

THE APOCALYPTIC PAST

**Puritan Theology and Narrative Strategies in
Selected Texts of Hawthorne and Melville**

**Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University in partial
fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of**

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

ATANU BHATTACHARYA

**Centre of Linguistics and English
School of Languages
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi-110067**

1997



CENTRE OF LINGUISTICS & ENGLISH
SCHOOL OF LANGUAGES

जवाहरलाल नेहरू विश्वविद्यालय

JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY

NEW DELHI - 110067 INDIA

21 July, 1997

CERTIFICATE

Certified that the dissertation entitled "THE APOCALYPTIC PAST :
PURITAN THEOLOGY AND NARRATIVE STRATEGIES IN SELECTED
TEXTS OF HAWTHORNE AND MELVILLE" submitted by **Atanu
Bhattacharya** in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the
Degree of **Master of Philosophy** is his original work. This dissertation has not
been submitted for any other degree to this University or to any other
University to the best of our knowledge.

We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for
evaluation.

Meenakshi Mukherjee
(Prof. Meenakshi Mukherjee)
SUPERVISOR

Kapil Kapoor
(Prof. Kapil Kapoor)
CHAIRPERSON
CHAIRPERSON
GLE/SL/JNU

*For
Ma and Baba
Muna and Mitu
This was possible because you were there*

CONTENTS

	Page No.
Acknowledgements	i
Introduction	iii
CHAPTER ONE	
The Theological Discourse: Conflicts and Contradictions.	1
CHAPTER TWO	
The Great Awakening and its Consequences.	32
CHAPTER THREE	
The Secret	54
CHAPTER FOUR	
The Apocalyptic White Whale.	82
BIBLIOGRAPHY	105

Acknowledgements

The word 'acknowledgement', the Oxford English Dictionary informs us, means 'thing given or done in return for a service'. The plural form of the word would then mean 'things given or done in return for services'. There are however some services that better remain unacknowledged, for it is not in the power of the recipient to either *do* or *give* anything in return that could match the sheer magnitude of help and co-operation that he had received. These 'acknowledgments' thus are not in any way an attempt to 'return', but are merely small reciprocative gestures for the amount of services that had been offered.

Firstly, I would express my sincere gratitude to Prof. Meenakshi Mukherjee without whose help and critical suggestions this dissertation would never have been written. She carefully sifted through all the material, suggesting changes, throwing in clues that would help the dissertation to remain within its limits and often editing all those things that in my over-enthusiasm I had incorporated. If there are still some blemishes, the responsibility is mine.

I would also like to thank Prof. Kapil Kapoor and Prof. H.S.Gill for their valuable contributions during my formative years as student in Jawaharlal Nehru University. They had opened a new world of critical exegesis to me without which the present dissertation would not have been

possible. I am also deeply indebted to the staff and teachers of Centre of Linguistics and English who were a constant source of inspiration for me.

Most of the critical works used in this dissertation have been collected from the American Studies Research Centre and CIEFL, Hyderabad. I am grateful for the help extended to me by Mr. Srinivas of ASRC and Mr. Laxmanan of CIEFL. I must also express my thanks to Mr. Malik^{DIL} of the JNU library for his thorough help and co-operation.

My friends at J.N.U. – Gour, Shankar, Bhaduri, Rajneesh, Debu, Himu, Piyas, Sunita, Loveena, Rakesh, Trivedi, Hashmi, Feroze, Anurag, Rajiv, Vicky, Subodh, Mithilesh, Naresh, Uday—to name a few, have been a constant source of ideas, criticisms and encouragement. Without them, this dissertation could not have been written.

Also a special note of thanks for Mr. Rajender and Anil Kumar who diligently and uncomplainingly typed this dissertation.

And finally, as always, my thanks to Mitu.

New Delhi
21 July, 1997.

Atanu Bhattacharya

INTRODUCTION

This study in its present form has its origins in a course titled 'Nineteenth-century American Literature' that I did for my M.A. at the Jawaharlal Nehru University. The course was designed to elicit maximum response from the class in the forms of discussions and debates. One of the ideas thrown up during the course that deeply stirred my imagination was the use of language as a self-reflexive medium – a medium turning upon itself without positing a stable referent – in the text of Hawthorne and Melville. The 'meaning' of texts like *The Scarlet Letter* and *Moby-Dick* thus, in spite of heated arguments and sometimes long-drawn out debates could never be definitively fixed. This semantic instability is perhaps inherent in all textual interpretations. However, the amount of questions that these texts generated made me conscious of the fact that both the letter 'A' and the white whale encourage multivalent interpretations rather than a univocal reading. It was as if an admission on the part of the writers that the medium of language could not capture the 'reality' that they were trying to depict.

This resulted in my writing a paper on Poe's short stories where I tried to show that Poe's stories hover on the brink of signification, alluring the reader into the maze of the text, and then finally withdrawing when the narrator or protagonist encounters death. The stories do not negate a significant possibility, but the final revelation never comes. The scarlet letter and the white whale however kept haunting me.

One of the oft-repeated phrases that we came across during the discussions was 'the puritan heritage'. Both Hawthorne and Melville were trying, though differently, in their texts to subvert or come to terms with the elaborate framework that the puritans had created in their quest to interpret the visible sign. The signs were divided and classified as portents of 'good' or 'evil' creating a strict dichotomy that till the nineteenth-century held their position of power. Hawthorne and Melville were trying to fashion a highly symbolic genre that took into account the contradictions and paradoxes that was inherent in the framework itself. The question that kept on hounding me was: if conflicting ideas were at work in the Puritanic discourse then it could not be regarded as a homogeneous system with a semblance of harmony and union. What the romancers were doing in the nineteenth century was to question this very notion of homogeneity in their texts. Was the sense of apparent uniformity that the term 'puritan heritage' conveys, in itself a series of fragmentary discourses that shaped and moulded the ideology of the puritans for two centuries till it found its literary representation in the works of nineteenth-century writers? Thus, was it that 'puritanism' in America was not a monolithic structure at all, and beneath the surface consonance lay discordance, turmoil and paradoxes? And if this was true, then it meant that the system of visible signs that the romancers were questioning was from its inception fraught with contradictions, the writers pitting those contradictions against each other to create a myriad of meanings. And what was the relationship held between the theological framework and the polysemous texts that came to be written by

Hawthorne and Melville? These are the questions that this dissertation has tried to address.

Michel Foucault in his perceptive study of nineteenth century literature in *The Order of Things* (1970), writes:

..... [Nineteenth century literature] becomes detached from all the values that were able to keep it in general circulation during the classical age (taste, pleasure, naturalness, truth) and creates within its own space everything that will ensure a lucid denial of them (the scandalous, the ugly, the impossible); it merely becomes the manifestation of language that has no other law than that of affirming its own precipitous existence; it addresses itself to itself as a writing subjectivity.¹

The self-consuming nature of language often entices the reader to decode the labyrinth of Hawthorne's or Melville's text but never allows a revelation. The perceptible sign itself proliferates numerous significations and any attempt to read it becomes an exercise in intense subjectivity. Each reader/observer has his/her own meaning to offer. But this subjectivity only adds to the complexity of the text rather than solves it, for the text becomes the ground for all sorts of conflicting meanings which the reader tries his/her best to systematize. It is this self-annihilating subjectivity coupled with the problems of linguistic communicability that become the preoccupations of Hawthorne and Melville.

Subjective interpretation was perhaps the greatest threat that the Puritans faced when they came to America in 1640. They had come to America with the distinctive vision of a "city upon a hill" and to transform this vision into reality, they could and would take extreme measures.

America to them was what Israel was to the Jews. From its very inception, the Bible Commonwealth established by the Puritans was accorded the status of a biblical myth – the founding of New Jerusalem amid the wilderness. Attempts were made to make the myth conform to reality, only after the former had been deeply instilled in the minds of the inhabitants. In other words, the existing reality became readable and transcribable so that it could cohere with the mythical framework that the Puritans had brought along with them. In a sense, the meaning of America was imposed on it. For this framework to function successfully, the Puritans recurrently reverted to the theme of communitarian life, for the basis of a community depended on coherence and not discordance. And the Puritan Fathers knew during their experience in England that subjective interpretation of the Bible could lead to disharmony and heterogeneity.

But even before the Puritans, the Protestant Reformation was bogged by the same problem: how to curb sectarianism that threatened the edifice of a community life? What the Reformation did, at least at the theoretical level, was to create a space for the individual who till then was under the sole governance of the Pope. The Bible could now be read and interpreted by the individual without the intervention of the Pope. In other words, a subjective interpretation of the Bible was possible. The reformers devised various methods to restrain this subjectivity and were mostly successful in doing so for a certain period of time. But at the margins lurked this solipsism as vindicated by Anabaptism in Germany (1521), and Mennonism (C.1580) and

Arminianism (C.1600) in England.² The Reformation was able to shake off the yoke of Roman Catholicism, but it faced new threats in the form of these sects.

The Puritans or Congregationalists in England faced the same problems. They knew that they were dissenters from the Church of England and had to resort to many manipulative strategies for their survival, thus leaving open the possibility for other sects and dissenters to appropriate and manoeuvre them accordingly. The tenets of John Calvin that formed the basis for Congregationalism had to be defended against incipient sectarianism. America thus became the land of promise where the perfect community could be brought into existence. And it is with this ideal vision that the Puritans came to America.

I have often used the word 'framework' to denote the puritanic tenets that they brought to the new land. The 'framework', it must however be understood, was not a unitary category having a fixed structure through the centuries. The framework did change, and we can actually point to a succession of frameworks rather than one. With the passage of time the Puritans had to modify the framework to cope with growing sectarianism, materialism and even supernaturalism as evinced in the Salem Witch Trials of 1692. All these frameworks are worth studying separately. But in this study I have retained the word, for I believe that all these frameworks were founded on the notion of the visible sign: a sign once present could be read

and interpreted. The decipherability of a sign, natural or linguistic, was never in question.

For my purposes here then, I have tried to understand this framework as it was slowly moulded and then impressed upon the new land. During my research, three images aroused my interest because of their constant recurrence in the Puritanic writings of seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth century. They were the image of the past, the image of death and the image of revelation. The Puritans were trying to bring something new into this world and for this purpose they had to resort to the glories of the past. John Calvin's theocracy at Geneva thus, became the perfect model for the Puritans in America. This model itself was immured in the past and the Puritans strove to bring into existence the perfect commonwealth on the basis of this model. The model however, promised a majestic future. When the model failed to live up to its expectations, the image of the 'past' was recalled to counter the frustrating present. Thus Cotton Mather in 1702 lamented about the glories of the past because by that time the commonwealth was slowly crumbling. The rhetoric of revelation, or what I have called in the course of this study the rhetoric of apocalypse, however was not once rescinded. The future kept on holding a great promise for on the Day of Revelation all contradictions would be solved, all frustrations would come to an end. The Puritan sermon thus, started with the recounting of the glories of the past, progressing with the image of death that would compel all souls to stand before the Judgement Seat, and ending with the

apocalyptic vision when all mysteries and secrets will be unshrouded. The gloom of the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination that ended with death, thus could be dispelled by the assurance of the final revelation. In my study of Hawthorne and Melville I have tried to analyse these three central puritanic images as they were employed to enhance the semantic density of the texts.

The ideological configuration of any age is not only determined by the preceding age but also by contemporary social, political and economic contexts. In this dissertation, therefore, I have not restricted myself to the study of Puritanism as it existed in the seventeenth-century, but have tried to understand it as a series of discourses that created ruptures in the existing framework and modified it in some way. The period covered in the first two chapters range from late Middle Ages (12th A.D.) to the Second Great Awakening (1795 through the 1840s). My attempt has been to see how these ruptures finally opened vistas for the nineteenth-century writers, giving them ample scope to create a highly resonant, symbolic genre. For this purpose, the first chapter is completely devoted to the study of theological issues and how they shaped the socio-political domain, paving the way for later reform movements. The second chapter is an attempt to analyse The Great Awakening and the First Amendment, which in themselves threw open possibilities for Hawthorne and Melville to explore. The third and fourth chapters are textual analyses on the basis of the three images that I have referred to previously.

Finally, a word about the 'American Renaissance'.³ The term used by F.O. Matthiessen to denote the complex and varied writings that came into existence in nineteenth century America presupposes the fact that the undercurrents of this literary efflorescence were present in their nascent forms in the centuries preceding the one to which the term was applied (vis-a-vis, the European Renaissance). In other words, the American Renaissance, like the European Renaissance, stood for certain values and ideals and there were certain overriding principles that could be detected in this movement being already carried over from the past. Also implicit is the assumption that certain social, cultural, economic and literary factors made it possible for Hawthorne to create his 'labyrinthine' texts, for Melville to visit the 'whited sepulchers', for Emerson to utter the 'Everlasting Yea', or for Whitman to associate democratic humanism with American ethos. As a natural consequence, we encounter a group of critics who make it their sole purpose to delve into the depths of the letter A or the white whale, trying to fathom the implicit as well as the explicit relationships between the Puritan past and the nineteenth-century texts thereby trying to vindicate that the contradictions in their germinal forms were everpresent in Puritanism.⁴ The other group of critics take the second assumption of the term 'American Renaissance' as their overriding premise emphasizing the cultural and sociological aspects of the text, scrutinizing the text as a mirror of contemporary society and as a product of the socio-economic contours that delineate both the society as well as its literary output.⁵ These group of critics

completely negate the possibility of the past playing any part in the composition of the texts. Both the approaches throw a good deal of light on the subject under study but as Hawthorne would say, it leaves a good deal of shadows. My approach has been to fuse these two viewpoints so that the past as well as the present are seen as complementary and not conflicting categories. A text is not only rooted in the present but also is governed by what happened in the past. And in order to understand the nineteenth-century writers it is necessary to take into account both the 'puritanic heritage' and the ideological configurations of the present.

Notes :

- ¹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, (London, Tavistock and New York: 1970), p.300
- ² The Anabaptists believed that baptism should be withheld until it could be accompanied with a confession of faith. They became a highly spiritualized religion of 'inner light', and also a focus for general peasant discontent. They were persecuted by both Catholics and Protestants, but offshoots persisted in many countries (e.g., Baptists in America were the intellectual descendants of Anabaptists). The Arminians were followers of Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609), Dutch Protestant theologian who rejected the Calvinistic doctrines of predestination, election and grace. He believed that man could influence God's justice. The Mennonites developed out of the Anabaptist movement and refused military service,

public office and oath-taking, seeking holiness by discipline [after Menno Simmons (C.1496–1561), Dutch religious reformer].

- ³ F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*, (New York: 1941).
- ⁴ In this group of critics, I would include David Barrymore Howard, *Tradition and Tolerance in Nineteenth-century Fiction*, (London: 1966); William Richard Poirier, *A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature*, (New York: 1966); Lyle Glazier, *Decadence and Rebirth*, (Ankara: 1971); Frederick Campbell Crews, *The Sins of the Fathers: Hawthorne's Psychological Themes*, (New York; 1966); Leonard J. Fick, *The Light Beyond: A Study of Hawthorne's Theology*, (Westminister: 1955); Richard Harter Fogle, *Hawthorne's Fiction: The Light and the Dark*, (Norman:1964); John J. Frederick, *The Darkened Sky: 19thc. American Novelists and Religion*, (Notre Dame:1969); J.Golden Taylor, *Hawthorne's Ambivalence Towards Puritanism*, (Utah: 1965); James K. Folsom, *Man's Accidents and God's Purposes: Multiplicity in Hawthorne's Fiction*, (New Haven: 1963); Lawrence Roger Thompson, *Melville's Quarrel with God*, (Princeton :1952). These are representative of the kind of critics I am trying to point out. This is in no way an exhaustive list.
- ⁵ This would include Harold J.Kaplan, *Democratic Humanism and American Literature*, (Chicago: 1972); Harry Levin, *The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville*, (New York:1960); Charles Berryman, *From Wilderness to Waste to Wasteland : The Trial of the Puritan God in American Imagination*, (New York : 1979); Robert H. Fossum, *Hawthorne's Inviolable Circle : The Problem of Time*, (Deland : 1972); Paul Brodtkorb, *Ishmael's White World : A Phenomenological Reading of Moby-Dick*, (New Haven : 1965); John Fentress Gardner, *Melville's Vision of America*, (New York : 1977); T. Walter Herbert, *Moby-Dick and*

Calvinism : A World Dismantled, (New Brunswick, N.J. : 1977); James Duban, *Melville's Major Fiction : Politics, Theology and Imagination*, (Illinois : 1983); Carolyn L. Karcher, *Shadow Over the Promised Land : Slavery, Race and Violence in Melville's America*, (Baton Rouge : 1980); A.N. Kaul, *The American Vision : Actual and Ideal Society in Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, (New Haven : 1963); David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance : The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*, (New York : 1988).

CHAPTER I

THE THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE : CONFLICTS AND CONTRADICTIONS

“...and the daughter destroyed the mother”

Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*

The Puritans arrived in America in 1640 with the vision of establishing a Church-State that John Calvin had already found in Geneva (C. 1537). The doctrines and tenets that they brought along with them to the New Land was primarily based on the interpretation of the Bible that Calvin provided in his ‘Institutes of the Christian Religion’ (1536). The vision had already been realised at Geneva and it is this model of the Presbyterian form of government that acted as the guiding principle for the Puritans in America. The New Land was promising as well as threatening. It was in the midst of this “wilderness” that the Puritans had to fashion out a Commonwealth which they thought would function successfully and coherently, making people aware of the ways of God. For this purpose, the Puritans had to cope with ecclesiastical as well as civil matters, and had to create a framework that would include both. However, a study of Puritanism in America cannot be complete without referring to the Protestant Reformation that opened vistas that were till then controlled by the Roman Catholic Church. This chapter is an attempt to analyse the theological discourses that were instrumental in shaping the religious and community

life in the first hundred years of colonial America. There were various factors that influenced and finally moulded the ecclesiastical and civil organisation of the Puritans, which in turn played a formative role in the works of nineteenth-century writers like Hawthorne and Melville. I have tried to investigate in this chapter, this organisation, its principles, contradictions and paradoxes, and how they finally led to compromises that had far reaching consequences.

For my purposes here, I would begin with Alexis de Tocqueville's (1805–59) characterisation of democracy in his *Democracy in America* (1835).

“Aristocracy”, Tocqueville observes “had made a chain of all the members of the community, from the peasant to the king; democracy severs that chain and breaks every link of it.”¹ Tocqueville goes on to say in a chapter entitled “Why the Americans Show More Aptitude and Taste for General Ideas Than Their Forefathers, The English,” that democratic citizens generalize on the basis of equality and the ideal similarities of their fellow men,

and thus it is that the craving to discover general laws in everything, to include a great number of objects under the same formulas and to explain a mass of facts by a single cause becomes an ardent and sometimes an undiscerning passion in the human mind.²

A few chapters later, explaining “Why the Americans Are More Addicted to Practical than to Theoretical Science”, he notes that

hardly anyone in the United States devotes himself to the essentially theoretical and abstract portion of human knowledge.³

The contradiction was not in Tocqueville but in the subject he was contemplating and trying to record as objectively as possible. In fact, he was being prophetic : he was foreshadowing a literary style which constantly and interchangeably traversed between the universal and the particular, between the empirical world of facts and a metaphysical, universal cosmos. The meticulous descriptions of life lived in Walden Pond, the informative accounts of the extraction of oil from the blubber of whales, the life-like representation of “Custom-House” and “Main Street” were still things of the future, but the free play of these ‘objective’ signs were already present in Tocqueville’s time. But before we proceed further with this discussion, we must take into account the factors that led to this contradiction and allowed the nineteenth century writers to assimilate these diverse ideas, to fuse them consistently in order to create a kind of stylistic implosion resulting in extraordinary compaction of image, making the text a maze of conflictual meanings.

