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The Scarlet Letter and the Red Star: Hawthorne's Appeal to China's Students of American Literature

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Darrel Abel has posed the critical question: Who in fact wrote Hawthorne's autobiography? It seemed to Abel that Julian Hawthorne "derived" the first-person account of his father's early years from the text of Stoddard's piece and claimed a privileged authority for this version.²³ The "autobiography" has been frequently cited over the past century--by Conway in 1890, by Fred Lewis Pattee in 1896, by Annie Fields in 1899, by George Woodberry in 1902, and more recently by Newton Arvin, Edward Mather, Randall Stewart, and Mark Van Doren.²⁴ But Abel cautions scholars "to refrain from tacitly perpetuating the supposition" that the autobiography Hawthorne sent Stoddard in 1852 "is somewhere accessible in his undoubted phrasing."²⁵ That is, Abel implies that Julian Hawthorne tampered with the Stoddard text to produce a document with "striking effect" but no special authority.

Not necessarily. There is a compelling reason to credit Julian Hawthorne's reliability in this particular instance. R. H. Stoddard, the only person known to have read Nathaniel Hawthorne's original letter, twice reviewed Julian Hawthorne's biography upon its publication. On neither occasion did he question the veracity of the "autobiographical memorandum." Indeed, in the longer of the reviews he even excerpted several hundred words from it. He explicitly declared that "Hawthorne wrote to me in the autobiographical fragment" the very words his son attributes to him.²⁶ It is certainly possible, moreover, that Stoddard had shared his copy of Nathaniel Hawthorne's letter with Julian. Though Abel asserts "they did not become acquainted until years after the publication of *Hawthorne and His Wife*,"²⁷ Bassan proves that the two men corresponded as early as 1871.²⁸ Either Stoddard and Julian Hawthorne conspired to falsify evidence, or the autobiographical memorandum is accurate as the younger Hawthorne recorded it. That is, either Hawthorne shares responsibility for his misstatements, as in the case of the legend about *The Scarlet Letter*, or he deserves more credit as a biographer than he has received.

Julian Hawthorne's biography of his parents is not without its flaws. It scrupulously avoids even the barest mention of James T. Fields, despite Fields' role as publisher of Nathaniel Hawthorne's major works, because Sophia Hawthorne believed the firm of Ticknor & Fields underpaid royalties on these books after her husband's death. Fields had described his friendship with his father in detail, the younger Hawthorne weakly protested later, and "for me to emphasize these things would be superfluous."²⁹ Julian Hawthorne was also faulted for publishing derisive comments about Margaret Fuller his father had jotted in his private Roman notebook. As Frederick T. Fuller observed, the son's "publication of this extract is to be ascribed to no other cause than that he is not one to spoil a sensation to save a friend."³⁰ On the surface, the accusation seems fair, for the younger Hawthorne betrays a "settled prejudice"³¹ against feminism in general and Fuller in particular in his public reply to her nephew's charge: "What Margaret Fuller was in herself is of very slight importance, but she represents a large and still surviving class, the existence of which is deleterious to civilization and discreditable to human

nature. With the advance of progress this class must disappear."³² Hawthorne was repeatedly censured by Christopher Cranch, Caroline Dall, and others for failing to exercise proper discretion in the preparation of the biography. It is "a pity that the son could not have imitated the wise reticence of the wife," Dall opined, "and refrained from printing that part of the 'Roman Journal' which relates to Margaret Fuller."³³ Whether or not Julian Hawthorne planned his biography to become a *cause célèbre*, he could hardly have been expected to omit so provocative a passage merely to avoid controversy. In this particular case, ironically, Julian Hawthorne was flayed by the critics for excerpting a document of unquestioned authenticity. Not only was he a more conscientious biographer than usually conceded, it seems, but he revealed more about his father than some readers can tolerate.

