels between Pearl and Cordelia, the rebellious daughter of the titular King Lear. When asked by Lear to justify her inheritance with a declaration of love to her father, Cordelia responds with, "Nothing, my lord," and is instantly disowned (*King Lear*, 1:1, 95-96). Lear's disclaiming of "paternal care, propinquity, and property of blood" in response to Cordelia's silence displaces his daughter within the chain of hereditary signifiers that is so central to the world of *King Lear*, and Lear's descent into madness, like Dimmesdale's own deterioration at the hands of Chillingworth, is generated by the refusal of his daughter's true paternity (1:1, 125-126). How, then, in light of these similarities, of both characters' use of silence as rebellion, do we explain the actual kiss? Does Pearl's apparent gesture of affection towards Dimmesdale distinguish her from Cordelia, as most interpretations of her actions seem to imply?

Part of the answer to this question lies in Hawthorne's choice of the act of kissing as the source of Pearl's supposed transformation. Given the specter of Shakespeare looming large over the scene in question, it is no wonder that Hawthorne calls attention to Pearl's mouth. Shakespeare's frequent juxtaposition of the heart and the mouth (often specifically the tongue) prefigures Lacan's distinction between the Real and the Symbolic. For Shakespeare, the tongue is the conduit *into* the realm of logical abstractions, his obsession with the insufficiency of language to honor the heart's yearnings providing a template, so to speak, for Lacan's theory of the permanently severed dyadic unity.[7] Insofar as we acknowledge Shakespeare's influence here, in particular his association of the mouth with the futility of language, it is not unreasonable to interpret the kiss as a kind of taunt, a chilly rejection of the Symbolic order in favor of the very silence which accompanies Pearl's gesture. This reading is not without precedent in the novel. In an earlier chapter, Hawthorne, describing Hester's befuddlement at Pearl's mercurial nature, writes of the child, "it will sometimes, of its own vague purpose, kiss your cheek with a kind of doubtful tenderness" (*The Scarlet Letter* 109). Indeed, one imagines that if Pearl *were* to speak at the moment of the fateful final kiss, she might say, with Cordelia, "I cannot heave my heart into my mouth" (*King Lear*, 1:1, 100-101). The kiss is, in other words, a genuinely heartless gesture.

For argument's sake, though, let us for a moment indulge the mainstream of criticism and suppose a more generous interpretation of the kiss, one in which Hawthorne allows Pearl a momentary lapse into something like affection, or at any rate solidarity. Such an interpretation leads us away from *King Lear* towards a more classically "romantic" Shakespearean tragedy: *Romeo and Juliet*. There are certain undeniable similarities between the two texts to suggest the

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[7] Perhaps the quintessential example of the psychoanalytic critic's debt to Shakespeare comes from Bottom's burlesquing of 1 Corinthians in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with its reference to the authenticity of Bottom's dream echoing Lacan's idea of the Real: "man's hand is not able to taste, *his tongue to conceive*, nor his heart to report what my dream was" (4.2, 208-210).

influence of *Romeo and Juliet* on the climactic final chapters of *The Scarlet Letter*. For example, the notion that through the act of kissing Dimmesdale, Pearl pardons her father's sin reminds us of Romeo's quip to Juliet on the occasion of their own first kiss: "Then move not while my prayer's effect I take / Thus from my lips, by thine, *my sin is purged*" (emphasis mine) (1.5, 117-118). More important than this rather obvious parallel, however, is the way in which kissing in *Romeo and Juliet* symbolizes, first, the fantasy-like synthesis of self and other, and, finally, the transcendence of this divide (that is to say, of the Symbolic order) altogether. In the above-referenced exchange in Act 1, Scene 5, the flirtation accompanying Romeo and Juliet's exchange of kisses forms a "shared sonnet" comprising "fourteen, alternately rhyming lines in iambic pentameter" (Shaw para. 4), the structural cohesion and fluid poeticism of their colloquy momentarily suspending their distinctions as individual "selves" opposed to the "other." The origin of this divide is, of course, the Lacanian paternal figure symbolized by the hereditary feud between the Montagues and the Capulets. Thus, Romeo and Juliet's self-inflicted deaths, each of which is preceded by a kiss (Romeo's as a farewell to Juliet after ingesting poison, and Juliet's in order to acquire a trace of that very poison from her dead lover's lips), enact a permanent fusion of "self" and "other," a fleeting, though powerful, vision of Jameson's "collective life." This symbolic restoration of the broken dyadic unity is reinforced by the symmetry between Romeo and Juliet's respective last lines in the play (which are also their dying words), delivered more than fifty lines apart from each other and each without knowledge of the other:

Romeo: Thy drugs are quick. Thus with a kiss I **die**. (5.3, 120)

Juliet: **T**his is thy sheath. **T**here rust, and let me **die**. (175)

Not only are both lines composed in iambic pentameter, but, taken together, they form a single pattern of alliteration, as shown by my highlighting of the four occurrences of the letter "T."