I would like to argue that one of the major factors that resulted in this contradiction was the relation between the Church and the State – matters *ecclesiastical* and matters *temporal* – the bone of contention even in the Roman Catholic Church. Before the fall of the Roman Empire (476 A.D.), the domains seemed to have been divided, the Church concerned with spiritual matters and the Emperor with temporal. It is, however, not to be assumed that this implied a separation of Church and State but rather an inseparability which bordered on parallelism but not identity : the Church

and State were inseparable in God's immutable order of things, each having its own province and not intersecting, though the final loyalty of both was to God. Pope was the head of the Church and the Emperor the head of the state and together they formed the Christendom. The fusion was complete by the time of Hildebrand, Pope Gregory VII (1021–85) when he decreed that secular princes do not have power for the installation of prelates. He proclaimed a "ban on lay investiture, hereby forbidding ecclesiastical and spiritual control",⁴ assuming a hegemonic control over the State by virtue of being the vicegerent of God on earth. How developed was this power can be observed from the incident of King John, King of England (1199–1216) who was made to stand barefoot in snow at Canossa (1213) for three days when he went to ask forgiveness for what the Pope termed 'errant spiritual behaviour'. The distinction is important, for the Pope still did not claim for himself temporal power but could punish only on the basis of matters ecclesiastical. The theoretical distinction between Church and State powers remained throughout the Middle Ages but when put to practice it seemed to be either non-functional or defunct.⁵ The full exposition and perhaps the most stout defence of this Church–State relationship can be found in the works of Thomas Aquinas (1225–74). *Summa Theologica* (1265–73) is the final apotheosis of medieval thought. The medieval King in his coronation oath swore to defend the church, to repress injustice, and to enforce justice. By that oath the king entered, so to speak, into a contract with the people to rule with certain ends in view and in accordance with specific principles. If

the King abandons those ends and principles, says St. Thomas, the people are not bound by the contract. He goes so far as to say that it is the will of the people operating through the King that makes a law, not a far cry from the American Declaration of Independence. It is however interesting to note, how a principle of legitimacy was increasingly used in order to justify, and thus fortify the medieval church a principle that gained immense importance in the Protestant Reformation (16th C.). The King is the head of the empire and owes his allegiance to God and rules according to God's tenets as laid down in the scriptures. The Pope is the spiritual head and being in direct communication with God is his agent, for on the Day of Judgement it is he who is answerable to God as his lieutenant even for the mightiest of Emperors. As a natural corollary, the Kings owe their allegiance to the Pope who is the legitimate head of both matters, temporal and spiritual. As for the masses, though St. Thomas emphasizes the "will" of the people, even "wills" have hierarchical structure like the Church and whether the will is in accordance with God's commandments is a matter that has to be settled by the ultimate authority on this earth, the Pope. False or corrupted will is to be rightly condemned as blasphemy or heresy.

This principle of legitimacy was inextricably linked with the notion of sovereignty. God is the sovereign of the universe, the Pope his vicegerent, the King loyal to both : this was the axiom on which nationalities functioned, the balance tilting to one side if the King was powerful giving rise to the State-Church, as in England, and to the other, bringing forth the

Church-State as in Geneva.⁶ Both these principles of legitimacy and sovereignty are central for this study, for Puritanism in England as well as in New England arose out of the conflicts and tussles between these two principles, giving rise to contradictions which either had to be assimilated or expelled and which finally provided the opportunity to writers in nineteenth century America to indulge in a free-play of signs, pitting one against the other.

A note of caution about 'perspective' before we deal with the titanic events of the Protestant Reformation. In today's perspective it appears that the Reformation looked towards the future. In the perspective of its own day, the Reformation looked squarely towards the past. The Reformation was not born of a determination to bring something new into the world. Its purpose was to bring back something very old – back to one book, the Holy Writ; back to one law, the law of God; back to one goal, the life eternal. A nostalgia for the past, a recreation of the lost glory was the dominant attitude of all Protestant reformers. The Puritans who followed the tenets of Calvin were infused with the same zeal to capture and re-create the glories of the past, and thus, the myth of America as the New Jerusalem, "the city upon the hill", was in itself a projection of the Calvinistic ideal onto the new land. This "past" itself was elusive and baffling defying a systematization, or image that was to find its full blossoming in the works of Hawthorne as will be shown in the third chapter. Another point that has to be stressed is the Protestant conception of God. Roman Catholicism tended to think of

God as the eternal perfection of goodness, beauty and truth to the vision of which the church led its children. "The last end for man", Thomas Aquinas had said, "is the contemplation of truth, and to this end all other human activities seem to be directed."⁷ The divine attribute which impressed the Protestant minds was not so much God's changeless perfection as His forceful reality or power; it is God who forgives and saves, not man; it is God who reveals the truth and the life, not human reason; God is King, and man is utterly dependent on Him; He demands present obedience of men; He saves them by pure grace without any merit or assistance upon their part; fear of Him is the beginning of wisdom; He is the Alpha as well as the Omega. The note of immediacy in the divine initiative is noteworthy. "The Kingdom of God is at hand" and "Thine is the kingdom"⁸ were the two principles from which Protestantism derived its ruggedness and power.

One of the most momentous beliefs that both Martin Luther (1483–1546) and John Calvin (1509–64) cherished is that the Scriptures cannot be misinterpreted. Calvinistic theology started with the axiom : the Bible is the self-evident word of God, its authority is internal; it does not depend on the interpretation of any church, and requires no defence. There is but one possible interpretation of the word of God, and it is the only interpretation possible for an honest man of sound intelligence to reach. Where the Word is truly preached and the Sacraments properly administered, there is the Church. Of course, appended to this was the notion of the visible and invisible church. The invisible church is self-existent and is carved by God

and admits people who are saved by grace, thus having no hierarchies. The visible church, however, is different for it has to introduce hierarchies for its functioning as this church with the help of the Elect has to discriminate between the true will and false will of persons. As a natural consequence, the Church-State founded at Geneva by Calvin was a theocracy with supreme authority lying with the Church. However, this should not be confused with the Catholic Church, for the latter has forgotten the Word, while the former is solely dependent on the Holy Writ. From its very inception, the Protestant Reformation was dependent on a linguistic displacement replacing the ritualistic structure of Rome with the written word; a displacement of the perfect and ideal God with a jealous, angry and sometimes benevolent God. In this implicit principle of linguistic sovereignty lay the great fork of the road – on one side was Calvinism and theocracy and on the other, democracy and religious tolerance.

The dilemma of constructive Protestantism lay in the fact that though the absolutism of one relative power was questioned, it would not stop other relative powers and institutions to assume absolute sovereignty. The dilemma was in the fact that the new freedom was not self-organizing but threatened anarchy on all sides. Luther and Calvin had liberated their church from the iron-grip of Roman Catholicism, but once this liberty was achieved there were no governing principles by which the church could be legitimized. The new church had to cope with this and the reformers came up with solutions that opened possibilities that were not only diverse and

multifarious but conflictual and self-contradictory. The new church had no will to power and in view of its positive principle could have none because supreme power belonged only to God and evil resulted from every human arrogation of his dominion; it had no definite idea of the end towards which it was travelling and could have none, since the future lay with the free God; and it could not be ruthless since it had the inhibiting commandment of the gospel before it. How could the new church fashion an ideal commonwealth free from the polluting influence of Roman Catholicism?

One way out was the Calvinistic notion of visible and invisible church discussed above. The implications of this division for church-state relationships were manifold. As William H. Marnell notes :

The state was the product of the will of God and the need of man. The Prince is God's lieutenant on earth, and the duty to honor and obey him is absolute.... If obedience to the Prince means disobedience to the law of God, the higher law prevails and disobedience to Prince becomes a moral imperative. But this means passive disobedience only and in no sense countenances rebellion.⁹

The very concept of obedience to the Prince stemmed from the belief that the visible church had to have hierarchies. The second argument that was used to fortify the new church can be found in Calvin's works, and was related to the freedom of human will. Protestantism as a dynamic religion did have an anarchic potential which was kept on the peripheries for a long time by the reformers, condemning it either as blasphemy or heresy, but could not completely annihilate it.

By denying the Pope his position of power and by bringing man in direct contact with the Scriptures and with God, the Reformers were able to separate themselves from the Papacy, but were hard put to legitimize their own Church. It brought in a subjectivity into play – for the conscience and will of a person could interpret the scriptures as he liked, probably leading to a complete mayhem with no central authority to control the superabundance of linguistic interpretations. It was not easy to disrupt the centre, but it was more difficult to control the peripheries. One solution was to bring the Church under the qualified governance of the Prince, a strategy used in England to buttress the claims of Henry VIII (1491–1547) to the throne; the second was to qualify the human will.

God made the world, and its end and purpose is the greater glory of God. God predestined men to heaven and hell; the saved glorify God's mercy, the damned glorify God's justice. But the very notion of predestination seemed to be extremely fatalistic, which Calvin tried to avoid by the "Doctrine of Efficacious grace", the mark of "God's Absolute and Free Mercy by which the Elect are saved."¹⁰ Others are not saved because they have the wills of fallen beings. Calvin may not have denied the freedom of the human will, but the logic of Calvin's theology did. The very concept of efficacious grace was based on the hierarchy of the visible church where some have a greater proximity to God and thus who can lead the flock of ignorants from doom to salvation. The Elect had experienced conversion, being the recipient of God's mercy and grace and thus, had the natural right

as a saved person to salvage the unsaved souls. In fact, inherent in this presupposition is the great contradiction of church and state, of temporal and the spiritual, of domains that were always overlapping but which the Reformers in their zeal wanted to separate. It gave rise to debates, dissensions, separatism and also a cohesion that found its fullest expression at Masachussets Bay Colony.

The third solution, a logical extension of the Calvinistic doctrine, gaining a notorious popularity among the New England Puritans, was the qualification of human liberty. John Winthrop (1588–1649) in his Election Sermon of 1642 talks of two kinds of liberty – the liberty of brute animals, and “the other kind of liberty I call civil or federal”. While the liberty of brutes is incompatible with authority, the civil or federal (or moral) liberty is a prerogative for any communitarian life, “in reference to the covenant between God and man, in the moral law, and the political covenants and constitutions, amongst men themselves”. Such liberty is the proper end of authority and society cannot exist without it:

This liberty is maintained and exercised in a way of subjection to authority; it is of the same kind of liberty wherewith Christ has made us free.... If you stand for your natural corrupt liberties, and do what is good in your own eyes, you will not endure the least weight of authority, but will murmur and oppose, and be always striving to shake off that yoke; but if you will be satisfied to enjoy such civil and lawful liberties, such as Christ allows you, then will you quietly and cheerfully submit into that authority which is set over you, in all the administrations of it, for your good.¹¹

John Winthrop’s statement aboard the *Arabella* in 1640 is the classic example of Puritanic intentions and the kind of church, state and society that

they wanted to create in the new land:

...we must be knit together in this work as one man. We must entertain each other in brotherly affection; we must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others' necessities; we must uphold a familiar commerce together in all weakness, gentleness, patience and liberality. We must delight in each other, make others' conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together; always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body.¹²

America was the land of promise where the persecuted Puritans could finally bring into reality the kind of Church they could not in England. In fact, early Puritanic literature is full of references to the new land as "the new Jerusalem", "the modern Canaan", the "new Israel", thereby giving rise to a religious myth of an errand into the wilderness like the persecuted Jews with whom the Puritans instinctively identified themselves. That they were bringing something new into this world was constantly emphasized. Along with this they were aware that they were being watched with curiosity by the world because of the religious experiment that they were conducting. This awareness and the resultant anxiety gave rise to the notion of the "city upon a hill" open to the gaze of all and sundry.¹³ And for this purpose uniformity and coherence in the religious life was absolutely necessary, because dissension meant a break up of the mission that would create the cohesiveness. Religious toleration was not uppermost in the Puritan mind as toleration would indicate an acceding to the disruptive powers of the religious system that they were bent on bringing forth. The dictum on toleration was precise and clear. The magistrates were given full powers to

deal with dissension as the old belief of the Prince defending the Church was extended to the domain of the law-enforcers. As the Cambridge platform put it in 1648, to suppress all

Idolatry, Blasphemy, Heresy, venting corrupt and pernicious opinions, that destroy the foundation, open contempt of the word preached, prophanation of the Lord's day, disturbing the peaceable administration and exercise of the worship and holy things of God.¹⁴

It further went on to say :

If any church one or more shall grow schismaticall, rending itself from the communion of other churches, or shall walk incorrigibly or obstinately in any corrupt way of their own, contrary to the rule of the word; in such case the magistrate is to put forth his coercive power as the matter shall require.¹⁵

When in 1681, the Baptists first established their church at Charlestown, Massachussets, they appealed to the Elect for religious toleration. Samuel Willard, Minister of the Third Church in Boston, cleared their misunderstandings about the motives of the Puritans in coming to the New World :

I perceive they are mistaken in the design of our first Planters, whose business was not Toleration; but were professed enemies of it, and could leave the World professing they died no Libertines. Their business was to settle, and (as much as in them lay) secure Religion to Posterity, according to that way which they believed was of God.¹⁶

The sacred space created by the Puritans could offer no compromise to dissent. The Puritans subconsciously were aware of the fact that they themselves were Dissenters of the Church of England and as such knew that too much of coercion by the state was bound to result in rebellion. They were also cognizant of the fact that unbridled dissension can lead to a

complete moral anarchy. The American experiment was meant to create a moral centre which could be put up as an example for the world to see, an absolute theocratic state that was harmonious in all its relations. They however did admit, that dissension could not be kept at bay for long. Tolerance was however connived at by a division in the Bible, a step that had consequences of such magnitude that had the Puritans lived to see its aftereffects they would have damned all to the fire of Gehenna.

As dissenters in England, the Puritans had to resort to a number of strategies and manipulative devices, both for their own survival as well as for gaining some foothold in the predominantly Anglican clergy system. Both Henry VIII and Elizabeth I (1533–1603) had rejected the Papacy, but the implications of this break were not fully worked out by any of them. In fact, both of them retained most of the Catholic practices because they were more interested in strengthening the State than in carrying out a pietistic reform in the Church. It is not true that they were not aware of dissent at the margins, as the Marprelate tracts of 1584 evince, but both were shrewd enough to keep them at bay. The day of reckoning, however, could not be averted and as soon as James I came to the throne in 1603, the Puritans pressed for more reforms. In fact, the Puritans were already using strategies like lectureships to gain church and state control. The lectureship was the epitome of the Puritanic will to reform and to bring about a complete change in the Romish church. It gave the Puritans ample scope to manoeuvre, for the lecturers were recruited and paid by the local parish people and once the

Puritans could install a popular preacher from their own brethren, they could have complete control over the Parish. Ecclesiastical and state control lay only a step away from parish and lay control.¹⁷ One of the most momentous strategies that the Puritans employed was to make a distinction between the “covenant of grace” and “covenant of law” for the Book contained both the Gospels and the Epistles and the Puritans had to fuse them in a coherent whole in order to create the Bible Commonwealth. The “covenant of grace” was a religion based on the individual’s direct intuition of God’s grace and love and was in opposition to the “covenant of works”, a religion based on obedience to the laws of church and state. This dyadic structure was not anything original. The germs of it were present in Calvin’s theology itself. In it lay the primal distinction between the structure of the church and the structure of the state. But this was also a flexible tool in the hands of the Puritans to segregate and further isolate the dissenters. Roger Williams was banished from Massachusetts in the winter of 1635–36 because he “broached and divulged divers new and dangerous opinions”¹⁸ – among others, the doctrine of the two tables, i.e., that it was the business of the civil magistrate to enforce the injunctions of the second table of the Decalogue which concerned man’s dealings with his fellow men, but that the punishment of offences against the first table, governing one’s relations with God, was not within the proper sphere of the state :

All lawful Magistrates in the world, both before the coming of Christ Jesus, and since, (excepting those unparalleled typical Magistrates of the Church of Israel) are but Derivatives and Agents immediately derived and employed as eyes and hands, serving for the good of the whole. Hence they have and can have no more Power than

fundamentally lies in the Bodies or fountains themselves, which Power, Might or Authority, is not Religious, Christian etc. but natural, humane and civil.¹⁹

The concept of schism of the Church and the state was abhorrent to the early Puritans, for the very foundation of the Bible Commonwealth was based on harmony and uniformity between the Magistrates and the Elect. The “covenant of works” and the “covenant of grace” had to be fused in order to create a theocratic state. In an era of pietistic ferment, the Puritans took a practical view : “while the liquor is boiling it must needs have a scumming”.²⁰ The banishment of Roger Williams, Anne Hutchinson, Robert Childe, and the Quakers are the best known incidents of scumming – the Puritans’ attempt to maintain at least an outward conformity and uniformity in faith and practice.

The division of the Bible into “matters fundamental” and “matters indifferent” was another means to evade and circumvent the power and control of the Church of England. The Puritans were aware that this division meant an invitation to dissent and sectarianism. The distinction between the two was alarmingly fluid for the domains could overlap and often did to suit the exigency of the situation. The Puritans used it to their advantage whenever charges of separatism and dissension were levelled against them by the Anglican clergy. For they argued that they were differing merely on “matters indifferent” which should be tolerated, and thus were entitled to receive communion and sacraments. The Baptists argued on the same line when they separated from the Congregational Church of Boston on the issue

of infant Baptism (1681).²¹ In the first thirty years, the Puritans managed to control these subversive tendencies either by banishing the dissenters or by publicly admonishing or punishing them. A law promulgated in 1646 stated :

...(anyone who) shall contemptuously behave himself toward ye word preached or ye messengers thereof...either by interrupting him in his preaching or by charging him falsely with error...shall for the first scandall be convented and reprov'd openly by ye magistrates...and for the second offense pay a fine of five pounds, stand two howres openly upon a block for foote high on a lecture day with a paper fixed on his breast with this : A WANTON GOSPELLER, written in capitall letters.²²

The scarlet letter was two centuries away.

The zeal with which the Puritans held on to their beliefs and practices in spite of growing threats of sectarianism and dissension is an epic worth studying. In fact, by the end of the seventeenth century, the Boston Puritans were an isolated island surrounded by dissenting sects – the Baptists, Quakers, Antinomians, Brownists, Mennonites, Universalists, Shakers, Free Will Baptists, Friends, Methodists, Christ-ians and so on. The subversive tendencies of the Protestant Reformation had come full circle in America – the new Jerusalem. William Bradford had already anticipated this as early as 1649, for the uniformity and coherence of a monolithic structure that the Puritans strived for came in direct conflict with the doctrine of personal revelation :

For this community (so far as it was) was found to breed much confusion and discontent and retard much employment that would have been to their benefit and comfort. For the young men, that were most able and fit for labour and service, did repine that they should spend their time and strength to work for other men's wives and children without any recompense. The strong, or man of parts, had no more in division of victuals and clothes than he that was weak and

not able to do a quarter the others could; this was thought injustice. The aged and graver men to be ranked and equalized in labours and victuals, clothes etc. with the meaner and younger sort, thought it some indignity and disrespect into them.²³

The ideal community, free from a corrupt society was already crumbling within a few decades of the Puritan's arrival in America – the vision of the “city upon a hill” was slowly fading away in the face of the hard realities. The greatest threat that the Puritans faced was the increase in material wealth and opportunity in New England, enabling the settlers to be less dependent upon providence, a natural corollary of the tendencies implicit in a Religious Plantation, and the confounding of commerce and religion. Things appeared so threatening by 1679 that a Synod was convened to make “full inquiry.... into the Causes and State of God's controversy with us...the Lord having written his displeasure in dismal characters against us.”²⁴ Every sign was directed towards the interpretation of God's wrath and anger; a steady rise in itinerant preachers preaching the doom of mankind gave a new dimension to New England, for these modern Jeremiahs preached in a more fiery and intense language than the Puritan preachers, the consequences of which are to be discussed later in this study. By 1707, a Puritan as powerful as Increase Mather was removed from the Presidency of Harvard by the merchants' guild and replaced by a candidate of their own choice.²⁵ The gradual swing in mood from an intense religious piety to a more material earthly pragmatism was largely due to an increase in economic prosperity as well as a steady decline in the pietistic fervour of the second and the third generation, thus, reducing church membership. The sovereign light of the

Puritan God was fading among the children of New England : “And thus was this poor church left, like an ancient mother grown old and forsaken of her children...she that had made many rich became herself poor.”²⁶ Cotton Mather came to the same conclusion a century and a half later : “...religion brought forth prosperity, and the daughter destroyed the mother.”²⁷

The growing materialism of New England also encouraged a drift toward the acceptance of the Arminian philosophy, which questioned Calvin’s doctrine of predestination and maintained instead that man could influence his own future. The Puritan leaders of New England decried the Arminian point of view as heresy because it detracted from the absolute sovereignty of God. But with the gradual economic development of the Puritan settlements the acceptance of the Arminian philosophy became inevitable. The early Puritans who shared in the economic growth of Bay Colony were anxious to interpret their good fortune as a tangible sign of God’s favour. As long as the work done by man was not seen as an attempt to influence God, the doctrine of predestination remained unchallenged. But once the connection was made between material wealth and divine favour, it became rather common to reverse the logic of cause and effect.