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Notes

1. Davidson, *Hawthorne's Doctor Grimshawe's Secret* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1954) vi.
2. Abel, "Who Wrote Hawthorne's Autobiography?" *American Literature* 28 (March 1958): 75. See also Vernon Loggins, *The Hawthornes* (New York: Columbia UP, 1951) 316-29.
3. Clarke, "Hawthorne and Margaret Fuller," *Independent*, 1 January 1885: 1-2.
4. "Nathaniel Hawthorne and His Wife," *Atlantic Monthly* 55 (February 1885): 259-65.
5. Bassan, *Hawthorne's Son* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1970) 163. See also Bassan, "Julian Hawthorne Edits Ebe," *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 100 (1964): 274-78.
6. Hawthorne, *Nathaniel Hawthorne and His Wife* (Boston: J. R. Osgood, 1884) I, 340.
7. Matthews, *An Introduction to the Study of American Literature* (New York: American Book Co., 1896) 115. See also Matthews, "Nathaniel Hawthorne," *St. Nicholas* 22 (March 1895): 387.
8. Hawthorne, "The Making of *The Scarlet Letter*," *Bookman* 74 (December 1931): 402.
9. Stewart, *Nathaniel Hawthorne: A Biography* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1948) 93-94.
10. W(illiam) C(harvat), "Introduction," *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1962) I, xix.
11. Reid, "A Note on the Date of *The Scarlet Letter*," *Furman Univ. Bulletin*, NS 4 (Winter 1957): 35. See also Hubert H. Hoeltje, "The Writing of *The Scarlet Letter*," *New England Quarterly* 27 (March 1954): 342.
12. Arlin Turner, *Nathaniel Hawthorne: A Biography* (New York: Oxford UP, 1980) 190.
13. James R. Mellow, *Nathaniel Hawthorne in His Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980) 303.
14. Conway, "A Fresh Green in Kensal Green," *Harper's Weekly* 22 April 1871: 369.
15. Conway, *Emerson at Home and Abroad* (Boston: J. R. Osgood, 1882) 217.
16. "Editor's Easy Chair," *Harper's Monthly* 43 (August 1871): 453.
17. "The Late Mrs. Hawthorne," *Boston Transcript* 21 March 1871: 2.
18. Lathrop, "Biographical Sketch," in *The Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1883) XII, 496-97.

19. Stoddard, *Recollections, Personal and Literary* (New York: Barnes, 1903) 123.
20. Stoddard, "Nathaniel Hawthorne," *Lippincott's* 43 (February 1889): 252-53. For the record, the document is not located among the Stoddard papers at Columbia Univ. or in the New York Public Library, the major depositories.
21. Stoddard, "Nathaniel Hawthorne," *National Magazine* 2 (January 1853): 19.
22. Hawthorne, *Hawthorne and His Wife*, I, 96.
23. Abel, 75-76.
24. Conway, *Life of Hawthorne* (New York: Scribner and Welford, 1890) 20; Pattee, *History of American Literature* (Boston: Silver, Burnett and Co., 1896) 242-43; Fields, *Nathaniel Hawthorne* (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1899); Woodberry, *Nathaniel Hawthorne* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin) 40; Arvin, *Hawthorne* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1929) 10; Mather, *Nathaniel Hawthorne* (New York: Crowell,

- 1940) 43-44; Stewart 18; Van Doren, *Nathaniel Hawthorne* (New York: William Sloane, 1949) 23.
25. Abel 77.
26. See Stoddard, "The Hawthornes," *Critic* 13 December 1884: 277-78; and especially "Hawthorne and His Wife" *Independent* 1 January 1885: 10-11.
27. Abel 75.
28. Bassan, *Hawthorne's Son*, 61-62. See also *Critic* 2 July 1887: 12.
29. Hawthorne, "Mr. Hawthorne and His Critics," *Boston Transcript* 5 February 1885: 4.
30. Fuller, "Hawthorne and Margaret Fuller Ossoli," *Literary World* 10 January 1885: 11-15.
31. Henry B. B[lackwell], "Literary Notices," *Woman's Journal*, 6 December 1884: 394-95.
32. Hawthorne, "Mr. Hawthorne and His Critics," *Boston Transcript*, 5 February 1885: 4.
33. Dall, "The Hawthorne Book Censured," *Springfield Republican* 15 December 1884: 2.