Most resoundingly, the final iamb of each line ends with the word "die," Romeo and Juliet's identical utterances suggesting a final dissolving of differences through their mutual, and nearly simultaneous, deaths.

From this perspective, Romeo and Juliet's relationship provides a model for Dimmesdale and Pearl's final encounter. Viewed as an act of solidarity, Pearl's acquiescence to Dimmesdale's request, which by no coincidence takes the form of a kiss, suggests a reconciliation between the Lacanian paternal figure (again, the source of the good [self] and evil [other] divide) and the would-be subject generated by the breaking of the dyadic unity. Only, Hawthorne appears to be wrestling with Shakespeare's insistence that such a reconciliation is impossible, or more precisely that it is possible only in death, for *Pearl survives*. In light of Hawthorne's apparent awareness of Romeo and Juliet in the moments leading up to Pearl's kiss, the only plausible explanation for Pearl's survival is the author's radical vision of transindividualism *in this life*. To reiterate my earlier point, this projection of a "transindividual perspective of collective life" *in the here and now*, of what Jameson might also call true "class consciousness," is so unsettling to Hawthorne that he immediately re-suppresses the impulse by shoving Pearl offstage. Henceforth, her existence is patched together by rumor, conjecture, and unconfirmed reports of her prosperity in Europe, the ambiguity with which Hawthorne renders her fate in "the world" echoing Žižek's understanding of the Lacanian symptom as those acts of overcompensation resulting from any attempt to "[incorporate] two antithetical and irreconcilable impulses" (Budick 211).

Afterthoughts

Near the end of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester, having settled into her role as counsel to the "wretched" women who had been "wounded, wasted, wronged, [and] misplaced," as she herself

had been years earlier, assures her peers "of her firm belief, that, at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven's own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness" (154-55). A footnote in the Norton critical edition of the novel links Hester's words to the unmistakably similar passage from *Life of Franklin Pierce* (quoted above) in which Hawthorne predicts that slavery will "in its own good time…vanish like a dream" (113-114). As alluded to earlier, the conventional interpretation of this connection is that Hester's patience for change echoes Hawthorne's hope that the forces of radical reform in his time would yield to a more organic, and indeed slower moving, social progressivism. But the subtle differences between the two passages are what intrigue me most. Hester's reference to the "whole relation between man and woman," though frequently overlooked or attributed to Hawthorne's well-known proto-feminism, more or less symbolizes the notion of binary separatism that is central to my argument. And her emphasis on an as yet unrealized "*mutual* happiness" seems to envision the eventual reconciliation of this binary.

What's more, while Hawthorne's prediction for the end of slavery in *Life of Franklin Pierce* entails a fantasy-like vanishing of the institution at some point in the distant future by means beyond "human contrivances," with no view of how this atrocity might be prevented from reoccurring, Hester's vision of the future at the end of the novel is literally productive insofar as it envisions not the disappearance of something, but the *emergence* of an entirely "new truth." To the extent that we approximate "truth" to the Marxist notion of "raw material," or what I have referred to herein as the ideologeme of binary thought, it is reasonable to conceive of Hawthorne's vision of this "new truth" as the giving way of positional thinking to a dramatically

altered form of existence, one that might begin to redress the fundamental conditions of labor

exploitation and racial violence endemic to the American project since its inception.

In all of this, however, I hope not to have tempted the notion that Hawthorne was some

sort of closeted radical or proto-Marxist writing in code as he lie in wait for the next phase of

revolution. If I should endeavor to make any definitive conclusion about Hawthorne it is only

that he was, in some degree, as each of us is, unconvinced of his own beliefs. It is in this ability

to discern the uncertainty of a text, I believe, that we find the real value of Jameson's theory of

the political unconscious. For all of its complicated technical elements, its many rhetorical

flourishes, and its demands on our engagement with countless challenging psychological and

literary theories, the real reward of this method is the realization, in the final analysis of things,

that a text is so much like a mind: fragmented, insecure, at times overzealous, but always on

some level in search of that most *human* of desires. Let us call it the collective.

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