The Puritan tenets of the guilt of the original sin, the rule of predestined election, the doctrine of limited atonement – all negative points in Calvin’s theology – were balanced against the positive confession of irresistible grace. Thus while God was considered to be both angry and jealous he was benevolent as well. He extended his grace even to the lowest

sinner. But as soon as it was felt that material prosperity was a sign of God's unlimited mercy, the first three tenets were bound to become null and void : Jehovah was transformed into Mammon. The declining piety in New England forced the Puritans to come to some kind of compromise, for in the second generation many children of the original members simply could not attest to a personal experience of divine grace, a prerequisite for church membership, and therefore had to remain in "external covenant" – baptized but not admitted to full communion. At the full Synod convened in 1662 to resolve this problem, the famous Half-Way Covenant was adopted. Children could now be baptized if their grandparents had received that sacrament, though their parents were unregenerate and did not experience conversion. But full communion was still reserved for those prepared to confess the experience of regeneration.²⁸ At the heart of the Half-Way Covenant, lies the dilemma of Protestantism in general, and Puritanism in particular. The covenant had both religious as well as secular dimensions. In the next generation of settlers the religious mood darkened. Increase Mather lived long enough to lose faith in the divine mission of New England and began to preach instead the inscrutable mystery of God's purpose – the covenant had been hopelessly broken. The time was ripe for a Benjamin Franklin (1706–90) to appear and to give voice to these subversive feelings; time was also ripe for a Cotton Mather (1663–1728) to write his most powerful swan-song.

The years following the adoption of the Half-Way Covenant witnessed a steady retreat from the exacting creed of Massachusetts Bay's

first generation. As the number of those who experienced grace became an ever diminishing minority in the congregations, dissatisfaction with the 1662 settlement spread throughout the colony. Accordingly in 1667, Reverend Solomon Stoddard, Minister of Northampton, took the decisive step of extending communion to all but the openly scandalous. Stoddard himself knew that without the operation of the Holy Spirit regeneration was impossible. He did not commit the mistake which Increase Mather made, accusing the rising generation of imagining that "saving Grace and Morality are the same". But open communion meant that so far as society and the churches were concerned, the distinction had lost its significance. The endeavour to bring the visible and the invisible churches into some degree of conformity was being abandoned, for ministers who endorsed Stoddardism presumed to judge, as Perry Miller puts it, "only of appearances, not of realities."²⁹ It was not only the sense of grace which was fading from New England; evidently the sense of evil was fading as well. By 1690 the churches were being invited to draw up lists of iniquities and "to pass their votes, that they count such things to be very offensive evils."³⁰ The ministers were thus reduced to entreating their flocks to vote themselves sinners, and their defensive posture testified to fears of incipient Armimanism. It was against this background of declining faith in the immanence of the invisible world, that the witchcraft hysteria burst upon New England in 1692.

DISS
O, III, 3, MoA: 2 (R, 26)
N7

TH-6710

The fervent interest aroused by the witchcraft confessions now assume a special importance. The trials were an attempt by the established clergy to reinstate the doctrine that the world is to be understood on the basis of the perceivable signs that God furnishes. The incident thus, became symbolically pregnant as it could be forwarded as 'proof' of Satan's evil designs and God's mercy. In what struck unsympathetic observers as one of the darker ironies of the whole affair, the confessions benefited the witches as well, since only those who admitted complicity with Satan were spared execution. In other words, if they confessed they were saved. In this respect, the sentences meted out at Salem marked a departure from New England precedent. There had been a flurry of prosecutions between 1647 and 1662, and in almost every case confession had been followed by execution. Only at Salem defendants who pleaded innocence were hanged, while those who acknowledged dealings with supernatural beings escaped with their lives. In the earlier period, the apostasy from Orthodox Calvinism was not so threatening. Mather's role in the witch-hunting episode had drawn much flak from his detractors but seen in the light of his Puritanic heritage it is not surprising that a person of his zeal and sense of mission should act as he did. Certainly he never doubted the existence of witches nor the subtlety of the devil, as is evident from his *Wonders of the Invisible World*, (1694) and the symptoms of the victims were seen as sure signs of devil's handiwork. Mather could not go against the commandment prescribed in the scripture: "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live". Thus Cotton Mather could see no

other choice but to commend the special judges for “the speedy and vigorous prosecution of such as have rendered themselves obnoxious, according to the Direction given in the Laws of God, and the wholesome Statutes of the English Nation, for the Detection of Witchcrafts.”³¹ The sign system constructed around the visible and the invisible church had as its natural corollary a belief in the visible and invisible reality. This invisible reality was to be understood in terms of portents and signs sent by God’s angels or devil’s messengers and accordingly discerned by the Elect. The entire society was constructed on the pattern of this systematized sign system. Mather was just following the established system.

Perhaps the greatest work and the magnificent farewell paean of a bygone era was Mather’s *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702). In the midst of disintegrating hope for the Puritan cause in Massachusetts, Mather decided to write a full account of the holy mission of the Puritans in America from 1620 to 1698. Mather’s heroes were the great men of the first generation, who crossed the Atlantic and dedicated their settlements in the wilderness to the glory of God. Frequently a note of nostalgia is sounded in the narrative, nostalgia for the heroic days when his grandfathers, John Cotton and Richard Mather, preached in Massachusetts. The heroic stature of the early Puritan leaders was described by Cotton Mather in epic dimensions : a bold voyage to a new continent, building settlements in the wilderness, fighting the devilish Indians, coping with the harshness, privation and danger of frontier life, discovering heretics among the faithful,

and preserving the communion of visible saints. In the pages of the *Magnalia* the details of Puritan life are transformed into heroic legend, and the history of New England begins to resemble a biblical myth. Cotton Mather was happier imagining a heroic past, than he was in dealing with the confused and frustrating present. And like the greatest of all Puritan writers, his imagination turned to the vision of Paradise on earth – innocent, heroic and lost. Cotton Mather died in 1728, convinced that Winthrop’s “city upon a hill” had become “a city full of Lies and Murders, and Blasphemies”. The paradise of his grandfathers, had become “a Hell upon Earth.”³² But where something dies, something else comes to life; where Cotton Mather’s hope died, Franklin’s blossomed.

The “dying power of godliness” mourned by Cotton Mather was interred by Poor Richard’s proverbs [published as *Poor Richard’s Almanac* (1733–58)] and the *Autobiography* (1781) of Benjamin Franklin. Franklin retained the Puritan social ethic and propounded it in his memoirs as a secular gospel : he retained the Puritan framework but emptied it of its theological contents. The most interesting part of the biography deals with a table of thirteen virtues that Franklin drew up to guide his own life. There is no little significance in the fact that Franklin settled on thirteen virtues rather than ten or fifteen. The most obvious explanation is that four cycles of thirteen conveniently total fifty two, the number of weeks in a year. According to Franklin however, his original list contained only twelve virtues, and he did not add the thirteenth until admonished by a friend for

insolence and pride. Only then did he include humility, giving as its precept “Imitate Jesus and Socrates”.³³ By ‘virtue’ Franklin did not mean, as Jonathan Edwards meant, love of humans in general. He meant, instead, a policy of enlightened self-interest such as Edwards, his exact contemporary had defined as self-love. He expounded his scheme for personal success through “the practice of virtue, or what in the religions Stile are called Good Works”³⁴ – an equation which the Puritans would have found abhorrent. Franklin wished to inspire the youth of America to emulate the industry, temperance, and frugality which had characterised his ascent to prosperity and eminence. He saw the Republic’s collective destiny mirrored in his own success, and he was persuaded that his system of secular values was more relevant to the needs of “a rising people” than the outmoded Calvinism of churchmen like Edwards. Michael T. Gilmore notes :

In Mather’s hagiographies, the hallmark of the saint is his conformity to Christ. In his table of virtues, Franklin adopted and radically revised this fundamental Christian concept. The twelve original virtues, with the addition of “Imitate Jesus”, pointedly recall the apostles and the Saviour, but Franklin’s Christ was a very different figure from the Christ of Mather or Edwards. In an early piece entitled “Dialogue between two Presbyterians”, Franklin, speaking in the person of Socrates, ascribed to Jesus his own beliefs. “Our Saviour”, he argued, “was a Teacher of Morality or Virtue” who recommended faith only as “a Means to obtain that End.” Thus was Christianity emptied of its spiritual significance. In the *Autobiography*, the historic ideal of *Imitatio Christi* was transformed by Franklin into the injunction to imitate himself.³⁵

Cotton Mather and Benjamin Franklin in their different ways foreshadow and illuminate the future development of American thought. Mather’s entire career can be seen as an effort to breathe fresh life into the

religion he inherited from his ancestors. This was the motive that compelled him to involve himself in the trials of Salem and to compose the witchcraft narratives in which he reaffirmed the essential rightness of the Puritans. His heirs were the nineteenth-century Romancers who saw in him the perfect embodiment of the inherent contradictions of Puritanic thought, opening up possibilities for Hawthorne or Melville who would explore them skilfully. Franklin's purpose, in contrast, was not to preserve theological categories but to dispense with them, not to reclaim the temper of his ancestors but to secularize it. His heirs like Thomas Jefferson (1748–1826) and James Madison (1751–1836) were instrumental in shaping the American political and social thought, and he contributed to the emergence of an ideological conformity that was repeatedly questioned by the Romancers in their art.

While Mather's mission was doomed to fail due to the inexorable march of history, Franklin's philosophy gained ground as the eighteenth century progressed. The Puritans loaded with the baggage of existing ideals and a huge past had tried to fashion a church state that not only took into account the machinations of societal governance but also individual beliefs and practices. However, in order to legitimise their own church and to create a utopian society of harmony and coherence, the Puritans had to resort to certain conceptual structures which were from their very inception open-ended in nature. The distinction between the visible and the invisible church, temporal and the spiritual, matters indifferent and matters fundamental, natural liberty and civil liberty, were all bound to result in

pluralism and discordance, for the simple reason that the authoritative moral centre was not strong enough to hold in check these anarchic tendencies, present from the beginning of Protestant Reformation. Further, by bringing man closer to the godhead interpreted through the Bible, the Puritans indirectly were giving an impetus to sectarian tendencies. The Puritans were able to cope with the problem of dissension and separatism in the early years by repeatedly invoking the necessity of cohesion and communitarianism in a strange and alien world, but as the frontiers expanded and prosperity grew, the concept of wilderness itself held no meaning for the precise reason that man had conquered it. The doctrine of original sin was no longer as powerful as before for the connection had been made between growing prosperity and God's favour. This naturally brought in a declining piety which gradually eroded the privileged position held by the magistrates and the Elect. The Half-Way Covenant is a glaring example of this eroding piety. Moreover, the theocratic state remained a Utopian ideal as the seventeenth-century progressed. By 1720, there was no more a single state, no more a single visible church of saints. Rhode Island under Roger Williams practised religious toleration, Pennsylvania had its own church, Connecticut and New Haven had their own Baptist Churches, the frontier settlements had their admixture of religion. The vision was rapidly disintegrating into a pluralistic reality and the Puritans had to adapt to this changing reality. It needed a great awakening to prop up the fledgling church. The Great Awakening (C.1740) did come but with such a difference

that had the Puritans like Cotton Mather been there to witness it, they would have condemned all to the black pits of hell. It had repercussions in the literary domain paving the way for Cooper, Hawthorne, Melville and Poe to exercise their literary art in a masterly fashion. In their works, the Puritanic framework was retained with all its contradictions but a more secular tone entered.

The apparent decline in the Puritan faith in America was temporarily reversed in the 1740s by an unexpected increase in religious conversions. Puritan churches from Georgia to Maine received members at an unprecedented rate. The sudden spurt in conversion led many to believe that this was the handiwork of God. The question however that remains unanswered is why did the spirit of revivalism prove so successful a few years after Cotton Mather's death, While the thousands of jeremiads preached during his lifetime had proved ineffective in checking the decline in piety? The Great Awakening as it came to be known, is perhaps the most controversial subject in the history of religion in America. The possible factors that led to the Great Awakening, the implications and the consequences, and how it had a formative influence in the literary world in nineteenth-century America are the topics of discussion in my next chapter.

Notes :

- ¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, (ed.) Phillips Bradley, (New York: 1956), p.99. All references to Tocqueville are to this edition.
- ² Ibid., p.15.
- ³ Ibid., p.42.
- ⁴ Sidney Z. Ehler and John B. Morrall, *Church and State Through the Centuries : A Collection of Historic Documents with Commentaries*, (Westminister: 1954), p.48.
- ⁵ I do not mean to say that 'Middle Ages' is a monolithic category which lacks spatial and temporal co-ordinates. The 'Middle Ages' in this chapter refers to the period between the fall of the Roman Empire (476 A.D.) to the late 15th c. To further narrow down the scope, I am specifically dealing with the period between 1073 A.D. (Hildebrand becoming the Pope) and the writing of *Summa Theologica* (1273 A.D.).
- ⁶ By State-Church, I mean where the State has precedence over and is more powerful than the Church as in England, where Henry VIII founded the State-Church, when he separated from the Roman Catholic Church (1534). Similarly, the Church-State was established at Geneva (C.1537) by John Calvin where the ecclesiastical domain controlled the temporal domain.
- ⁷ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* as quoted in Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, (London and New York : 1944), p.446.
- ⁸ *The Open Bible* (King James Version), (New York : 1985), pp. 1126-7.
- ⁹ William H. Marnell, *The First Amendment*, (New York: 1964), pp. 27-28.
- ¹⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (tr.) Leo Pfeffer, (New Haven: 1927), p.219.

-
- ¹¹ John Winthrop, as quoted in George E Ellis, *The Puritan Age*, (Boston: 1888), p. 381.
- ¹² John Winthrop, 'A Model of Christian Charity' as quoted in *The American Puritans*, (ed.) Perry Miller, (New York: 1956), p. 83
- ¹³ This image was used by John Winthrop. The image played a dominant role in Puritan life for as Edmund W. Sinott informs us that the Puritan Church or Meetinghouse, "was conspicuous both by its size and its commanding situation. It was always built on a raised ground for it had to be *seen* by the masses in times of peril as well as prosperity reminding them of the religious mission that the church symbolized." Edmund W. Sinott, *Meetinghouse and Church in early New England*, (New York: 1963), pp.6-7. In fact, even the pulpit was made on a raised platform of wood. See the chapter entitled 'The Pulpit' in *Moby-Dick*.
- ¹⁴ Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, (New York : 1893), p.237.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.238.
- ¹⁶ As quoted in Isaac Backus, *History of New England*. (2 Vols.), (ed.) David Weston, (Newton : 1871), p.54 (Vol.1).
- ¹⁷ For a detailed discussion of the institution of Puritan lectureships and the strategies that the Puritans employed to evade both clerical and ecclesiastical control, see Paul S. Seaver, *The Puritan Lectureships*, (Stanford : 1970).
- ¹⁸ Joseph B. Felt, *The Ecclesiastical History of New England*, (Boston :1862), p.136.
- ¹⁹ Roger Williams, 'The Bloody Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience', quoted in L. Haskins, *Law and Authority in Early Massachussets*, (Boston : 1960), p.121. I am indebted to this book for its brilliant discussion of the Puritan theory of Church and State.
- ²⁰ *The Book of Proverbs*, (ed.) William Skeat, (Hertfordshire: 1992), p. 896.

-
- ²¹ For a detailed study of the Baptists and New England dissent, refer William J. Macloughlin, *New England Dissent : The Baptists and the Separation of Church and State*, (2 Vols.), (Cambridge : 1971).
- ²² Quoted in Macloughlin, *New England Dissent*, p.24.
- ²³ William Bradford. *Of Plymouth Plantation* as quoted in A.N. Kaul, *The American Vision : Actual and Ideal Society in 19th C. Fiction*, (New Haven : 1963), p.10.
- ²⁴ Quoted in Macloughlin, *New England Dissent*, p.38.
- ²⁵ My source is Charles Berryman, *From Wilderness to Wasteland : The Trial of the Puritan God in American Imagination*, (New York : 1979), p.21.
- ²⁶ William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation : 1620-1647*, (ed.) Samuel Eliot Morrison, (New York : 1959), p.21.
- ²⁷ Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, (Hartford : 1855), p.246.
- ²⁸ The source is Helmut Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, (New York : 1937), p.64.
- ²⁹ Perry Miller, *The New England Mind : From Colony to Province*, (Cambridge: 1960), p.34.
- ³⁰ Cotton Mather, *Magnalia*, II, p.287.
- ³¹ Cotton Mather, *Wonders of the Invisible World* as quoted in Berryman, *From Wilderness to Wasteland*, p.64.
- ³² Cotton Mather, *Magnalia*, II, p.294.
- ³³ Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, (ed.) Leonard W. Labaree *et al*, (New Haven : 1964), p.150.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.167.
- ³⁵ Michael T. Gilmore, *The Middle Way : Puritanism and Ideology in American Romantic Fiction*, (New Brunswick : 1977), p.57.

CHAPTER II

THE GREAT AWAKENING AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

The First Amendment to the Federal Constitution

In 1740, George Whitefield (1714–70) in his tour of the colonies condemned the local clergy of the traditional parishes as “dead men” and dismissed their traditional preaching as “a sad Symptom of Decay of vital religion.”¹ The example set by Solomon Stoddard for the conversion of a whole group of people, a practice heretofore almost unknown in New England, became the dynamic principle of revivalism. Mass conversions accompanied with a frenzy hereby unprecedented in the history of New England became a common phenomenon during the Great Awakening. The seed of the great revival was ever present in its embryonic forms in the Puritan Church itself for the very notion of bringing man into direct contact with God had in it the subversive fact that the universal church could not distinguish between the Elect and the non-Elect. How this hierarchy was created and maintained has been the topic of discussion in my previous chapter. It cannot be argued however, that Stoddard began a chain reaction by breaking away from the Half-Way Covenant and admitting unconverted persons into the Church, for it must be remembered that the Church of Northampton remained isolated for a period of more than sixty years and the

Puritans held sufficient sway to ensure the stemming of the contagion. To my mind, there are three factors that contributed to the great revival in New England around 1740 : the inherent contradictions in the Puritanic Church itself, the growing materialism of New England, and the style of preaching in the established Church.

The causes of the Great Awakening were not primarily economic or political; they were rooted deeply in the Puritan imagination, and were called forth by the recent changes in Puritan worship. The success of the Great Awakening depended upon the rejection of the Half-Way Covenant, and the now ready availability of Church membership. The individual was no longer required to stand before the congregation of visible saints and confess his experience of divine grace in order to gain membership. When revivalist preachers began to invite the unregenerate to come forward together, many who were hesitant to make an individual confession of grace found comfort in group participation. The practice of multiple conversion also intensified the drama of the conversion experience. Instead of the sober confession of a single person seeking admission to the communion of saints, the churches now witnessed the unregenerate crowd shrieking and moaning and writhing their way to drink at the Lord's Table. The experience of conversion thus assumed all the dynamic aspects of crowd hysteria and Whitefield and Tennent (1703-64) were able to bring more sinners to Christ in a short time than the conventional ministers had been able to do with years of patient doctrinal exposition. Puritan leaders had of course, realized

the importance of emotion in the conversion experience. But the drama of group conversion accorded a much larger role to the force of emotion. Revivalist preachers intensified the emotional drama of conversion by drawing upon the power of fear. For generations Puritan ministers had attempted to frighten their listeners into a conviction of original sin and thereby inspire a desperate hope for salvation. How was it that thousands of sermons preached for more than hundred years couldn't convert as many persons as a single sermon of a Whitefield or an Edwards? One of the reasons was the formality of the situation in which the Puritan ministers preached. It was the general practice in the Puritanic Churches not to change the minister of a particular church unless of course the minister acted in a fashion contrary to the established tenets of the Church. Increase Mather preached to the same congregation for fifty-nine years.² As a natural corollary to this, the emotional drama that was characteristic of the revival was lacking in these sermons, for the situation was one of formality where the preacher was always *above* the masses, both literally as well as metaphorically : the Church of the Elect had as its primary task the preaching of the Word. Conversion could come only by the grace of God. The relation between the Church and the masses was based on a very simple but formal proposition - souls could be saved only by divine initiative and preachers *could not* instil the fear of God. The Great Awakening completely subverted this notion. By allowing everyone in the congregation to share the grace, it opened up vistas which were till then closed, the pulpit and its

following becoming one and the same. All these revivals shared a quickening of interest in the fundamental question of Calvinism – what must I do to be saved? The two central emotions of Calvinism—fear of damnation and fervent hope for divine grace were both pushed to their extremes. Revivalist preachers would torment a congregation with visions of eternal punishment until the extreme tension would issue forth in a flood of confessions and the relief of spiritual conversion.