The Scarlet Letter and the Red Star: Hawthorne's Appeal to China's Students of American Literature

Geoffrey Kain

Having taught numerous works of American literature--novels, short stories, essays, poems--for two and half years to junior and senior undergraduates and graduate students of English literature and language in two Chinese universities (Fuzhou University and Xiamen University, both in the southeastern coastal province of Fujian, during 1984-1985 and 1986-1988), I have been struck by the almost unanimous recognition of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* as the students' "number one." Other major works have their own peculiar merits, but none measures up to Hawthorne's novel. *Huckleberry Finn*? Noteworthy chiefly because of Huck's daring involvement in Black emancipation, as well as because of the novel's exposure of the social degeneracy stemming primarily from money lust. *Moby-Dick*? Oddly composed and painfully long, despite the author's reassuring recognition of life as "eternal warfare," as ceaseless struggle and endless antagonisms. *Walden*? Also reassuring because of Thoreau's forceful denunciation of materialism, though somewhat mad, too, because of his extreme individualism and his need to "touch Heaven." Some available twentieth-century American novels have a strong general appeal, too--such as Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, and Ellison's *Invisible Man* (primarily because they poignantly reveal cultural ills). But *The Scarlet Letter*. Here is an American novel that speaks directly and forcefully to the Chinese university student. Why?

What moves young Chinese readers of *The Scarlet Letter* is that, unlike nearly all other works of American literature, it embodies a reality that more closely parallels their experience than it does the experience of most any contemporary American reader. Rather than standing as yet another prefabricated target or field on which to exercise their requisite literary-political ide-

ology, *The Scarlet Letter* refreshingly invites them to remove the Marxist spectacles with which they are trained and expected (required) to view works of literature and empathize with the difficulties of Hester Prynne and the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, the unhappy couple who feel that they must never reveal to the truth about their "illicit" love affair. So many Chinese student readers of Hawthorne's classic romance recognize along with Hester and Dimmesdale the strain and tension of hidden love and suppressed passion.

Chinese university students understand as well as anyone could the contrast represented by the rose and the cold black iron of the prison door (that isolates the guilty adulteress and mother), the symbols Hawthorne introduces in the first chapter of the conflict between human passion and inflexible authoritarian (Puritan) strictures. On Chinese campuses (at least the large majority of them, particularly those removed from the massive centers of great urban sophistication, such as Shanghai and Beijing), it is still unusual to see a couple walking together frequently, making it clear to all that they are indeed a couple; it is, for that matter, very unusual to see a young man and woman sitting side by side (by choice) in the same classroom. Until recently (in the early-to-mid 1980s, depending on the city and province), students were forbidden to date or to attend dance parties. It remains illegal for students to marry. Students hesitate to be seen frequently in the company of a member of the opposite sex. As students, the dictate has it, their business is to study; love and marriage are to come after the years of dedicated and disciplined study are completed. One who dates openly will almost certainly be subjected to "criticism" by his or her Political Advisor (a Party-appointed individual whose occupation it is to oversee each student's political education and "right behavior"). Official political criticism goes on the individual's record, and the record, in most

cases, is permanent (the "black mark" of Party criticism does, indeed, serve a function similar to that of the scarlet "A" Hester is condemned to wear always on her breast). The obstacles to romance posed by the domineering Chinese educational/political machinery is further supported by Chinese custom, which has it that to appear regularly as a couple implies betrothal. And for a young woman to be seen at various times in the familiar company of various men suggests promiscuity, which is taboo.

To a good many of China's university students who would like to adopt the freer, more open dating patterns of the West this means, of course, a profoundly troubling conflict between the urge for freer expression of their affections and the authoritarian hindrances to that expression manifested in tradition and implemented by Party policy. Most of the students' romantic relationships are thus forced "underground." At night, under cover of blackness (made all the blacker by the near absence of street lights), the couples can be dimly discerned walking hand in hand or sitting arm in arm in out of the way corners of the campuses, whispering secrets. The dark public parks and dark movie theaters mask the face of lovers who find brief solace, like Hester and Dimmesdale when they meet secretly in the forest, "sufficiently deep into the wood to secure themselves from the observation of any casual passerby." The student couples comprehend with full force what Hester means when she says to her illegitimate daughter, Pearl, "We must not always talk in the marketplace of what happens to us in the forest."