The Great Awakening, however, was not an exercise in evangelical preaching only; it not only brought to the fore the peripheral elements of Puritanism in America which they had for long kept at abeyance, but also the immense subversive power that such revivalist congregations had. It was a triumph of crowd manipulation. News of the preacher's coming would be advertised well in advance, expectations would be built up to a high degree of excitement, large crowds would gather in church or field, and then the powerful voice of the revivalist preacher would hypnotically unite his audience into one band of sinners, trembling, crying, and finally exulting in the release of mass emotion. Jonathan Edwards travelled to Enfield by special invitation to deliver his famous sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" in 1742. It was not an ordinary Sunday for the congregation. They were eager to see and hear the great preacher from Northampton. And Jonathan Edwards came with the avowed purpose of a revivalist. "The use of this awful subject", he frankly stated, "may be for awakening unconverted persons in this congregation".³ The audience was ready for him. They

shrieked and moaned with fear, some fainted, some cried for mercy, few could resist the drama of conversion. The leaders of the revival had the advantage of appealing to the uncommon expectations built up during the Great Awakening. The unregenerate often came to a revivalist sermon with the intention of taking some part in the excitement of conversion. For this purpose, the space was adequately created to manoeuvre and sometimes even control the emotions that the congregation was supposed to experience, so that the preacher elicited the right kind of response at the end of his sermon. By abandoning the Half-Way Covenant, and by allowing multiple confessions of grace, the revivalist preachers made it easy for the crowd to come forward to acknowledge Christ. Jonathan Edwards's listeners at Enfield would have been waiting expectantly for his call at the end of the sermon : "Therefore, let everyone that is out of Christ, now awake and fly from the wrath to come".⁴ Every good revivalist sermon ended with a stage cue for audience action.

The multitude of jeremiads preached during the Great Awakening repeatedly harped upon the power and rage of God. The steady increase in materialism and Franklinian philosophy which from the traditional viewpoint hovered on the brink of Arminianism – a belief in individual enterprise and equating all material gains with God's favour–demanded a religious preaching style that could sufficiently infuse the unregenerate crowd with a feeling of impending doom, and thus guarantee their conversion at the end of the sermon. The preachers thus often resorted to the images of

apocalypse and death that could depict the picture of earthly life as a stop-gap arrangement in the immensity of this universe : the sinners were in the hands of an omnipotent God, their life being continually governed by Him. Though the vivid and often lurid portrayal of death and life's inscrutability were themes that were more fully developed in the Second Great Awakening (1795 through the 1840s) , their seed is to be found in the Awakening of 1740. The Great Awakening not only provided Hawthorne with themes that he could play with and subvert (to be discussed in the next chapter), but also was at the root of Melville's supreme symbolic art. Five years after the publication of *Moby-Dick* (1851), Hawthorne noted, "Melville, as he always does, began to reason of providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken, and informed me that he had 'pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated'; ..." ⁵ The revivalist preachers however, refused to be 'annihilated' and like Father Mapple in *Moby-Dick*, ended their sermon with a benevolent vision of God's mercy.

The Puritan sermon followed the Ramist format of "Text", "Doctrine" and "Proof" (or "Application").⁶ The first part of the sermon thus specifically dealt with that part of the Bible with which the sermon is concerned; the second dealt with the doctrinal exposition of the passage; and the third involved giving examples from common life so as to illuminate the doctrine. Examples were needed solely for their didactic purpose rather than for their entertainment value. The revivalist preachers, though maintaining the tripartite format, started emphasizing more on the "Proof", giving

examples that were vivid and imaginative. The avowed purpose, as earlier, was the instillation of the fear of the Divine, but with a difference. The immediate purpose of the Awakening preachers was to convert the congregation, so that they may all share the sacrament of communion at the end of the sermon. This was different from the practice of the established Church whose only purpose was to arouse fear, and not conversion, for the latter could be achieved only by divine grace. To heighten the emotion of fear and to introduce a note of urgency, the preachers had to resort to an imaginative discourse that would portray the image of an angry and jealous God in all its starkness; and for this they had to depend on the “Proof” of the sermon. Why is it that hardly anyone can remember the words of Increase Mather or Charles Chauncy, and no one can forget the sermon of Jonathan Edwards? :

The God that holds you over the pit of Hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked : his wrath towards you burns like a fire...You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder.⁷

This stylistic device with its rugged power and the note of immediacy happened to be a powerful tool in the hands of the itinerant preachers. There was, however, the flip side of the coin. The same sermon in the hands of a lay exhorter or an overzealous preacher could cross the limits and border on blasphemy. This did happen and the critics of the Awakening who were silenced by the stupendous success of the preachers, vociferously protested against such “religious affections.”⁸

Ministers like Richard Mather and Charles Chauncy soon realised that the Awakening had tendencies that were beyond the control of the established church. Edwards came to the same conclusion when he admitted that only the genuine experience of regeneration could qualify a person for membership in the Church. The harmony reported during the first year of Awakening was soon replaced by schism, invective and bitterness. Battle lines were drawn for and against the methods and meaning of revivalism; congregations began to split apart because of their inability to agree about either the validity or the significance of the Awakening. The congregationalists divided into factions known as “new light” and “old light” – a polarization creating a number of changes in Puritan theory and practice. The division of congregations into pro – and anti–revivalist factions was encouraged by the itinerant preachers like Whitefield, who in their various sermons lay stress on their own dynamism and progressiveness, condemning the traditional form of preaching as dead and decayed. Congregations were thus invited to compare ministers, and more than ever before in New England, ministers were seen vying for a kind of popularity context. The men and women who travelled miles to hear the open-air sermons of Whitefield and Tennent would return the following Sunday to their parish church, stirred with expectations that could not be fulfilled, and ready with criticism that could not be silenced. In 1742 the General Assembly of Connecticut passed a law “regulating abuses and correcting disorders in ecclesiastical affairs.”⁹ The law was designed to prevent itinerant preaching

and to suppress the practice of lay exhorting, and jail sentences were provided for laymen who might still dare to “publicly teach and exhort the people.”¹⁰ But no law could heal the bitterness that had already divided congregations; the feelings on both sides were too strong.

The disruptive tendency of the Great Awakening and the fashion in which the “Proof” could be moulded came to the fore in the sermons preached by James Davenport, who toured New England in the summer of 1741. In the impassioned harangues of Davenport, the excesses of the Awakening were fully exposed. He was brought to trial in Connecticut, was found mentally disturbed, and was transported under guard out of the colony. Undaunted by such treatment, Davenport next took his evangelical preaching to Massachusetts. A contemporary witness described Davenport’s preaching in the *Boston Evening Post*:

He has no knack at raising the Passions, but by a violent straining of his Lungs, and the most extravagant wreathings of his Body, which at the same Time that it creates Laughter and Indignation in the most, occasions great Meltings, Screaming, Crying, Swooning, and Fits in some others....Were you to see him in his most Violent agitations, you would be apt to think that he was a Madman just broke from his Chains.¹¹

Davenport tried desperately to fight back by branding all his critics as unconverted. The symbolic climax of his career came in the year 1744 in New London when Davenport persuaded a crowd to hold a public book burning. Moving around the flames, the minister then told his wild audience that “in order to be saved they ought to burn all their idols”. They built a great heap of silk gowns, cloaks, fans, gloves etc. According to a witness :

“Davenport’s own idol with which he topped the pile was a pair of old, wore out, plush breeches.” But when the crowd had a chance to observe the preacher “strutt about bare-arsed”, their enthusiasm waned, and it was decided that “making such a sacrifice was not necessary for their salvation”.¹² It is not surprising that Hawthorne’s imagination grabbed upon this incident and fashioned a story out of it in which he played different symbols against each other to create a polysemous maze. In “Earth’s Holocaust”, the narrator describes the scene as “the Titan of innovation-angel or fiend, double in its nature, and capable of deeds befitting both characters”, threatening the very “edifice of our moral life”.¹³ The reformers throw into the fire one thing which refuses to burn—the human heart – imbuing the story with a memorable Hawthorne touch.

Towards the end of his career, Edwards though still firm in his belief in a sudden and often violent conversion, had come to the conclusion that the revivals that were reported throughout the colonies were mostly “false enthusiasm”. The events which precipitated Edwards’s dismissal from the pulpit of Northampton in 1752 are more complex than can be described here, but the principal cause was his uncompromising belief that only the genuine experience of regeneration could qualify a person for membership in the church. He wanted to repeal the Half-way covenant, and turn back the tide of compromise and moderation that had diluted the Puritan faith for more than seventy years. But with his vision of a pure communion of saints Jonathan Edwards stood practically alone, cut adrift from the current that

had surfaced after a century. He died in the frontier town of Stockbridge in 1758 trying to defend the fundamental principles of Calvinism. The floodgates that he had opened were, however, too overpowering and he had to bow down to the inexorable march of history.

The Great Awakening was a small, if not a definite step towards the American Revolution and subsequently, to the First Amendment of the Federal Constitution. It opened doors for linguistic experimentation that found its full subversive flowering in The Second Great Awakening a phenomenon to be discussed later in this chapter, which in its turn, provided ready materials for the nineteenth-century writers to work upon and create multivalent symbols. Further, the Great Awakening in its wake left the traditional parish system in a complete state of confusion and the church as the symbol of centralized authority which the First Settlers dreamt of establishing, was no longer even cherished as a dream. A replacement of the Edenic myth was to be found. It was not very difficult : the myth of the democratic nation took hold of the people during the American Revolution (1775-83) thereby creating a liberal and secular space in which the Bill of Rights could be formulated. The Great Awakening, itself a result of the Puritan contradictions, gave birth to the First Amendment, thus providing a forum to the thousand of dissenting voices to speak from, and formalising the recognition that the myth of New Jerusalem with its centripetal tendencies was no longer tenable in a world where thousands of sects vied with each other for ecclesiastical supremacy. The "New Israel" of the

Puritanic fathers had become the *Pequod*, “freighted with savages, and laden with fire,...and plunging into the blackness of darkness...”¹⁴ In 1789, the First Congress of the United States, responding to demands made by several states during the process of ratification of the federal constitution, set about drawing up a Bill of Rights. By the end of 1791, the required three-fourths of the states had ratified this Bill of Rights in the form of a series of ten amendments to the Constitution, the first of which began with the statement, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”¹⁵

The debates and discussions generated by the ratification of the First Amendment were immense and it is not within the purview of this study to record the bitterness and rancour that was caused by it. But two things have to be pointed out. Firstly, Protestantism had become such a part and parcel of the American life, that there was no doubt in anyone’s mind that the First Amendment meant a non-interference in *Protestant Christianity*. The vast majority of Americans assumed that theirs was a Christian, i.e., Protestant country, and they automatically expected that government would uphold the commonly agreed on Protestant ethos and morality. In many instances, they had not come to grips with the implications of the First Amendment because the values, customs, and forms of Protestant Christianity so thoroughly permeated civil and political life that one could hardly separate one from the other. On the civil front, for example, customs like days of prayer and thanksgiving appeared not so much matters of religion as part of the

common coin of civilised living. Sabbath laws enjoyed widespread support and were so little the subject of dissent that citizens never even felt challenged to think how those laws might impose a particular religious viewpoint. Both Houses of Congress, almost immediately after they had agreed to a Bill of Rights, passed a resolution for a “day of public thanksgiving and prayer to be observed...[for] the many signal favors of Almighty God.”¹⁶ In the House discussion of the matter, Tucker of South Carolina argued that “this... is a business with which Congress have nothing to do, it is a religious matter, and, as such, is proscribed to us”.¹⁷ The House did not agree. Congress’s thanksgiving and prayer resolution represented only one of its many involvements with religion, including the appointment of Chaplains in the Army and in its own houses. During its first session, Thomas J. Curry informs us :

[when]... it reenacted the Northwest Ordinance, it included the provision that “Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good Government...schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged...true religion and good morals are the only solid foundation of public liberty and happiness”.¹⁸

The logic of safeguarding public liberty and upholding moral sanctity helped not only to legitimise the continuation of state support to the established churches but also was extended to the public offices by limiting office holding only to Christians. Even the small Catholic community in the new states had no objection to this as long as the said Christians included themselves. Writing in 1950, Anson Phelps Stokes, notes that :

The Continental Congress showed its interest in religion [by] references to ‘God’....to ‘Jesus Christ’, the ‘Christian

Religion'...and the 'Free Protestant Colonies'. ...The Congress thus, saw the importance and the need of encouraging the religious spirit in the new nation, while at the same time avoiding favoritism to any domination.¹⁹

The discrepancy between the widespread conviction of late eighteenth-century Americans that government possessed no power in matters of religion and the persistent interference of State in religious affairs dates back to the very beginning of America : it went back to Roger Williams, to William Penn and the Quakers. The mingling of matters temporal and matters ecclesiastical was the bone of contention between Calvin and the Catholic Church; it was also the domain of conflict between Roger Williams and the Congregationalists of New England. In fact, this was one of the main issues that separated congregations giving rise to multiple sects and churches. The Baptists had separated on the grounds of "religious taxation or compulsory tithing to pay the minister's salary and the upkeep of the meeting house."²⁰

Secondly, the inhabitants of all the states decided that government had no power to prohibit the free exercise of *peaceable* religion. This of course tied up with the notion of moral integrity that had to be defended by the state. All states agreed with Thomas Jefferson that civil government could interfere when principles break out into overt acts against peace and good order, but otherwise citizens had a right to practise the religions of their choice, even the hated Catholicism, which had been proscribed in colonial America. On the question of financial support of religion, the vast

majority believed with the Continental Congress that “true religion and good morals are the only solid foundation of public liberty and happiness”. From this premise, however, they drew different conclusions. Some legislators, such as those in Massachussets decided that since good government depended on morality and piety, government should inculcate those virtues by seeing that churches and ministers were financially provided for. Others, such as those in Virginia, while agreeing with the necessity of virtue and religion for civil society, reasoned that if religion were to remain healthy, it had to remain free from the interfering hand of government.²¹ The meaning of the First Amendment was at least this : that each citizen had a right to the free exercise of his or her religion as long as it did not “break out into overt acts against peace and order”. Further, the people of almost every state that ratified the First Amendment believed that religion should be maintained and supported voluntarily. They saw government attempts to organise and regulate such support as an usurpation of power, as a violation of liberty of conscience and free exercise of religion, and as falling within the scope of what they termed an establishment of religion. The contradiction between their theory and practice became evident to Americans only later, with the advent of a more religiously pluralistic society.

The implications of the First Amendment reached their culmination in the Second Great Awakening which came up with a truly informal, indigenous preaching style. The earliest and most daring pulpit story telling in the ante-bellum period occurred among a group of preachers – Southern

blacks – who at first addressed only their fellow slaves but who were destined to attract increasing attention among white mainstream Protestants. What needs to be highlighted is that this innovative use of imagination by black religious preachers had been an important element in American popular culture ever since the 1790s. This typical use of folk story telling techniques, evident throughout the century in the sermons of black preachers like Lemuel Haynes, Uncle Jack, and Harry Evans was characterised especially by vernacular dramatizations of the Bible and by secular stories about the conflict between the powerful and the powerless.²² It is significant that *Moby-Dick* in full of references to black religious practices, from the passionate black preacher Ishmael witnesses when he first enters New Bedford, through the colourful rituals of the humane Queequeg, to the entertaining sermon delivered to the sharks by the black cook, Fleece. An even more important stylistic change during the Second Great Awakening was initiated by white frontier evangelists such as Peter Cartwright, Barton Warren Stone, and James Macgregary. The religious frenzy at camp meetings—manifested in dancing, barking, shouting and running – was sparked in large part by emotional, illustrative sermons preached by unlearned ministers to frontier congregations who had little interest in theological niceties.²³ What the new sermon did was to completely undercut the strict structure of the Puritan sermon – “Text”, “Doctrine” and “Proof” – by embellishing it with a bold narrative and often daring imagery. The

romancers were quick to seize the opportunity. Consider Father Mapple's sermon in *Moby-Dick* :

In their gamesome but still serious way, one whispers to the other—"Jack, he's robbed a widow"; or "Joe, do you mark him; he's a bigamist"; or "Harry lad, I guess he's the adulterer that broke jail in old Gomorrah, or belike, one of the missing murderers from Sodom,"...Frightened Jonah trembles, and summoning all his boldness to his face, only looks so much the more a coward.²⁴

Father Taylor, preaching during the 1830's at the Seamen's Bethel Church in Boston often came up with extemporaneous, free-flowing sermons filled with racy anecdotes and striking metaphors. In one of his sermons, tracing the moral descent of a country boy ruined by city vices like gambling and drinking, he is foreshadowing Father Mapple : "Hush-h-h, he is cursing his mother - shut the windows of heaven - *shut the windows*."²⁵ He treated divine matters with a new familiarity, as is shown by his homely imagery : "Don't burn the candle down to the end in sin and then give God the snuff".²⁶

Another mode that was repeatedly used by the evangelical preachers and reformers was that of moral reform literature which became increasingly popular between 1800 and 1850, often completely subverting the Puritan moral and social ethic. This kind of literature was extensively used by popular authors and lecturers who ostensibly aimed to correct human behaviour but whose texts show that they were actually engaged in exploring dark forces of the human psyche, in venting subrational fantasies. The topics chosen for this type of literature was generally behavioural sins -

intemperance, licentiousness, urban poverty, poor prison conditions, and so forth, but these were described in such lurid detail that the reformers themselves were branded as dangerously immoral and sacrilegious. These reformers, such as George Lippard and George Thompson, dealt on the surface level with vice and its remedy but actually de-emphasised the remedies for vice while probing the grisly, sometimes perverse results of vice at such lengths that the remedy often got overshadowed by the pictorial depiction of vice : vice in itself became a fascinating object of study.²⁷ The paradox of the reform culture of early nineteenth century America lay in the fact that the reformers revelled in the vice that they ostensibly denounced : the “Proof” by this time had completely subsumed the “Text” and the “Doctrine”. It also opened up horizons for the nineteenth century novelists to explore a domain that was till then proscribed, but which always lurked behind the Puritan imagination. The new reform literature made it easier for the romancers to delve beneath the surface and bring out the contradictions and paradoxes in the Puritan past, and then artistically combine them in a polysemous whole. Consider Hawthorne’s description of how the Quaker woman was whipped in public in his ‘Main Street’:

And there a woman – it is Ann Coleman naked from the waist upward, and bound to the tail of a cart, is dragged through the mainstreet at the pace of a brisk walk, while the constable follows with a whip of knotted cords. A strong-armed fellow is that constable; and each time that he flourishes in the air, you see a frown wrinkling and twisting his brow, and at the same instant, a smile upon his lips. He loves his business, faithful officer that he is, and puts his soul into every stroke, zealous to fulfil the injunctions of major Hawthorne’s warrant in the spirit and to the letter.²⁸

The sexual and sadistic undertones in the passage would have found a more detailed exposition in reform literature but not so in Hawthorne, for he knew how to fuse the two in an artistic whole. The post-Calvinist image signalled a cultural shift from dogma toward literariness. This shift was indicated also by another common feature in reform literature, what David S. Reynolds terms as the “benign-subversive style - the use of moral pretext as a shield against criticism in depictions of the tabooed or sacrilegious”²⁹ Many reform writings can be considered as preliterate texts which pry into the domain of the subversive extensively, but then retreat into the canopy of conventional reform writings. Some writers tilted the balance so much towards the subversive that they were branded as dangerous writers. Still, even the most crassly pornographic reformers were quick to proclaim moral intentions. For instance, George Thompson concludes his highly sensational novel *Road to Ruin* (C-1850) by stating he has succeeded “if any moral has been conveyed, calculated to beget a horror for vice, and a fondness for the paths of honesty and virtue”.³⁰ Similarly, Lippard’s widely read novel *The Quaker City* (1834), dealing with popular topics like anti-prostitution, temperance, anti-Catholicism, prison reform, gang warfare and so forth ends with the following memorable lines :

Fools that they were! To think that Fate which drives its iron wheels over hearts and thrones and graves, would turn aside its career for them!....Every thing fleeting and nothing stable, every thing shifting and changing, and nothing substantial ! A bundle of hopes and fears, deceits and confidences, joys and miseries strapped to a fellow’s back like a pedlar’s wares.³¹

The stringent distinction between 'good' and 'evil' set forth by the Puritanic settlers was not simply dwindling but was being completely annihilated by reform writings. What Lippard failed to do in his novel was to fuse these varied images into memorable literary symbols, not allowing the pervasive ironies to turn inward and consume themselves. It was left to the masters like Hawthorne and Melville to use these images in a fashion that would open up the closed systems of Calvinistic doctrine. The stage was now set for these literary masters to indulge in a free play of the inherent contradictions and paradoxes in the Calvinistic system that the Puritans had given as a heritage.

Notes :

- ¹ As quoted in Charles Berryman, *From Wilderness to Wasteland*, (New York : 1979), p.48. For a detailed study of Whitefield and The Great Awakening, this is one of the best books. Also refer to Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind : From the Great Awakening to the Revolution*, (New York : 1966).
- ² My source is Perry Miller, *The New England Mind*, (Cambridge : 1960), p.72.
- ³ Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" as quoted in Berryman, *From Wilderness to Wasteland*, p.41.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p.41.
- ⁵ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The English Notebooks*, (ed.) Randall Stewart, (New York : 1941), as quoted in T. Walter Herbert, *Moby-Dick and Calvinism : A World Dismantled*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey : 1977), p.12.

-
- ⁶ My source is William J. Macloughlin, *New England Dissent : The Baptists and the Separation of Church and State*, (2 Vols.), (Cambridge, 1971), p.141.
- ⁷ Jonathan Edwards as quoted in Berryman, *From Wilderness to Wasteland*, p.42.
- ⁸ The term is used by Jonathan Edwards in his "A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections" (1746), in Edwards, *Personal Narrative* (ed.) C.C. Goen,(Brunswick : 1973), p.64. Edwards however, maintained that "religious affection" is to be distinguished from mere "religious enthusiasm", the former constituent of any "true religion" and the latter of "false" religion.
- ⁹ As quoted in Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, (New York : 1893), p.231.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., p.232.
- ¹¹ As quoted in Charles Berryman, *From Wilderness to Wasteland*, (New York : 1979), p.42.
- ¹² Ibid., pp.42-43.
- ¹³ Nathaniel Hawthorne, 'Earth's Holocaust' in *A Nineteenth Century American Reader*, (ed.) M. Thomas Inge, (Washington : 1980), pp.254-256.
- ¹⁴ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, (London : 1992), p.367.
- ¹⁵ As quoted in William H. Marnell, *The First Amendment : The History of Religious Freedom in America*, (New York : 1964), p.237.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., p.237.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., p.238.
- ¹⁸ Thomas J. Curry, *The First Freedoms*, (New Haven : 1982), p.218.
- ¹⁹ Anson Phelps Stokes, *Religious Freedom in America*, (New York : 1950), p.52.

-
- ²⁰ William J. Macloughlin, *New England Dissent : The Baptists and the Separation of Church and State* (2 Vols.), (Cambridge : 1971), I, p.28.
- ²¹ My source is Curry, *The First Freedoms*, (New Haven : 1982), pp.219-220.
Also see, pp.186-187, 194, 216.
- ²² My source is David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance : The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*, (New York : 1988), pp.17-18.
- ²³ My source is William B. Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit*, (New York : 1860), pp.206-208.
- ²⁴ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, (London : 1992), p.42.
- ²⁵ As quoted in Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, p.14.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.15.
- ²⁷ My source is Rush Welter, *Antebellum Reform in America*, (New York : 1978), p.24.
- ²⁸ Nathaniel Hawthorne, 'Main Street', Preface to *The Blithedale Romance*, (New York : 1992), p.16.
- ²⁹ Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, p.90.
- ³⁰ As quoted in Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, p.90-91.
- ³¹ As quoted in Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, p.85.

CHAPTER III

THE SECRET

“... but still keep the inmost Me behind its veil”.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, ‘The Custom–House’, *The Scarlet Letter*

In “Main Street”, Hawthorne's avowed purpose is “... to call upon the multiform and many-colored Past...”¹ of his native Salem by showing the major events that had occurred on its principal street since its infancy. In ‘The Village Uncle’, he says, “How strangely the Past is peeping over the shoulders of the present.”² In both these references, it is noteworthy that the “past” is not projected as an entity that can be grasped in its monolithic totality, but as something that is chimeric, elusive. In the first, the “past” refuses to be tied down to a singularity – morphological (“multiform”) or aesthetic (“many-colored”) – and thus, belongs to a domain which needs constantly to be reinterpreted, to be “called upon” so that it does not recede into a point of no return. In other words, the “present” beckons the “past”, for without it the “present” has no significance. The second quote with its image of “peeping” is perhaps even more powerful, for it brings into focus a disembodied observer who can watch both the “present” and the “past” from where the “present” is open to the gaze but not the “past.” For the image involves a frontal viewpoint where the “present” is visible at the back of which lurks the elusive face of the “past”. The “past” in this sense becomes a secret, a hidden body, to view which the observer has to change his

viewpoint continually so that it can be grasped in its totality; or, he may try to understand the “past” by referring only to the part that is visible to him, so that he may deduce the rest from this exposed part. It naturally brings in a play of subjectivity to be intensely directed towards the unveiling of this elusive entity, but what this observer finds out/discovers after the unveiling may not accord with the account of another observer who may have as intensely tried to understand the “past”. The “past”, thus, becomes both a metaphoric and metonymic sign for all things that are behind the veil, for all hidden secrets, for the unknown. The “past” however, is itself a medley of signs, a fall out of the linguistic replacement that the Protestant Reformation stood for: the Bible in direct relation with man, who in turn is in a direct relation with God without the intermediacy of the Pope. The repercussions of this replacement have already been discussed in the previous chapters with special reference to New England Puritanism; how this linguistic proliferation was curbed by a qualification of the conscience and the will and how it led to a natural coalescing of the church and state which were intended to be apart, and with what consequences and compromises have also been discussed. In nineteenth-century America these historical materials were refashioned, reinterpreted and “called upon” to give rise to a highly symbolic and resonant genre that Hawthorne preferred to call “Romance” rather than a “Novel”.³

One of the central themes of the two texts under discussion, viz., *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), is the

veiling of a secret, which through the maze of the text, retains its unknowability. This element of frustration is a central stylistic device in Hawthorne's texts for it encourages the reader to decipher the text, to unveil the secret, but like the minister's veil defies all attempts to bring it out into the open. At the end of the text, the veil unfolds the "impossibility of unveiling"⁴ as Joseph Hillis-Miller calls it. David S. Reynolds informs us that the image of the veil was one of the most recurrent ones in contemporary reform writings of nineteenth-century America:

The most significant common denominator among disparate reformers was a conscious impulse to "tear away veils" or "lift up masks", in an effort to reveal hidden corruption. To antebellum reformers,...authority figures such as urban aristocrats, wealthy churchgoers, Catholic priests, landlords, bankers and so forth were "whited sepulchres" whose inner rottenness could be revealed only through what I term unmasking imagery: violent, often sensational language designed to strip hypocrites of their sanctified cloaks and bring to light the horridness within.⁵

The veil in other words becomes a sign which hides a meaning, or perhaps "multiform" meanings, enticing the reader outside the text and the audience inside the text to decipher it. In the strict Puritanic code of New England in the seventeenth century, the reverse was also true: a sign became a veil, be it natural or linguistic. The Salem Witch trials of 1692 thus became emblematic of the tussle between good and evil, the ultimate struggle for man's soul, with God's party represented by Cotton Mather on one hand, and the Devil's party represented by the "witches" and "wizards" on the other. Though the signs acted as veils, with sufficient grace it was possible to unveil the meaning that lay behind it. The Bible too, was an open book

before the Fall but after the Fall man's vision had got corrupted and thus could not penetrate the veils that the Bible put upon itself. Only the Elect could do it because they were predestined and had received God's Mercy. To the Elect, the veiled word becomes a revelation through God's grace, transparency being the quintessential element of the Bible which the veils of corrupted vision fail to decipher. This tenet, of course, followed from the Calvinistic axiom that the meaning of the Bible is self-explanatory and needs no critical exegesis for its comprehension. The veil therefore, obstructs the vision of the Fallen man who should strive to attain the transparency that he had before the Fall. On the basis of this notion, the New England Puritans built up an elaborate sign system, that believed in the efficacy of a particular sign to convey a particular meaning, the sign acting as a mirror to reflect a predestined meaning-image. In other words, the word is both a veil as well as a mirror, a veil because it conceals, and a mirror because it reveals; the scarlet letter is both, for it conceals the thoughts of Hester Prynne, and a mirror for it reveals the inner depravity of the woman, a living emblem of adultery. I would attempt to argue in this chapter that this contradictory nature of the word, as both veil and mirror, found a stylistic outlet in the writings of Hawthorne.

But before we proceed further, we must pause to reflect on the interpretation of the sign as mirror. The mirror reflects, refracts and even laterally inverts. It gives both a faithful representation as well as an image that is not there, for it disappears as soon as the object of reflection is

removed. One cannot grasp the image, for the image itself is elusive, beyond bounds of physicality; it lures the onlooker into a deception of truth, though truth itself is evanescent and fleeting. It arrests the onlooker with the reflection, but resists any attempt to grapple with it. In 'The Custom-House', after seeing the piece of red cloth with the faded scarlet letter on it, Hawthorne comments:

My eyes fastened themselves upon the old scarlet letter, and would not be turned aside. 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.⁶

The letter does contain some "deep meaning" but cannot be grasped, as it continuously slides from one to the other as the text proceeds. The mirror image of that letter is on Dimmesdale's breast, but that image is more elusive, for it leads to multiple interpretations and no one is certain about what she/he sees. The mirror image reflects as well as distorts. In *The Scarlet Letter* any reflecting surface becomes a mirror, be it the multitude in whose gaze Hester is reflected in the opening chapters, or be it the shining armour of the Governor's house, or the eye of Pearl:

...she [Hester] fancied that she beheld, not her own miniature portrait, but another face in the black mirror of Pearl's eye. It was a face, fiend-like, full of smiling malice, yet bearing the semblance of features that she had known full well, though seldom with a smile, and never with malice, in them. ...or whether it peeped or no, her mother so imagined it – from the unsearchable abyss of her [Pearl's] black eyes. (p.93)

The image in the mirror becomes emblematic of both an intense subjectivity as well as an unknowable "abyss". Beyond the image lies a nothingness that is impossible to grasp just as the image itself depends on

the subjectivity of the observer. In *The Scarlet Letter* the image is always doomed to be distorted, just as in *The House of the Seven Gables* Judge Pyncheon's image in the public mirror is a distorted one, though the Judge believes it to be the truest and having the closest verisimilitude:

A hard, cold man, thus unfortunately situated, seldom, or never looking inward, and resolutely taking his idea of himself from what purports to be his image, as reflected in the mirror of public opinion, can scarcely arrive at true self-knowledge, except through loss of property and reputation. (p.232)

The gaze plays an important role in both the novels inasmuch it not only is directed towards the object to be observed, but also is a reflective and refractive medium in which the object is seen. The mirror in *The Scarlet Letter* often becomes a doorway for escape, a journey to the past, just as Surveyor Pue's manuscript becomes for Hawthorne a portal to enter the past. The "past", however, "multiform" and "many-colored" thus becomes a refractive mirror where the mere outline can be made out, instead of actual, concrete realities. The medium becomes the "neutral territory where the Actual and Imaginary meet" (p.38), it also becomes the territory where light and darkness, black and white converge. Harry Levin in his insightful study of Hawthorne and Melville attributes this to the puritanic obsession with the categories of light and dark that were fundamental in representing "good" and "evil":

This takes us back to the very beginning of things, the primal darkness, the void God shaped by creating light and dividing night from day. That division underlies the imagery of the Bible from Genesis to the Apocalypse, and from the world of life to the shadow of death... The Puritans were fond of invoking it to distinguish themselves from the other sects...⁷

The confession of grace, so central to the Puritan system, involved a reception of the light of God's mercy to dispel the darkness within. In his *Personal Narrative* Edwards describes the reception of grace with a profusion of the images of light. God is often compared to a fountain of heavenly light – “the sun in its glory, sweetly and pleasantly diffusing light and life.” And the soul of a Puritan is compared to “a little white flower... opening its bosom to receive the pleasant beams of the sun's glory.”⁸ The dichotomy created between light and dark, black and white is completely subverted in the romantic writings of nineteenth-century America. In fact, a curious feature of Hawthorne is the choice of a culturally established sign or emblem as the basis for thematic elaboration and symbolic extension. The “past” becomes an enigma where signs are liberated from their stringent codified structure. In order to recreate this “past”, the author no more depends on the actual historical material that is supposed to mirror the bygone era, but more on an apparently unreal structure “lighted only by the glimmering coal fire and the moon, striving to picture forth imaginary scenes, which..., might flow out on the brightening page...” (p.37) The mirror of romance which helps to recreate the “past” is based on a “tribe of unrealities” (p.37) and the details that are necessary for the outline “lose their actual substance, and become things of intellect.” (p.38) Thus, Surveyor Pue's manuscript becomes the basis for the story of the scarlet letter, but what Hawthorne contends for “is the authenticity of the outline.” (p.35) The mirror that is held forth to reflect the “past” reflects only a

shadowy structure, a “peep” and not anything substantial. The entire endeavour of the mirror is to make the “past” look like truth, failing which the romance cannot be written. The very essence of a romance is to put forth a distorted image, not because it is in its nature to do so, but because the author cannot but help doing so. The “past” itself can be captured in “a few scattered fragments and broken paragraphs” (p.40) : the rest has to be reconstructed by one’s own subjectivity. This subjectivity, a projection of one’s own image on to the page, is self-consuming with its multiplicity. The mirror of the “past” thus becomes a masquerade, “pass-words and countersigns” – not only a series of veils but also a series of unknown, unknowable signs. The light of the “present” makes Hester recede into the ambiguous darkness of the past:

Yet there were intervals when the whole scene, in which she was the most conspicuous object, seemed to vanish from her eyes, or, at least glimmered indistinctly before them, like a mass of imperfectly shaped and spectral images. Her mind, and especially her memory, was preternaturally active, and kept up bringing up other scenes.... Reminiscences, the most trifling and immaterial, ...came swarming back...; as if all were of similar importance, or all alike a play. (p.57)

The same image of recession into the “past” occurs in the chapter ‘The Interior of the Heart,’ when Dimmesdale’s remorse is described:

He kept vigils, likewise, night after night, sometimes in utter darkness; sometime with a glimmering lamp; and sometimes, viewing his own face in a looking glass... In these lengthened vigils, his brain often reeled, and visions seemed to flit before him; perhaps seen doubtfully, and by a faint light of their own, in the remote dimness of the chamber, or more vividly, and close beside him, within the looking-glass. (p.137)

The looking-glass, instead of reflecting an image of the observer reflects a “past” that itself is distorted and often ornamented. The mirror reflects a secret that is guarded from the onlooker/reader, but the secret itself is lost in the plethora of images that is buried in the “past”. In the ‘Preface’ to *The House of the Seven Gables*, Hawthorne seems to hint at this secret :

The point of view in which this Tale comes under the Romantic definition, lies in the attempt to connect a by-gone time with the very Present that is flitting away from us. It is a Legend prolonging itself, from an epoch now gray in the distance, down into our own broad daylight, and bringing along with it some of its legendary mist, which the Reader, according to his pleasure, may either disregard, or allow it to float almost imperceptibly about the characters and events, for the sake of a picturesque effect. (p.2)

And later, Hawthorne suggests that this “mist” may not be cleared to read a definite moral:

When Romances do really teach anything, or produce any effective operation, it is usually through a far more subtle process than the ostensible one. (p.2)

The mist hides nothing but itself and any attempt to recover something out of it is futile. The mirror of “past” invariably offers an image, but that image being a projection of one’s own subjectivity, it is impossible to determine any concrete visage, for subjectivity itself is unstable and elusive.

One of the strategies used in both the texts under consideration is the use of ornamentation/decor as both highlighting the “past” as well as veiling it. We first come across this notion of ornamentation in the chapter titled ‘The Custom-House’. An elaborate description of the Custom-House is given, with all the minute details to ensure a “novelistic” fidelity. But while

describing the “American eagle, with outspread wings,” Hawthorne suggests that though people expect the interior of the Custom–House to be all soft and snug, the opposite is true as his subsequent description reveals, for “sooner or later, [the eagle] is apt to fling off her nestlings with a scratch of her claw, a dab of her beak, or rankling wound from her barbed arrows.” (p.8) Similarly, the house of the Seven Gables is ornamented all over either with Alice’s Poesies, or by Maule’s well; the house itself is a living hieroglyphic with a secret in its bosom. The Custom–House too, harbours a secret – the secret of the scarlet letter – that the narrator chances upon and now it is his endeavour to lay bare the secret to an audience. Ornamentation or decoration, thus, also becomes representative of the persistence of the past in the present for all these decorations demand and arrest attention. More importantly, they also demand an interpretation, a unipolar meaning that the narrators in both the texts are unable or unwilling to deliver. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the sentence of the magistrates suggests that their community is especially distinguished by a preoccupation with the status of the written and that this preoccupation may take curious forms outside of the usual domain of writing. An example of such extension is to be found at the institutional centre of the community, on the walls of the Governor’s mansion, which are

decorated with strange and seemingly cabalistic figures and diagrams, suitable to the quaint taste of the age, which had been drawn in the stucco when newly laid on, and now had grown hard and durable, for the admiration of after times. (p.98)

The ornamentation inevitably leads to language in its written form which has spread over the surface of the artifacts of the New England colony : be it the Custom-House or the Scarlet Letter or the imaginary red stain of Judge Pyncheon, so similar to that of Dimmesdale's:

Hidden from mankind – forgotten by himself, or buried so deeply under a sculptured and ornamented pile of ostentatious deeds, that his daily life could take no note of it – there may have lurked some evil and unsightly thing. Nay; we could almost venture to say further, that a daily guilt may have been acted by him, continually renewed, and reddening forth afresh, like the miraculous blood-stain of a murder, without his necessarily, at every moment, being aware of it. (p.229)

The characters themselves become written signs, ornamented in such a fashion that the onlooker is forced to read them. Hester Prynne hides behind the ornament of the letter, Dimmesdale hides behind the ornamented veil of a righteous priest, Chillingworth is veiled behind the scientific decor of a physician with his miraculous curing powers, Pearl is a living ornament whom Hester dresses up accordingly :

Her mother... had bought the richest tissues that could be procured, and allowed her imaginative faculty its full play in the arrangement and decoration of the dresses which the child wore, before the public eye. (p.86)

Similarly, in *The House of the Seven Gables*, after giving a prolix description of Phoebe as pertaining to her dress, her youth, her beauty as observed by Clifford Pyncheon, the narrator comments :

He [Clifford] read Phoebe, as he would a sweet and simple story; he listened to her, as if she were a verse of household poetry, which God, in requital of his bleak and dismal lot, had permitted some angel..., to warble through the house. She was not an actual fact for him, but the interpretation of all that he had lacked on earth, brought

home to his conception; so that this mere symbol or lifelike picture had almost the comfort of reality. (p.142)

The ornament is open to multiple interpretations and each observer has his own to offer. The ornament in its very superabundance hides while it promises to reveal. Thus, when Holgrave tries to read Phoebe, he finds it impossible, for beyond the written lies an “abyss” :

With the insight on which he prided himself, he fancied that he could look through Phoebe, and all around her, and could read her off like a page of a child’s story–book. But these transparent natures are often deceptive in their depth; those pebbles at the bottom of the fountain are farther from us than we think. (p.182)

The ornament is like a mirror which refracts and belies the actual depth of the pebbles. Just like the melancholy brook in *The Scarlet Letter* which has innumerable secrets in its depth and which have to be understood by each individual observer in his own fashion, the signs elude interpretation by their very ponderous, ornamented nature. The secret, the moment it slips back into the past, is irredeemable, enveloped in a mist which is impossible to clear. The “past” does make its presence felt but to unveil it is beyond one’s power. In his ‘Preface’ to *The House of the Seven Gables*, Hawthorne seems to suggest that from the vantage point of the present it may be remotely possible to understand the “past”, for “many writers lay very great stress upon some definite moral purpose” (p.2) in a tale of the bygone era, but definitely negates the possibility in the text. In commenting upon Clifford’s debilitated state, the narrator says: “with a mysterious and terrible Past, which had annihilated his memory, and a blank Future before him, he had

only this visionary and impalpable Now, which, if you once look closely at it, is nothing.” (p.149)

A critic points out that one of the strategies employed by Hawthorne to bring out this notion of the irretreivability of “past” is “the alphabetical sign itself,” which proliferates in a sort of printing which fulfills its essential nature: reduplication.”⁹ The red ‘A’ appears on Dimmesdale’s chest (or may do so); on Pearl and *in* Pearl, since she is another version of the letter; and in the sky as a gigantic letter made by a comet. It appears, hugely magnified, in the convex mirror of the Governor; is engraved on Hester’s tombstone; survives as a rag of cloth; and finally leaves its “deep print” in the author’s brain, “where long meditation has fixed it in very undesirable distinctness.” (p.247) The letter gets reflected on all surfaces and acquires different meanings: Angel, Able and at the end just becomes a sign with no referentiality: “The scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world’s scorn and bitterness, and became a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too.” (p.246) In a sense all these meanings are embroidery, decorations, reflections, since any meaning ascribed to the outline is only a single version of an infinite potentiality which is ultimately blankness. Because the alphabetical sign can mean anything in the mirror, it must itself mean nothing. Yet in its irreducible existence as sign, the letter stands as a model for Hawthorne’s relationship to the past : the past intransigently existing in the present and offering a plethora of possible interpretations for the perceiving

consciousness, perhaps requiring a sort of embroidery to bring it to life, but occluded behind any particular reading of it. The "past" thus becomes an embroidered mirror beyond which lies an emptiness, throwing back grotesque and distorted images that cannot be comprehended. The "mist," the "moss" of the past covers it in such a fashion that the original structure can be seen only in its bare outline and not as a totality: the past "peeps" but never comes out in the open day light. The secret remains hidden behind the veil.