The "grim rigidity" of the "iron visages" in Hawthorne's tale is typical of those who (like the prison itself) uphold and enforce the "dismal severity of the Puritanic code." There is a striking parallel between the unbending fundamentalist dogma of seventeenth-century New England Puritanism and the atheistic dogma of twentieth-century Chinese communism, between the Puritan governor and the Party bureaucrat: both hold that human nature has been polluted by a past mistake (for the Chinese Communists it is the nature of their own countrymen). For the Calvinists, of course, this was original sin; for the Chinese Communists this "sin" was allowing foreign (i. e., capitalist) influence to extend too far. The response in the late 1940s was to expel non-Soviet foreigners and capitalism alike and to purge or annihilate those having connections with this source of "black" influence. These rectifying "purification waves" have been fairly regular in China, though of differing durations and intensities: the "Anti-Rightist" campaign of the late 1950s, the "Glorious Cultural Revolution" of the 1960s and '70s, the "Campaign Against Spiritual Pollution" of 1983, the "Campaign Against Bourgeois Liberalization" of 1987, and the (as yet unnamed) violent military suppression of the pro-democracy uprisings and the subsequent round-up of "counter-revolutionaries" in numerous cities and on many university campuses in 1989. All of these assaults on ideological strays (or those unjustly or mistakenly labeled as ideological strays--in the spirit of the witch hunt) have been, in a sense, expressions of the "dismal severity of the Puritanic code," as Hawthorne refers to it in The Scarlet Letter.

The attempt to purify China by stripping it

(repeatedly) of its "decadent" vestiges and instilling in the citizens the political ideals of leftist ascetism closely resembles the reactions of Puritans against the ornate and sensuous image of Catholicism, the whore of Babylon (images of Cromwell and the Roundheads smashing cathedral statuary across Britain in the seventeenth century come to mind). One is reminded here not only of Hester's outward conformity in tucking her long and dark, lustrous and luxuriant hair up under her plain cotton cap, but also her inward, silent though potent, defiance in richly and ornately embroidering in gold thread her shameful scarlet "A" for all to witness. The personal tension here revealed with Hester is the significant tension that is the heart of the novel, and it is precisely this tension--of authoritarian accusation and suppression opposed to individual expression--that Chinese university readers identify as central to their personal experience (manifested in just one significant way in their underground liaisons) and, beyond that, central to understanding the human pulse of their vast and richly complex nation.

There is not so great a distance, after all, between the figure Hawthorne paints of the early seventeenth-century Boston citizen in his plain grays and blacks and the image (still readily witnessed, though less universal in the larger cities than it was ten years ago) of the Chinese citizen in his plain grays and blacks and army greens, living in his simple and wholly functional concrete block housing unit (or dormitory) with its whitewashed and army-green walls, cement floor, and bare light bulb. Both anti-decorative orders, Calvinist Puritanism and Chinese Communism, have realized their pervasive disciplinary authority through an insistent fusion of moral and civic determinism. And, in both the world of The Scarlet Letter and contemporary China, that determinism is validated by the watchful eyes of the general citizenry.

The Chinese students who must live in this atmosphere of tension know very well the predicament of Hester and Dimmesdale, and some of them know by experience better than most Western readers can imagine the solace and freedom offered by darkness, by the "forest," the private world that can be found only outside the confines of their rigid social network. And just as the Chinese student reader of The Scarlet Letter invariably applauds Hester's strength (and I have read and listened to their applause) in facing the inflexible strictures of society and enduring the criticism that is her lot, so there appears now increasingly often couples willing to behave as couples in view of all in the full light of day, willing to allow that red rose bud to blossom in the dry earth near the jailhouse door. Their willingness to "stand together on the scaffolding in the marketplace," to face the crowd as Hester and Dimmesdale finally do and hand in hand exhibit their love is a deeply significant revolution of the heart.

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