'Secret' is a portentous, complex word for Hawthorne, and he uses it frequently and variously in his writings. He invokes it elusively; no single value can always be assigned. A secret may mean what exists but is not disclosed or what is hidden but which eventually can be revealed. It may also mean that which the reader should know but which the writer pointedly refuses to say or cannot express. A secret may be something that a reader does not know, while the author does or something some characters know but which readers are not yet entitled, and may never be, to learn. A secret may be reasonably ascertained yet it can be left maddeningly indeterminate. Some can be verified positively, while others, like the presence and origins of the 'A' on Dimmesdale's breast, cannot. In these broad respects, according to Gordon Hutner, Hawthorne's exploiting of a secret to propel his plots is linked to one of narrative's fundamental features: "...the covert communicating of special knowledge, or sacred wisdom through the telling of a tale, which in turn, suggests an implied message that the careful

interpreter is supposed to recover.”¹⁰ Thus, although each of Hawthorne’s novels end with a revelation or disclosure, each ends somewhat inconclusively, lacking a definite “closure”, offering resolution of less certainty than they can be argued to perpetrate. It remains debatable whether the narrative “closure,” the secrets told, finish the tales appropriately, like the “secret spring” in the *The House of the Seven Gables*. Even the short stories seem to hinge on the revelation of a secret – the meaning of a black veil, the truth of the birth mark, or Young Goodman Brown’s experience, the nature of the bosom serpent – demonstrate that the secrets finally affixed do not answer the several kinds of questions Hawthorne’s tales raise and elaborate as if to suggest that our understanding of it can only be partial. Whether the unknown can be learned and the unsaid disclosed become the very questions that a Hawthorne romance finally investigates. In a well-known letter to Sophia Peabody he writes about his refusal to tell his mother and sisters of his marriage:

Thou wilt not think that it is caprice or stubbornness that has made me hitherto resist thy wishes. Neither, I think, is it a love of secrecy and darkness. I am glad to think that God sees through my heart; and if any angel has power to penetrate into it, he is welcome to know everything that is there. Yes, and so may any mortal, who is capable of full sympathy and therefore worthy to come into my depths. But he must find his way there. I can neither guide him nor enlighten him.¹¹

This idea gets reduplicated in ‘The Custom-House’. While denying the impulse of many writers to reveal all, the narrator urges for a more covert strategy:

But as thoughts are frozen and utterance benumbed, unless the speaker stand in some true relation with his audience – it may be pardonable to imagine that a friend, a kind and apprehensive, though not the closest friend, is listening to our talk; and then, a native reserve being thawed by this genial consciousness, we may prate of the circumstances that lie around us, and even of ourself, but still keep the inmost Me behind its veil. (p.8)

The reader is enticed into the labyrinth of the text, promising to disclose a veiled secret, a secret that is going to solve all the ambiguous alternatives, the subtle distinctions, the ironic contradictions that contribute to produce the secret. At the end of the text, the reader still remains in the dark, frustrated, for the secret is lost in the maze. As has already been pointed out, the Protestant Reformation was founded on the belief of the transparency of the Bible, the Book of no contradictions. The essence of Protestant Reformation lay in the belief that man is governed and controlled by divine initiative, a belief that drew its succour from the axiom: “The kingdom of God is at hand”! All man can do is to persist in attainment of divine grace and mercy which however is predestined. It was this apocalyptic vision that was carried over to the New Land, the vision of a New Jerusalem. The previous chapters have argued that the vision itself lost its power and ruggedness once it came into contact with harsh realities. This however does not mean that the vision was given up, for as A. N. Kaul in reference to the utopian experiments in nineteenth-century America, says “...the myth of America was still operative in the nineteenth century. An ideal society could be created as soon as the individuals concerned subscribed to the ideal principle which was to inform it.”¹² The search for the “ideal principle” was

a search for a utopian dream, the dream that the Pilgrims and the Puritans had brought along with them. The dream itself was based on the apocalyptic principle of revelation, when all the hidden sins and veiled secret will be disclosed before all and sundry. Hawthorne had his stint at the utopian community of Brook Farm with Emerson and Bronson Alcott in 1841. He had realised the futility of the apocalyptic vision as seen in *The Scarlet Letter* : “the impracticable schemes” that were laid out “with the dreamy brethren of Brook Farm.” (p.28) Hawthorne was quick to realise that the apocalyptic vision with its promise of the revelation of all secrets was a notion not only difficult to achieve but impossible to apply.

Interestingly, the word ‘apocalypse’ etymologically means ‘unveiling’ (‘apo’ – un, kalupsis – ‘veil’, ‘obstruction’)¹³ – in religious terms, the veil that God has put over every visage in the form of the original sin and which helps the sinners to hide other sins as well, is to be lifted for the final disclosure – where everything will be visible. The rhetoric of apocalypse also involves a temporal dissolution for it is that moment when past, present and future hold no significance. The Past, thus, can only be exhumed and annihilated in a mythical Future where all things stand revealed to the eyes. The thousands of jeremiads preached before and during the Great Awakening, and even after it stressed this part of the sermon – that God will soon descend on earth with fires and angels to take stock of the past sins of mankind, making it necessary for all to confess and seek divine grace. The utopian dream of Jonathan Edwards that “great things are at hand”, however,

soon turned sour when he realised the subversive tendencies of the Awakening. John Winthrop's vision of the "city upon a hill" within a span of sixty years had become, in the words of Cotton Mather, "a city full of lies, and murders, and blasphemies". It is the nature of an apocalyptic vision that it may not and will not be realised, for its very realisation will deprive the vision of its power – the veil may never be lifted, the "past" may never leave its misty existence, the secret may never come out. It is in this perspective that we must look at the chapter titled 'The Custom-House', whose bosom the people imagine to have "all the softness and snugness of an eider-down pillow." (p.9) However, once inside, it contains a nothingness, or at best an embroidered, ornamental secret which means nothing: "Neither the front nor the back entrance of the Custom-House opens on the road to Paradise." (p.17) The narrator tries his best to comprehend the secret, but it "evades the analysis" (p.34) of his mind. Behind the ornamented veil of the Custom-House lies another veil which leads to another veil, each in the process emanating a range of meanings. In *The Seven Gables*, the house is an ornamented veil, behind which lie innumerable veils: the death of Governor Pyncheon, Maule's well, Alice's Poesies, Clifford's secret, Hepzibah's sorrow. The scientific rationalisation of Holgrave at the end of the text does not leave the reader completely satisfied, for the secret that the novel demonstrates but cannot say is the disharmony underlying its sentimental vision of union and progress. Moreover, coming from the mouth of Holgrave, who is a participant in the utopian community schemes, that Hawthorne

appellated as the “dreamy brethren”, the final “closure” of the novel leaves much to be desired. More questions remain unanswered than the few that are answered. Holgrave’s, and perhaps, Hawthorne’s bestowing a daydream of how past, present and future get unified by providing the castle-in-the-air with a definite closure, by showing that the wrongdoing of earlier generations is finally set right. Yet this fantasy only disguises and cannot undo romance’s “more subtle” and demagogic extension. *The House of the Seven Gables* becomes emblematic of the realisation of apocalypse gone awry; secrets are revealed but the whispers of the “past” can still be heard in the house:

Maule’s well, all this time, though left in solitude, was throwing up a succession of kaleidoscopic pictures,...The Pyncheon-elm, moreover, whispered unintelligible prophecies. And wise Uncle Venner, ...seemed to hear a strain of music, and fancied that sweet Alice Pyncheon—after witnessing these deeds, this by-gone woe, and this present happiness, or her kindred mortals—had given one farewell touch of a spirit’s joy upon her harpsichord, as she floated heavenward from the HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES. (p.319)

The last chapter of the romance titled aptly ‘The Departure’ portraying the change of house from the gabled one to the country-seat of Judge Pyncheon may impress upon the reader a belief that the mystery of the “past” has been satisfactorily solved. Hawthorne very subtly suggests that Chanticleer the rooster and his family have also been shifted to the new house – the hen with “the peculiar speckle of its plumage, the funny tuft on its head, and a knob on each of its legs”, which Holgrave believed to be representative of the “oddities of the Pyncheon family, and that the chicken itself was a symbol of

the life of the old house; embodying its interpretation, likewise, although an unintelligible one, as such clues generally are.” (p.152) The past is carried over to the new house with its unintelligibility and elusiveness.

The apocalypse is the final “unveiling” where all knots are to be opened. This vision is invoked at least twice by Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter*, first in the chapter titled ‘The Minister’s Vigil’ where he promises to hold the hands of Pearl and Hester “at the great judgement day”:

Then, and there, before the judgement seat, thy mother, and thou, and I, must stand together! But the daylight of this world shall not see our meeting. (p.145)

And then again in ‘The Leech and his Patient’, Chillingworth’s repeated proddings to pry out the secret from Dimmesdale’s heart forces the latter to reply: “The heart, making itself guilty of such secrets, must perforce hold them, until the day when all hidden things shall be revealed”. (p.124) But what *is* the hidden thing that has to be revealed? That is precisely the question that motivates readers to find a meaning in the otherwise frustrating text. The answer, if not the secret, may lie in the dichotomy that Hawthorne creates between “Romance” and the “Novel”. The Novel, according to Hawthorne, deals with minute fidelities; it is the domain of the sunshine, the domain of the “possible” where things are represented as *they are* or as they are “*probable*”. The Romance, on the other hand, revolves around the ancient mist; things are represented in a distorted shape with the aid of moonlight and the glow of coal–fire. In the domain of the Romance, the reader has to grapple “a great deal more...with the clouds overhead, than

with any portion of the actual soil". (p.3) Yet, Hawthorne takes great pains to recreate the past by depicting actual historical personages and actual historical mansions that existed in Salem in early seventeenth century. Moreover, Hawthorne gives a further historical twist to his Romance by claiming that the original scarlet letter is still in his possession, and that it is based on a "real" manuscript written by Surveyor Pue. After perusing the manuscript, Hawthorne knows what the scarlet letter is meant to convey – Hester Prynne as an adulteress – and yet it "evades the analysis" of his mind. Similarly, Dimmesdale's guilty secret of his adulterous union with Hester Prynne is revealed in the middle of the text, but the secrets which really baffle the reader are; what is there on Dimmesdale's chest? what does Chillingworth see? why does the minister keep his hand on his heart? And what is it that the audience sees when the final revelation takes place? The answer may lie in Dimmesdale's own admission that his secret cannot be bared in the "sunlight" of this world. It is only on the judgement day that revelations can be made; a secret will remain a secret till then. Moreover, the domain of the sunshine is the "actual soil" where revelations may be "possible" or more "probable". And once Dimmesdale steps out into the sunlight to hold hands with Pearl and Hester the secret can never be disclosed, for it lies outside the scope of Romance to venture into the sunlight. All it can do is to concentrate on the clouds, the mist, rather than show the "actual" happening. The apocalypse cannot admit of an unveiling in the present, for it is in its very nature to defer it to the future. The revelation,

the apocalypse, that Dimmesdale promised is further deferred and will keep on getting so, for the mirror of the past can only show partially: a full comprehension is impossible.

To return to the image of the mirror, the text of *The Scarlet Letter* itself becomes a distorted image once seen in the light of Surveyor Pue's documents. The ghost of Surveyor Pue compels Hawthorne to write – “to bring his mouldy and moth-eaten lucubrations before the public” (p.36) – and Hawthorne has no other alternative. The presence of the past forces him to postpone a narrative that was present before him in the Custom-House:

The wiser effort would have been, to diffuse thought and imagination through the opaque substance of today, and thus to make it a bright transparency; ... A better book than I shall ever write was there; leaf after leaf presenting itself to me, just as it was written out by the reality of the flitting hour, and vanishing as fast as written, only because my brain wanted the insight and my hand the cunning to transcribe it. At some future day, it may be, I shall remember a few scattered fragments and broken paragraphs and write them down, and find the letters turn to gold upon the page.
(pp.39-40)

The essential point is that the narrative that is to be written in the future, deals with the “past” where the author again has to create the “semblance of a world out of airy matter”, (p.39) as he is doing now by transcribing the narrative related by Surveyor Pue's documents. The “semblance” that the mirror of the “past” throws back as an image is an intense subjectivity that slides and defers the fixing of the meaning which the narrator in the text, and the readers of the text, are trying to discover. The historical element of the romance, its historicity, thus becomes a kind of a decoration, an

ornamentation that promises to lead to the ultimate secret, just like the Puritanic sermon in the two centuries preceding Hawthorne, took as its point of departure the innate depravity of man since the Fall and the exact historical predicament that they were in, and ended with the apocalyptic vision of the revelation, The revelation never came in colonial New England, nor would it come in the antebellum society in which Hawthorne was writing, for the precise reason that the secret keeps its “inmost Me behind the veil”; and the veil may never be lifted Gordon Hutner makes an interesting point:

Not only does the learning and telling of secrets lie near the very centre of Romantic Prometheanism, but also is sympathy, the enabling power of response to a world newly being seen as mysterious, filled with hidden sources of knowledge. The probing of mystery, the learning of secrets, emerges either as the positivist, scientific endeavour or the characteristic reaction to a social life grown increasingly complex and challenging. Sympathy marks the human effort to establish and verify meanings in a world no longer illuminated by Divine Revelation.¹⁴

Hawthorne invites his readers, “kind and apprehensive” to participate in the events of the text, to “sympathize” with the text, as Hester does with Dimmesdale's Election Sermon: “the sermon had throughout a meaning for her, entirely apart from its indistinguishable words”. (p.228) Hawthorne however, proscribes the “closest friend” to come into the space of the narrative for the precise reason that an inapprehensive, uncritical sympathy may lead to credulity – in believing in what one's seeing. Only when the reader is critically sympathetic, will he be able to understand the secret underlying the text. There is however, a qualification: the author will never

reveal his "inmost Me." Paradoxically, Hawthorne thus invites the kind, sympathetic and apprehensive reader to share the secret and yet refuses to divulge the secret at the end. It is this that leads to the reader's frustration. However, the secret cannot be or should not be revealed for it violates the sanctity of the human heart, the crime that Chillingworth is guilty of. It cannot be revealed because the secrets of the heart, the "inmost Me", will be revealed on the judgement day. Any attempt to understand the secret in the present is futile for the "past" distorts and the future defers.

Critics have wondered about the last episode of the novel – Hester's return to her scene of suffering – and the reasons why Hawthorne made her come back.¹⁵ I contend that the contradiction between the immense power accorded to Hester's individuality and her meek submission to an overwhelmingly oppressive system at the end of the story, can be worked out by referring to the notion of the "past". The entire 'Custom-House' chapter forcefully argues about the irrevocability of the "past", and throughout this chapter, I have tried to show how the "past", "peeps", reduplicates, distorts and makes its presence felt in Hawthorne. In the chapter titled 'The Pastor and his Parishioner', Hester tries to lift the spirits of the hapless Dimmesdale by repeatedly referring to the future:

Thou art crushed under this seven years' weight of misery, replied Hester,... "But thou shalt leave it all behind thee! It shall not cumber thy steps, as thou treadest along the forest-path; neither shalt thou freight the ship with it, if thou prefer to cross the sea. Leave this wreck and ruin here where it hath happened! Meddle no more with it! Begin all anew! Hast thou exhausted possibility in the failure of

this one trial? Not so! The future is yet full of trial and success...
(p.187)

And a little later,

“Let us not look back! The past is gone! Wherefore should we linger upon it now? See! With this symbol, I undo it all, and make it as it had never been!” (p.191)

In the ‘Introductory’ chapter however, Hawthorne categorically stated: “But the past was not dead. Once in a great while, the thoughts that had seemed so vital and so active, yet had been put to rest so quietly, revived again.” (p.30) The inevitability of the “past” cannot be denied. In fact, all the images that Hester invokes in her persuasive speech – that of the “forest path”, the “sea”, the “wreck and ruin”, and the “scarlet letter” itself are imbued with tinges of the past : the forest with its sadly murmuring brook carrying its own secrets, the sea with its immense and unfathomed secret (an image that was to find its most powerful exposition in the hands of Melville), the “wreck and the ruin” which already has a mirror image in the description of the Custom–House with its manifold secrets, and the scarlet letter as a sin that is prior and inescapable.¹⁶ The final reference to the future reminds us of Dimmesdale’s apocalyptic vision when all will be revealed. Hester however, refers to it as when all will be concealed, a subversion of the revelatory principle itself. Hester thus, has to return to New England with the burden of the “past”. The “past” however, is no more readable for it gives a different interpretation this time:

“But in the lapse of the toilsome, thoughtful, and self–devoted years that made up Hester’s life, the scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world’s scorn and bitterness, and became a type

of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too". (p.246)

The "past" has again shifted and distorted its image and the future still retains its apocalyptic promise of revealing a secret, though that secret may never be known.

The "past" as inherited by Hawthorne with its confounding of the Church and the State, of vision and reality were transmuted by him into literary symbols which promised to reveal but kept the secret undisclosed. The American experiment, the "livelie experiment", to borrow the words of Roger Williams, from its very inception resembled a biblical myth and like all myths when applied to the strict categories of reality – economic, social, religious or political – failed to mean anything after a few decades. The inherent contradictions and paradoxes in the Puritanic system, the mixing of the domains of "the Bible and the Sword", the rhetoric of apocalypse and the struggle to conjoin the rising growth of "Uncle Sam's Gold" with spiritual matters with the aid of compromises like the Half-Way Covenant, and later the Great Awakening failed because, as Hawthorne suggests, the presence of the "past" was bound to hinder the rhetoric of a futuristic apocalypse. Like all utopian experiments based on this vision, this too faded. And it is from this haze, this mist, that Hawthorne culls out his images and vindicates the impossibility of ever comprehending the "past" in its totality as well as the inevitability of this endeavour. It needed another contemporary of

Hawthorne, and a massive endeavour like *Moby-Dick*, to show the “all-colored no-color of atheism”, to bring out the blackness in whiteness and vice versa, to question all the culturally established signs created by the Puritans and leave them, as it were, in a limbo, beyond retrieval. In Melville, there are no more secrets but only signs that clash: the veil that still has a possibility of being lifted to reveal an awful secret in Hawthorne, itself becomes a “hieroglyphic” in Meville, beyond which a person can never venture.

Notes :

- ¹ Hawthorne, as quoted in J. Golden Taylor, *Hawthorne's Ambivalence Towards Puritanism*, (Utah:1965), p.3.
- ² Ibid, p.7.
- ³ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables* (ed.) Seymour L.Gross, (New York: 1967), p.1. All references are to this edition.
- ⁴ Joseph Hillis-Miller, *Hawthorne and History: Defacing It*, (Cambridge: 1991), p.78.
- ⁵ David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*, (New York :1988), p.86.
- ⁶ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, (Delhi:1988), p.34. All subsequent references are to this edition.
- ⁷ Harry Levin, *The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville*, (New York: 1960), p.29.
- ⁸ Jonathan Edwards, *Personal Narrative*, (ed.) C.C. Goen, (Brunswick: 1973), p.86-87.
- ⁹ Allan Gardner and Lloyd Smith, *Eve Tempted: Writing and Sexuality in Hawthorne's Fiction*, (New Jersey: 1984), p.11.

-
- ¹⁰ Gordon Hutner, *Secrets and Sympathy: Forms of Disclosure*, (Athens: 1988), p.4.
- ¹¹ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Letters to Sophia Peabody*, (Columbus:1962) as quoted in Michael T. Gilmore, *The Middle Way: Puritanism and Ideology in American Romantic Fiction*, (New Brunswick: 1977), p.82.
- ¹² A.N. Kaul, *The American Vision: Actual and Ideal Society in Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, (New Haven: 1963), p.34.
- ¹³ The Source is *Oxford English Dictionary* .
- ¹⁴ Gordon Hutner, *Secrets and Sympathy*, pp.13-14.
- ¹⁵ For example, Michael T. Gilmore suggests that Hawthorne strikes a “mean” by making Hester come back – a mean between the stringent Puritanic structure and the total anarchy of the “forest”, in Gilmore, *The Middle Way*, (New Brunswick : 1977); pp.78, 81, 83; For the sexual overtones and both Hester’s and Dimmesdale’s repressed sexual tendencies, resulting in the wearing of the phallic symbol at the end of the text, see Allan Gardner and Lloyd Smith, *Eve Tempted : Writing and Sexuality in Hawthorne’s Fiction*, (New Jersey : 1984), p.28, 34; For the letter as sign and it being in the very nature of sign to get reduplicated (a reason why Hester returns), see Joseph Hillis-Miller, *Hawthorne and History : Defacing It*, (Cambridge : 1991), pp.36, 37; Roy R. Male argues that as the letter itself represents both a “Sin of the Present” and the “Sin of the Past” (the Original Sin), Hester has to come back to atone for the latter, for which all mankind is toiling, Male, *Hawthorne’s Tragic Vision*, (Austin : 1957), pp.98-100; Leonard J. Fick argues from the religious viewpoint that Hester’s “sin” is a “material one” and has to be penanced for in the same place, Leonard J. Fick, *The Light Beyond : A Study of Hawthorne’s Theology* (Westminister : 1955), pp.110-112. Also refer to Charles Berryman, *From Wilderness to Wasteland*, (New York : 1979), pp.78-84, and A.N. Kaul, *The American Vision*, (New Haven : 1963).
- ¹⁶ Roy R. Male says of the adultery, “Of course it is prior; it is the literal, the original sin”, *Hawthorne’s Tragic Vision*, p.99.

CHAPTER IV

THE APOCALYPTIC WHITE WHALE

“... and yet, in some dim, random way, explain myself I must, else all these chapters might be naught.”

‘The Whiteness of the Whale’, *Moby-Dick*

Moby-Dick was published in the year 1851 and reviews in newspapers and periodicals on both sides of the Atlantic were numerous and on the whole may be described as mixed. No one found the novel dull and there was a marked tendency for reviewers to indulge in extremes of praise or censure, sometimes both in the same article. Almost everyone grappled with the problem of generic classification. But while the immediate critical reaction was equivocal and not encouraging, the delayed popular reaction was decidedly negative. By 1891, the year of Melville's death, *Moby-Dick* like his other books, had almost entirely sunk from sight.¹

Moby-Dick was perhaps the most complex and powerful text to emerge from nineteenth-century America. Melville was himself keenly aware of the difficulties of articulating his vision through the medium of prose and of doing so in a way that would engage the attention of his contemporaries. The imposing task that Melville undertook to delineate in his text takes as its point of departure the questioning of all forms of culturally established signs. All presuppositions, religious frameworks be it Calvinistic or liberal are subjected to rigorous analysis. The text becomes the focal point of a maze of conflicting meanings. The “truth” in the

Puritanic sermons was shrouded by death, though the promise of disclosure was never revoked, for on the Day of Revelation all will stand revealed. Individual endeavours to understand this 'truth' were bound to fail without God's saving Mercy. To grapple with this "truth" becomes the ultimate aim of *Moby-Dick*, employing the same apocalyptic framework that the Puritans used.

This chapter tries to probe into the problems, failures and narrative strategies employed by Melville to create his masterly work of art. For this purpose, I have tried to understand the text as the failure of apocalyptic vision itself. My argument hinges on the notion of the "past" and how this "past" is incorporated into the apocalyptic framework of the narrative. I have also tried to analyse how the "past" becomes an enmeshed network in itself and heaps of erudition to retrieve some meaning out of it only lead to an admission of a failed enterprise. The chapter is an attempt to understand this failure.

In one of the most pregnant remarks on the literature of a democracy Alexis de Tocqueville said that a democratic writer who sees man in his metaphysical essence rather than in his social trappings would have a more distinctive vision than his feudal predecessors :-

Man springs out of nothing, crosses time, and disappears forever in the bosom of God; he is seen but for a moment, wandering on the verge of the two abysses, and there he is lost.²

The image of man as 'wanderer', as a Promethean figure in search of truth was perhaps the most dominant image of the Romantics, and the recurrent theme in antebellum writings of nineteenth-century America. It was also the theme of thousands of Puritan Sermons preached in colonial America, drawing their images freely from the Old Testament. The Puritans naturally identified themselves with the persecuted Jews in search of Israel, and the myth of America's Manifest Destiny drew its succour from the elaborate social and civil framework that the Puritans created, relying heavily on Calvinistic theology and Old Testament versions of the wandering Jews. The New Land, in the writings of the Puritans got transformed into the Holy Land, the ideal commonwealth with no conflicts and contradictions. The two 'abysses', pre-natal and post-mortem thus became areas of speculative interest while the wanderer was caught between the two. Man, in between these two 'abysses', came to be progressively seen as preparing for his journey to the other world where all hidden things are to be revealed. From its very inception, the Commonwealth was founded on the rhetoric of apocalypse: the final revelation where doubts and conflicts are to be solved. To prepare the wanderer for this final encounter, the Puritans created an elaborate semantic framework that could not only explain the diverse 'natural' signs that presented themselves, but also the multiplicity of experience that the new world offered. The founders of the colony were fascinated by the status of the written word and proceeded to transcribe the signs into a meaningful structure, strict and well-codified. And this

semantic structure embodying the visible interpretable sign, becomes the leit motif of *Moby-Dick*.

Melville wrote an extraordinary series of letters to Hawthorne during the composition of *Moby-Dick*. In one of these, he wrote:

... [My] deepest concern is with visable truth, ... [that is], ... with the apprehension of absolute condition of present things as they strike the eye of the man, who fears them not, though they do their worst to him.³

The “visable truth” becomes the central theme of *Moby-Dick*. The story of Ishmael is a probe not only into the recent past—the experience that he had undergone—but also the prehistoric past. The story takes us back to the beginning of time, to what Melville calls an “aboriginal awfulness”:

Though we know the sea to be an everlasting terra incognita, so that Columbus sailed over numberless unknown worlds to discover his own superficial western one;... yet for ever and for ever, to the crack of doom, the sea will insult and murder him, and pulverize the stateliest frigate he can make; nevertheless, by the continual repetition of these very impressions, man has lost that sense of the full awfulness of the sea which aboriginally belongs to it.⁴

In chapter 103 of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael speaks of :

.... a large and liberal theme! We expand to its bulk. To produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty theme. No great and enduring volume can ever be written on the flea, though many there be who have tried it. (p. 394)

Strictly speaking, Ishmael was referring to the book’s principal subject—whales—rather than to its theme. The mighty theme of *Moby-Dick* is the quest for what Ishmael calls ‘the ungraspable phantom of life’ (p.9) “that demon phantom that, some time or other, swims before all human hearts”(p. 207), the predominant embodiment of which in the text is Moby Dick itself,

that “grand-hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air”(p.10). The “mighty theme” of the book is not only the “visible truth” but also the “ungraspable phantom” that lurks over it. The visible sign that Ishmael repeatedly tries to decipher, slides, leaving him frustrated and helpless. The semantic framework that he tries to impose on his experiences aboard *Pequod*, defies any form of schematization. Ishmael, the narrator is the person who has “escaped alone to tell” (p. 493) the reader. He is the knower, who has pre-knowledge of *Pequod's* disaster. But by the very act of narrating the story he is trying to grasp the past, and thus accord a significance to it. The narration takes the form of a quest to understand all written signs and then fit them into the narrative framework. In chapter I, speaking of the human urge to go to the sea, Ishmael says:

...Surely all this is not without meaning. And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all. (p.5)

The “image” as has been seen in Hawthorne, still reflects an elusive reality in Melville, but while the former posits the possibility of some form of retrieval, in the latter all notions of retrieval are annihilated. Ishmael's endeavour is to take the “plunge” though he is aware of the fact that the “ungraspable phantom” will never be grasped.

Ishmael's general orientation in the cetology chapters is aptly characterized by Robert Richardson as "mythic investiture": the infusion of what we know to be natural phenomena with a sense of mystic otherness:

Although we never lose sight of the fact that *Moby Dick* is *simply* a large albino sperm whale, it is, from the start, the *idea* of the great whale that compels us as it compels Ishmael... we see the whale through a veil of scholarship, rumour, legend, and myth; by imperceptible degrees we come to acquiesce in the appropriateness of such things, and we eventually find ourselves regarding the whale as something more than a whale.⁵ [Italics mine]

Although Richardson's "simply" strikes me as narrowing down the options that the text leaves open, this is a remarkable summation. The mythic "investiture" and concurrently Ishmael's attempt to grapple with the 'grand-hooded phantom' can be best seen at work in the cetology chapters. A convenient example is chapter 85, "The Tail". The chapter starts with a wealth of cetological data testifying to the Melvillean (and perhaps, American) passion for informative unfamiliar lore:

... it comprises upon its surface alone, an area of at least fifty square feet. The compact round body of its root expands into two broad, firm, flat palms or flukes, gradually shoaling away to less than an inch in thickness. (p. 325)

This is followed by a rhetorical intensification of the data: "Could annihilation occur to matter, this were the thing to do it". The actuality – the "real" substance of the data slowly starts getting dissolved in a series of metaphors, e.g., when the tail is compared to an elephant's trunk. As the sign itself starts getting lost in the maze of data, Ishmael mythifies it:

Out of the bottomless profundities the gigantic tail seems spasmodically snatching at the highest heaven. So in dreams, have I

seen majestic Satan thrusting forth his tormented colossal claw from the flame Baltic of Hell. (p.326)

Even the mythic framework is complicated by reference to the subjectivity of the onlooker/reader. The myth thus, acquires the form of a narcissistic enquiry:

But in gazing at such scenes, it is all in all what mood you are in; if in the Dantean, the devils will occur to you; if in that of Isaiah, the archangels. (p. 328)

But at the end of the chapter, even this subjectivity – “the key to it all” – is put to question. The entire framework gets annihilated by Ishmael’s confession of scribal inadequacy: the failure to transcribe the object under consideration. This however, is not only a failure of language but a failure of subjectivity itself:

The more I consider this mighty tail, the more do I deplore my inability to express it. Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep; I know him not, and never will. But if I know not even the tail of this whale, how understand his head? Much more, how comprehend his face, when he has none? (p. 328)

Ishmael’s decision to board *Pequod* is prompted by his intention to encounter the “visible truth”, the world of pre-existing signs:

“But what takes thee a-whaling? I want to know that before I think of shipping ye.”

“Well, sir, I want to *see* what whaling is. I want to *see* the world.” (p.66) [Italics mine]

But when he does encounter the visible, he fails to cull out any meaning from it. Even the story of Narcissus—the “key” –fails to transport him beyond the perceived.

The written sign occupied as exalted a place in the Puritanic system, as the perceived reality, for the very existence of the written depended on the status of the *seen*. The reality that was open to the gaze could be then transcribed, and transmitted among the inhabitants of the colony. The notion which the image of the "city upon a hill" rested upon was that of the gaze, as has been pointed out in chapter 1. Ishmael starts with the same assumption: the visible is transcribable. The cetology chapters thus are a striving towards capturing the elusive 'phantom'. In the words of Lawrence Buell :

This leads, on the level of symbol interpretation, to a reading of *Moby-Dick* as an allegory of reading and particularly as an allegory of unreadability: the undecipherability of the whale as text. Ishmael's account in 'Cetology' of his enterprise as an incomplete 'draught', classifying whales in terms of books, lends support to this interpretation, as does the pervasive hieroglyphic imagery.⁶

While agreeing with Buell's general argument, I have strong reservations about his claim that this undecipherability is completely dependent on the "narcissistic projection of one's desire." It seems to me that Melville undercuts all notions of subjectivity applying to them a rigorous questioning. *Moby-Dick* ultimately becomes an encounter with the realm of the past (not merely the near past but the Origin) dramatizing parallel failures of human striving (Ahab) and knowing (Ishmael). The narrative leaves open the question of whether the white whale is a divine or demonic agent, leaving us in a state of wonder rather than with a confident reduction of the whale to the status of material object or narcissistic projection.

In a sense, Ishmael's quest is of the same nature as Ahab's: to go beyond the visible sign. But while Ishmael's repeated attempts fail leaving him frustrated, Ahab is ready to "strike through the mask" though there's "naught beyond":

All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event – in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough...That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me. (p.469)

Just like Ishmael, Ahab's quest is to understand the visible—but with a difference. Ahab has projected his narcissistic impulses on to the white whale, and thus sees nothing but "inscrutable malice" in it. Ishmael, on the other hand, tries to subjectively interpret all visible signs, but fails.

The text of *Moby-Dick* from the beginning creates an apocalyptic framework, alluring the reader into the maze of the text, promising to reveal a grand secret. Quite aptly, the first chapter is titled 'Loomings'. Particularly interesting in this regard is the first close-up of Moby Dick:

Not the white bull Jupiter swimming away with ravished Europa clinging to his graceful horns; his lovely, leering eye sideways intent upon the maid; with smooth bewitching fleetness, rippling straight for the nuptial bower in Crete; not Jove, not that great majesty Supreme! did surpass the glorified White Whale as he so divinely swam. (p. 469)

Later moments in the chase sequence call this passage into question, with suggestions that its intent might be malignant or haphazard. But the rhetoric

of apocalypse is never revoked. The reader of *Moby-Dick* is all the more eager to experience the white whale's appearance as apocalyptic after such long foreshadowing – after hundreds of premonitory references to the “grand-hooded phantom like a snow hill in the air”. The text entices the reader and then seems to say: “This is not quite reality; this is only preparatory information or interpretation”. For almost the entire narrative, the text's central subject is an absent object, thus raising the expectations of the reader to a fervent pitch. Not until a third of the book is over does an encounter with even an ordinary whale take place. During this long buildup, the repetitious quality of the cetology chapters and of Ishmael's meditations in general, combined with the fact of Moby Dick's absence, reinforce the plausibility of the frequent hints that the quest is empty of meaning. At the same time, the plethora of apocalyptic images and the repeated admissions of intellectual defeat and skepticism create intense frustration for the reader as well as the narrator and with this a great longing for closure, which the text at the end *seems* to provide. At the end, the narrative becomes much more linear; the whale's eruption into the text and stoving the *Pequod*, seems to provide a resolution, at least at the plot level which seems to counter the prior state of indefiniteness. The narrative structure is reminiscent of Father Mapple's sermon about the tale of Job – without the Calvinistic frame. In each work, soul-searching and expostulation build up to an intolerable pitch of uncertainty until abruptly resolved by authoritative, repressive intervention. In the tale of Jonah, God intervenes to put an end to

his sufferings after he seeks grace; in Melville, the whale intervenes but the confession is yet to take place. The confession of Ishmael–Jonah takes the form of the narrative.

T. Walter Herbert, Jr. points out that:

He (Melville) was intimately familiar with the theological formulations by which liberal and orthodox believers sought to resolve those dilemmas for themselves, and with the language in which they accused each other of being hopelessly enmeshed in confusion.⁷

The dilemma that Herbert mentions was the age–old conflict between Arminianism and orthodox Calvinism. Calvin's doctrine of the providence was the crux of the matter. He held that nothing happens in this world except by God's counsel and decree. In other words, the truth about the nature of the universe and the unfolding of human experience is what God has ordained. To put it bluntly, the world is predestined, and believers devote their lives to making what happens in the world conform to His Will. Opposed to this was the liberal viewpoint, that the principle of predestination made God the author of sin. The problem was that God whose justice was the moral centre of Protestant theology, Himself seemed to act unjustly, since He ordained the sins that men commit.⁸ The first decade of the nineteenth–century (even before the birth of Melville in 1819) saw an intensification of this debate to such proportions that congregations were divided and a mood of bitterness prevailed. The debate continued for more than fifty years and Melville must have been aware of it. The crux of the

liberal outlook was this: Man has a certain moral dignity and God upholds and respects it. At the heart of *Moby-Dick* lies this dilemma.

In chapter 129, Ishmael comments: "...now that all his successive meetings with various ships contrastingly concurred to show the demoniac indifference with which the White Whale tore his hunters, whether sinning or sinned against (p.458) – suggesting a God run amok. Melville realized that the liberal outlook with its emphasis on man's sovereignty was bound to fail at some point of time for it still did not completely do away with the notion of a theocentric philosophy. The liberals, though believing in the freedom of man, still were dependent on the notion of God. What their philosophy amounted to was a reversal of the Calvinistic doctrine: man's good deeds vindicated God's mercy and benevolence, instead of the other way round as argued by the Calvinists. The liberal outlook was only a step away from utilitarianism (as has been shown in chapter I). The Calvinistic notion on the other hand, was firmly based on orthodoxy. In the text, both philosophies are proved to be redundant. It invokes traditional theological materials in such a way as to produce a characteristic dissonance, in which conflicting perspectives are pressed upon the reader simultaneously. By this means, the reader's relation to the narrative is continually established and disestablished; we find ourselves struggling to find a framework in which to place what is being said.

It is in this context that Ishmael as narrator plays a central role in the configuration of the text. The quest of Ishmael consists of a search for a

framework to understand his past – the experience he underwent on *Pequod*. And for this purpose, he delves into the past to come up with a wealth of sources to be cited on the subject under consideration. The past that he is trying to fathom, however, gets lost in the superabundance of the written sings that he collects, leaving him hapless. However, throughout the text the reader is promised a revelation, and this apocalyptic prospect is never given up. What the text ultimately creates, is an ontological instability, a semantic ground that is inherently insecure. The text takes us to the outermost horizons of theological discourse, and abruptly makes us realise that it is an ‘ungraspable phantom’. The absolute reality, the zone of revelation in the Calvinistic doctrine is itself shown to be a zone of tumult where a nothingness resides:

Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way? Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a colour as the visible absence of colour, and at the same time the concrete of all colour; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows— a colourless, all-colour of atheism from which we shrink? (p.170)

The theme of man as ‘wanderer’ between the two ‘abysses’ assumes added significance in this light. Both Ishmael and Ahab are wanderers trying to confer some form of meaning on to an experience that is prior to the actual happenings in the text. Ahab’s dismemberment leads him to accord an “inscrutable malice” to the white whale; Ishmael’s experience aboard *Pequod* leaves him skeptical, the narrative embodying a herculean struggle

to grasp the “ungraspable”. And it is in this context, that we may try to understand the manoeuvres and strategies employed by the narrator, Ishmael. The “past” as an inscription becomes the dominant image of the text, which the narrator tries to decipher. The puritanic obsession with the written sign is used as a framework, only to be taken to pieces.

The story of Jonah serves as the Biblical framework to the story of *Moby-Dick*. This framework however, is interspersed with various other Biblical characters to make it more dense: Ahab, Bildad and Peleg, Elijah, Rachel, Charity and so on. The canonical narratives divested of their temporality are employed to create a semblance of a religious discourse. Ishmael takes recourse to a narrative strategy that is employed by the Biblical narrative, and for that matter all religious texts: the promise of revelation and the fulfillment of a prophecy. Ishmael however, does not restrict himself to the Bible itself. *Moby-Dick* presents a succession of kaleidoscopic images showing religious practices from all parts of the world, be it the Oriental or Occidental. The *Pequod* becomes the focal point where all religions converge in the quest of one “visible truth”: the white whale. All aboard the *Pequod* at some point of time had an encounter with the “grand-hooded phantom”:

As they narrated to each other their unholy adventures, their tales of terror told in words of mirth; as their uncivilized laughter forked upwards out of them, like the flames from the furnace; ... as the wind howled and the sea leaped, and the ship groaned and dived, and yet steadfastly shot her red hell further and further into the blackness of the sea and the night;... then the rushing *Pequod*, freighted with savages, and laden with fire, and burning a corpse,

and plunging into that blackness of darkness, seemed the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander's soul. (p.367)

The *Pequod* becomes the transnational and transtemporal territory where the drama of the story unfolds.⁹ It also starts resembling an apocalypse never to materialise.

The characters of the text are not only immured in the past, but also assume the nature of written signs. Ahab is marked like the biblical Ahab:

Threading its way out from among his grey hairs, and continuing right down one side of his tawny scorched face and neck, till it disappeared in his clothing, you saw a slender rod-like mark, lividly whitish... whether the mark was born with him, or whether it was the scar left by some desperate wound, no one could certainly say. (p.108)

Any attempt to understand the written takes the form of a curious mixture of myth, legend and folklore and ultimately, leaves the reader as well as the narrator overwhelmed and frustrated. Queequeg's arm sports a curious tattoo which arouses the instinctive response of Ishmael to decode; the tattoo becomes a mystic symbol which is amenable to interpretation but at the end represents a "hieroglyphic". Moby Dick has a "peculiar snow-white wrinkled forehead" representing a "hieroglyphic", with a "pyramidical white hump." (p.155) All objects take the scriptal form: be it "Spouter-Inn", "the Doubloon", the sharks ("with strange cabalistic figures", p.263) the pulpit, the ship and so on. In a sense, the characters themselves are constrained and restricted by the biblical frame that has been thrust upon them. It must be remembered that Ishmael's quest is for "truth" and in his strivings to find it he takes recourse to a pervasive biblical imagery with a view to cull out

some meaning. And the narrative in this sense acquires the form of an apocalypse.

The pervasive “death” imagery including the onerous quality of the text seems to lend support to this reading. Ishmael takes to the sea as a “substitute for pistol and ball” (p.7). His quest is for the terminal ‘truth’, and in a sense this for him is the sinking of the *Pequod* and death of his shipmates. In other words, the quest lies in the ability to go beyond death, to “strike through the pasteboard mask”. The discourse of revelation however that Ishmael employs gets problematised at the end. The text till the chase sequence seems to ward off any possibility of revelation as Ishmael repeatedly fails to disclose anything. But the text does provide a closure, seemingly succumbing to the power of the apocalyptic vision – the elaborate structure of the past so craftily built up seems to provide a final resolution when the white whale bursts into the text.¹⁰ The text seems to support the interpretation that Lawrence R. Thompson provides – that Moby-Dick is god incarnated and Melville’s narrative is essentially “anti-Christian” in nature questioning the justice and mercy of God.¹¹ This may prompt the reader to believe that Moby-Dick is the malevolent God, as Ahab perceives it to be, as at the end with its “inscrutable malice” it does sink the *Pequod*. The apocalypse of the white whale, both because of the mythicized imagery investing it and because of its dramatic position within the narrative, gives at least the appearance of substance to the void created by the speculations of both Ahab and Ishmael. Absence is replaced by plenitude—at least of a

sort. The promised revelation does seem to take place in the form of the white whale.

The text however, it seems to me, problematizes the issue. Ishmael is the initiator of the discourse of *Moby-Dick*, he being the perceiving consciousness in the text. The rhetoric of apocalypse sustained through almost the entire length of the text is situated within his commentary. The vision of the 'grand-hooded phantom' with its ungraspability is invoked by Ishmael and throughout the cetology chapters his endeavour is to prove this. But as soon as the revelation occurs in the form of Moby Dick at the end, Ishmael disappears from the narrative framework. And here precisely lies the problematics of the text. Paul McCarthy tries to explain this by referring to the narrative structure of *Moby-Dick*. He argues that the narrative in the last three chapters assumes a linearity which is lacking in the previous chapters, and Melville by introducing the whale at the end puts an end to the intense frustration of the reader and the narrator by providing a closure, at least at the level of plot. The digressive narrative structure throughout the text impedes the progress of plot. However, at the end the linearity seems to accord a certain kind of resolution at the plot level.¹² With this reading I fully concur. I would however, like to extend the point by taking recourse to Paul Ricoeur's distinction between "prophetic" and "narrative" in his 'Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation.' As a textual phenomenon, revelation as Ricoeur see it is not "a monolithic concept" but a "pluralistic" and "polysemic" compound of overlapping forms of

discourse. The “prophetic” consists in “the idea of a double author of speech and writing. Revelation is the speech of another, that is God, behind the speech of the prophet.”¹³ In *Moby-Dick* Ahab’s discourse claims the equivalent of this, but not Ishmael’s. Ahab claims to speak as “the Fate’s lieutenant”(p.480). To be sure, his notion of right “worship” is “defiance” (p.375). What allows him to see his speech as having prophetic authority, however, is that his perceptions have a more than personal validity. On the Quarter-Deck, for instance, he justifies the pursuit of *Moby-Dick* not merely for the sake of vengeance but because “Truth hath no confines” (p.140). Ahab’s discourse of revelation fails to be prophetic for it is subsumed in that of Ishmael’s, which makes no such pretense, even if at times it gestures faintly in that direction, as when Ishmael seriocomically announces his voyage as part of “the grand programme of Providence” (p.10). Ahab’s prophecies are nullified in the course of the narrative by enclosing it within a secularized and on the whole mock-serious commentary. The text however, does not altogether do away with the prophetic nature of the discourse of revelation, for Fedallah’s three Macbeth-like prophecies do come to pass at the end of the text. The prophetic framework is retained as in Elijah’s case, but only Ahab’s prophecies are negated in the framework of Ishmael’s commentary.

Conceived as revelation narrative, Ishmael’s “mighty book” gains an added importance. The repetitious nature of the cetology chapters with its promise of apocalyptic revelation and packed with Ishmael’s speculations

provide the basis for understanding this. The chapter titled 'Cetology', begins with Ishamel's bold assertion :

Already we are boldly launched upon the deep; but soon we shall be lost in its unshored, harbourless immensities. Ere that come to pass; ere the *Pequod's* weedy hull rolls side by side with the barnacled hulls of the leviathan; at the outset it is but well to attend to a matter almost indispensable to a thorough appreciative understanding of the more special leviathanic revelations and allusions of all sorts that are to follow. (p.115).

But what follows is a long list of citations from authors, rumours, mythology, popular folklore, and the final admission of failure. The chapter ends with the all-will-be-revealed image :

Finally. It was stated at the outset, that this system would not be here, and at once, perfected. You cannot but plainly see that I have kept my word... For small erections may be finished by their first architects; grand ones, true ones, ever leave the copestone to posterity. Heaven keep me from ever completing anything. This whole book is but draught - nay, but the draught of a draught. (p.126)

It is with reference to this passage that Ricoeur's definition of revelation as "narrative" may be helpful :

What is essential in the case of narrative discourse is the emphasis on the founding event or events as the imprint, mark or trace of God's act. Confession takes place through narration, and the problematic of inspiration is in no way the primary consideration. God's mark is in history before being in speech. It is only secondarily in speech in as much as this history itself is brought to language in the speech-act of narration.¹⁴

Pequod's encounter with *Moby Dick* is an awe-inspiring and deeply mysterious event that gives rise to the telling of the story in the first place. But at the end the reflective commentary of Ishmael itself disappears giving way to a more linear narrative. *Moby Dick's* appearance in the text seems to

“complete” the text which Ishmael promises to leave incomplete. My argument is that one of the reasons, may be the main reason, why Ishmael as narrator disappears at the end of the text, is to dramatize the promise that Ishmael made : no revelations can be made by him. The revelation as “narrative” takes over to contain both commentary (Ishmael) and false prophecy (Ahab). Both the forms of discourse had proved to be ineffective in the course of the text and thus, the revelation can take place minus the commentary of Ishmael which contains the prophetic discourse of Ahab. In retrospect, Ishmael’s style of circumlocution can be seen both as a way deferring and warding off the terror of the once-experienced encounter, and as a preparation for our also experiencing that encounter as powerful and mysterious. Ishmael appeals to experience as the proper test and ground of human learning – “a whale-ship was my Yale College and Harvard” – (p.97) yet he must swim through libraries in order to tell his story, must swim through scores of extracts in order even to get to his story. This learning magnifies the proportions of the problem of the white whale : but linguistic speculations about it fade away at the end of the text in the face of the actual appearance of the white whale. In other words, Ishmael’s endeavour can never be more than a ‘draught about a draught’; his speculations will never end. Thus, when he returns to the narrative framework in the ‘Epilogue’ to reclaim it, he speaks like Jonah: “I alone am escaped to tell thee”. The discourse of revelation has completely co-opted him. He can now only act as a messenger-servant, as a reporter of the catastrophe. The endeavour to

understand “God’s mark” has failed. The white whale still defies any attempt at reduction to the level of either as an empty sign or a mere narcissistic projection. The vision of apocalypse still retains its immense potentialities, though the past promises to reveal.

Ishmael, floating on a coffin is picked up by the ship *Rachel* in search of its lost children. The death imagery takes us back to the beginning of the narrative where Ishmael’s quest starts – the suicidal impulse. Ishmael cannot go beyond the ‘pasteboard mask’ of death, for beyond death lies the Revelation which will never leave its veiled existence.

After the completion of *Moby-Dick*, Melville wrote to Hawthorne:

...[I] express a sense of unspeakable security ... on account of your having understood the book. I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb.¹⁵

But the question that haunts the reader is : where does the “wickedness” lie? Melville was an avid reader of nature’s spiritual “significances”, but without much confidence either in the validity of those readings or in the Puritanic doctrine of the mystical correspondence between spiritual and natural realms. This uneasiness and anxiety did not, however, cause Melville’s interest in reading nature to slacken as shown in *Moby-Dick* – a massive endeavour to *see* through the signs. On the contrary, it acted as an energising force, pushing Melvillean narrative in the direction of a repetitive sifting of nature’s possible significations. In the process, however, the Calvinistic framework is rigorously questioned and sometimes even ridiculed, leaving it

in completely disarray. And it is in this sense that *Moby Dick* is a “wicked” book, for it probes at not only the puritanic culturally established sign, but all forms of signs that hold forth the promise of a certain revelation. *Moby-Dick* thus, is one of the most ambitious products of religious imagination that nineteenth-century America produced. It was also the most powerful questioning of the Calvinistic framework that the Puritians had so diligently constructed : in *Moby-Dick* the framework crumbles and fades away.

Notes :

- ¹ My source is McSweeney Kerry, *Moby-Dick: Ishmael's Mighty Book*, (Boston: 1986), p.14.
- ² Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, (ed.) Phillips Bradley, (New York: 1956), p.80.
- ³ Herman Melville as quoted in McSweeney Kerry, *Moby-Dick*, p.13.
- ⁴ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, (London:1992), p.240. All subsequent references are to this edition.
- ⁵ Robert D. Richardson, Jr., *Myth and Literature in the American Renaissance*, (Bloomington: 1978), pp.212-13.
- ⁶ Lawrence Buell, 'Moby-Dick as Sacred Text' in *New Essays on Moby-Dick*, (ed.) Richard H. Brodhead, (New York: 1986), p.61.
- ⁷ T.Walter Herbert, Jr., 'Calvinistic Earthquake: Moby-Dick and Religious Tradition, In *New Essays on Moby-Dick*, (ed.) Richard H. Brodhead, (New York: 1986), p.113.
- ⁸ For a detailed discussion on these two opposing viewpoints, see T.Walter Herbert, Jr., *Moby-Dick and Calvinism: A World Dismantled*, (New Brunswick, N.J.:1977), pp.5-11, 29, 81.
- ⁹ For a comprehensive discussion on how nationalism and providence plays an important role in *Moby-Dick*, see James Duban, *Melville's Major*

Fiction: Politics, Theology and Imagination, (Illinois: 1983). The thrust of Duban's argument is that Ishmael salvages a sense of optimism positing his own survival as an example of God's promissory grace for a reformed America. Duban seems to indicate that the transnational character of the text is only to vindicate and emphasize America's reformist impulse. I think this reading narrows down the immense significative possibilities that the text leaves open. Also see, Carolyn L.Karcher, *Shadow Over the Promised Land: Slavery, Race and Violence in Melville's America*, (Baton Rouge, 1980).

¹⁰ Bainard Cowan claims that "the final events of the book do away with ambiguity and determine all meaning towards one end", in Bainard Cowan, *Exiled waters: Moby-Dick and the Crisis of Allegory*, (Baton Rouge: 1982), p.162.

¹¹ Lawrance R.Thompson, *Melville's Quarrel with God*, (Princeton: 1952), pp. 162-164.

¹² Paul Macarthy, "The Twisted Mind": *Madness in Herman Melville's Fiction*, (Iowa City: 1990), p.89

¹³ Paul Ricoeur, 'Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation' in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Lewis S.Mudge, (Philadelphia: 1980), pp. 75, 81.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

¹⁵ Herman Melville as quoted in McSweeney Kerry, *Moby-Dick: Ishmael's Mighty Book*, (Boston: 1986), p.8.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books

- Backus, Isaac. *History of New England*. 2 Vols. Edited by David Weston. Newton : 1871.
- Baird, James. *Ishmael : A Study of the Symbolic Mode in Primitivism*. New York : 1960.
- Berryman, Charles. *From Wilderness to Wasteland : The Trial of the Puritan God in American Imagination*. New York : 1979.
- Blau, Richard Manley. *The Body Impolitic : A Reading of four Novels by Herman Melville*. Amsterdam : 1979.
- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Ahab*. New York : 1991.
- Boswell, Jeanette and Richard Tuerk. *The American Renaissance and the Critics*. Wakefield : 1990.
- Bradford, William. *Of Plymouth Plantation : 1620–1647*. Edited by Samuel Eliot Morrison. New York : 1959.
- Brodhead, Richard H., ed. *New Essays on Moby–Dick*. New York : 1986.
- Brodtkorb, Paul. *Ishmael's White World : A Phenomenological Reading of Moby–Dick*. New Haven : 1965.
- Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion (1536)*. Translated by Leo Pfeffer. New Haven : 1927.
- Colacurcio, Michael J., ed. *New Essays on The Scarlet Letter*. New York : 1985.
- Cowan, Bainard. *Exiled Waters : Moby–Dick and the Crisis of Allegory*. Baton Rouge : 1982.
- Cowley, Malcolm. *A Many–Windowed House*. Carbondale : 1970.
- Cragg, Gerald Robertson. *From Puritanism to the Age of Reason : A Study of Changes in Religious Thought Within the Church of England, 1660 to 1770*. Cambridge : 1966.
- Crews, Frederick Campbell. *The Sins of the Fathers : Hawthorne's Psychological Themes*. New York : 1966.
- Curry, Thomas J. *The First Freedoms*. New York : 1986.

- Duban, James. *Melville's Major Fiction : Politics, Theology and Imagination*. Illinois : 1983.
- Ehler, Sidney Z., ed. *Church and State Through the Centuries : A Collection of Historic Documents with Commentaries*. Translated by Sidney Z. Ehler and John B. Morall. Westminster : 1954.
- Ellis, George E. *The Puritan Age*. Boston : 1888.
- Eusden, John Dykstra. *Puritans, Lawyers and Politics in Early Seventeenth-Century England*. New Haven : 1958.
- Felt, Joseph B. *The Ecclesiastical History of New England*. Boston : 1862.
- Fick, Leonard J. *The Light Beyond : A Study of Hawthorne's Theology*. Westminster : 1955.
- Fogle, Richard Harter. *Hawthorne's Fiction : The Light and the Dark*. Norman : 1964.
- Folsom, James K. *Man's Accidents and God's Purposes : Multiplicity in Hawthorne's Fiction*. New Haven : 1963.
- Fossum, Robert H. *Hawthorne's Inviolable Circle : The Problem of Time*. Deland : 1972.
- Franklin, Benjamin. *Autobiography (1781)*. Edited by Leonard W. Labaree et al. New York : 1956.
- Frederick, John J. *The Darkened Sky : Nineteenth-Century American Novelists and Religion*. Notre Dame : 1969.
- Friedman, Maurice, ed. *Problematic Rebel : Melville, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Camus*. Chicago : 1970.
- Gardner, John Fentress. *Melville's Vision of America : A New Interpretation of Moby-Dick*. New York : 1977.
- Gerber, John C., ed. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Scarlet Letter*. New Jersey : 1968.
- Gilmore, Michael T. *The Middle Way : Puritanism and Ideology in American Romantic Fiction*. New Brunswick : 1977.
- Glazier, Lyle. *Decadence and Rebirth : Hacettepe Lectures in American Literature*. Ankara : 1971.
- Guetti, James. *The Limits of Metaphor : A Study of Melville, Conrad and Faulkner*. Ithaca : 1967.

- Haskins L. *Law and Authority in Early Massachusetts*. Boston : 1960.
- Heimert, Alan. *Religion and the American Mind : From the Great Awakening to the Revolution*. Cambridge : 1966.
- Herbert, T. Walter, Jr. *Moby-Dick and Calvinism : A World Dismantled*. New Brunswick, New Jersey : 1977.
- Hillis-Miller, Joseph. *Hawthorne and History : Defacing It*. Cambridge : 1991.
- Howard, David Barrymore. *Tradition and Tolerance in Nineteenth Century Fiction*. London : 1966.
- Howe, Mark Dewolfe. *The Garden and the Wilderness : Religion and Government in American Constitutional History*. Chicago : 1965.
- Hudson, Winthrop S. *The Great Tradition of the American Churches*. New York : 1953.
- Hutner, Gordon. *Secrets and Sympathy : Forms of Disclosure*. Athens : 1988.
- Issac, V. Luther. *Puritanism in the Short Stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville*. Hyderabad : 1981.
- Kaplan, Harold J. *Democratic Humanism and American Literature*. Chicago : 1972.
- Karcher, Carolyn L. *Shadow Over the Promised Land : Slavery, Race and Violence in Melville's America*. Baton Rouge : 1980.
- Kaul, A.N. *The American Vision : Actual and Ideal Society in Nineteenth Century Fiction*. New Haven : 1963.
- Kerry, MacSweeney. *Moby-Dick : Ishmael's Mighty Book*. Boston : 1986.
- Levin, Harry. *The Power of Blackness : Hawthorne, Poe, Melville*. New York : 1960.
- Macarthy, Paul. *"The Twisted Mind" : Madness in Herman Melville's Fiction*. Iowa City : 1990.
- Macloughlin, William G. *New England Dissent : The Baptists and the Separation of Church and State*. 2 Vols. Cambridge : 1971.
- Male, Roy R. *Hawthorne's Tragic Vision*. Austin : 1957.
- Marnell, William H. *The First Amendment : The History of Religious Freedom in America*. New York : 1964.

- Mather, Cotton. *Magnalia Christi Americana (1702)*. 2 vols. Hartford : 1855.
- *Wonders of the Invisible World (1694)*. Boston : 1866.
- Matthiessen, F.O. *American Renaissance : Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*. New York : 1941.
- Mellard, James M. *Using Lacan, Reading Fiction*. Urbana : 1991.
- Miller, Perry. *The New England Mind : From Colony to Province*. Cambridge : 1960.
- , ed. *The American Puritans*. New York : 1956.
- Mudge, Lewis S., ed. *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*. Philadelphia : 1980.
- Niebuhr, Helmut Richard. *The Kingdom of God in America*. New York : 1937.
- Olson, Charles. *Call me Ishmael : A Study of Melville*. New York : 1947.
- Pfeffer, Leo. *Church, State and Freedom*. Boston : 1967.
- Poirier, William Richard. *A World Elsewhere : The Place of Style in American Literature*. New York : 1966.
- Reed, Walter L. *An Exemplary History of the Novel : The Quixotic versus the Picaresque*. Chicago : 1981.
- Reno, Janet. *Ishmael Alone Survived*. Lewisburg : 1990.
- Reynolds, David S. *Beneath the American Renaissance : The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*. New York : 1988.
- Richardson, Robert D., Jr. *Myth and Literature in American Renaissance*. Bloomington : 1978.
- Russel, Bertrand. *History of Western Philosophy*. London : 1961.
- Seaver, Paul S. *The Puritan Lectureships : The Politics of Religious Dissent (1560-1662)*. Stanford : 1970.
- Shapiro, Charles. *Twelve Original Essays on Great American Novels*. Detroit : 1958.
- Sinott, Edmund W. *Meetinghouse and Church in Early New England*. New York : 1963.
- Smith, Lloyd and Allan Gardner. *Eve Tempted : Writing and Sexuality in Hawthorne's Fiction*. New Jersey : 1984.

- Sprague, William B. *Annals of the American Pulpit*. New York : 1860.
- Stokes, Anson Phelps. *Religious Freedom in America*. New York : 1950.
- Taylor, J. Golden. *Hawthorne's Ambivalence Towards Puritanism*. Utah : 1965.
- Thompson, Lawrance Roger. *Melville's Quarrel with God*. Princeton : 1952.
- Tocqueville, Alex D. *Democracy in America*. Edited by Phillips Bradley. New York : 1956.
- Walker, Williston. *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*. New York : 1893.
- Washington, Joseph R. *The Politics of God*. Boston : 1967.
- Welter, Rush. *Antebellum Reform in America*. New York : 1978.
- Young, Phillip. *Hawthorne's Secret : An Untold Tale*. Boston : 1984.

Articles

- Baym, Nina. "Melville's Quarrel with Fiction." In PMLA 94 (1979) : pp.909-23.
- Buell, Lawrence. "Moby-Dick as Sacred Text." In Richard H. Brodhead, ed. *New Essays on Moby-Dick*, pp.53-72. New York : 1986.
- Gaustad, Edwin S. "Religious Liberty in America : The Contributions of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison." In David E. Harrell, ed. *Indian Journal of American Studies*, Vol.25, Number 1, pp.1-22. Hyderabad : 1995.
- Herbert, Walter T., Jr. "Calvinist Earthquake : Moby-Dick and Religious Tradition." In Richard H. Brodhead, ed. *New Essays on Moby-Dick*, pp.109-40. New York : 1986.
- Mayhew, Jonathan. "Observations on the Charter and the conduct of the society for the propagation of the Gospel in foreign parts; designed to show their non-conformity to each other." In Sidney Z. Ehler, ed. *Church and State Through the Centuries*, pp.215-235. Westminster : 1954.
- Vejnar, Robert J. "How to Preserve Republican Government : The Debate in Antebellum Virginia Over Education Reform." In David E. Harrel, ed. *Indian Journal of American Studies*, Vol.25, Number 1, pp.55-71. Hyderabad : 1995.