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SCARLET LETTERS READ AND RESPONDED:
THE QUESTION OF TRUTH IN HAWTHORNE AND UPDIKE

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MARCIA ALVES

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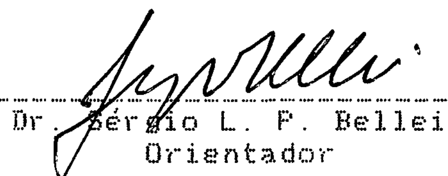
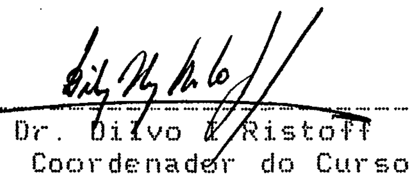


Dr. Sérgio L. P. Bellei
Orientador

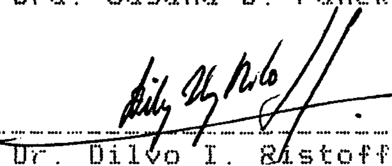


Dr. Dilvo I. Ristoff
Coordenador do Curso

BANCA EXAMINADORA:

Dr. Sérgio L.P.Bellei

Dra. Susana B. Funck



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To Mario, Inah, and Volnei.

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RESUMO

Esta dissertação tem como objetivo investigar a questão da verdade nas versões de Nathaniel Hawthorne e John Updike para o episódio "the scarlet letter": **The Scarlet Letter**, **A Month of Sundays**, **Roger's Version** e **S.**.

Supondo-se que de Hawthorne a Updike (do século XIX ao século XX) houve uma evolução no conceito de verdade, a qual pode ser vista como consequência de uma mudança no conceito de leitor, decidiu-se concentrar especial atenção na atitude dos "leitores/narradores" em relação à verdade em cada um dos quatro romances.

O termo leitor/narrador refere-se ao tipo de leitor que deixou sua posição de mero observador para realmente atuar no processo de produção de significado, ou seja, o leitor para quem a leitura é uma atividade criativa que inclui escrever ou narrar.

O primeiro capítulo desta dissertação caracteriza este "leitor criativo" e traça a evolução deste novo conceito através da discussão das teorias de Wolfgang Iser, Norman Holland e Roland Barthes sobre a experiência da leitura.

Os quatro capítulos que se seguem, apresentam os narradores de Hawthorne e Updike como leitores/narradores semi-criativos (Iser) e criativos (Holland e Barthes) respectivamente, oferecendo uma descrição detalhada do comportamento destes. Nestes capítulos, fica claro que, enquanto em Hawthorne os leitores/narradores não somente

apresentam-se fortemente comprometidos com a verdade mas também acreditam que podem alcançá-la, em Updike os leitores/narradores não chegam à verdade e nem desejam aproximar-se dela.

A conclusão chama atenção para o fato de que, tendo migrado da passividade para a ação, o leitor/narrador mergulhou no território da ambiguidade e não mais espera alcançar a "verdade absoluta". Aquele leitor/narrador com um forte compromisso com a verdade, apoiado pela atmosfera de certeza do século XIX, transformou-se em um leitor/narrador condenado a viver aprisionado na linguagem e privado de qualquer acesso à verdade final e à certeza.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation aims to investigate the question of truth in Nathaniel Hawthorne's and John Updike's versions of the scarlet letter episode -- namely **The Scarlet Letter**, **A Month of Sundays**, **Roger's Version**, and **S.**.

Assuming that from Hawthorne to Updike (from the nineteenth to the twentieth century) there has been an evolution in the concept of truth which can be seen as a consequence of a change in the concept of reader, it was decided to focus attention upon the "readers/narrators's" attitude toward truth in each of the four novels.

The term reader/narrator refers to the kind of reader who has quit his position as mere observer to actively take part in the process of meaning production, i.e., a reader who sees the activity of reading as including the activity of writing or narrating.

The first chapter of this dissertation characterizes this "creative reader" and traces the evolution of this new concept through the discussion of Wolfgang Iser's, Norman Holland's, and Roland Barthes's views of the reading experience.

The four chapters that follow picture Hawthorne's and Updike's narrators as semi-creative (Iserian) and creative (Hollandian and Barthean) readers/narrators respectively, by offering a detailed description of their behavior, and showing that Hawthorne's readers/narrators are not only strongly commited to truth, but believe they can get to it, whereas Updike's neither reach truth nor wish to approach it.

The conclusion calls attention to the fact that, having migrated from passiveness to action, the reader/narrator has plunged into the territory of ambiguity and no longer expects to reach the "ultimate truth." That subject with a strong will to truth, supported by a nineteenth-century atmosphere of certainty, has turned into a subject condemned to live imprisoned in language and deprived of any access to final truth and certainty.

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"There is no invention (in the sense of discovery) without invention (in the sense of creation)."
Hillis Miller

INTRODUCTION

Reviewing literature on **The Scarlet Letter** means dealing with more than a hundred years of criticism on Hawthorne's apparently most discussed pages. From 1850 on a lot has been written about **The Scarlet Letter.** Critical editions such as **The Scarlet Letter: A Norton Critical Edition** and **Eight American Authors**, for example, may provide an idea of the productivity of the workers in **The Scarlet Letter** industry in all these years.

Quantity, however, does not necessarily lead to quality or originality, and in the case of the extensive literature on **The Scarlet Letter** this proves to be quite true. After examining a number of critical essays on Hawthorne's "tale of frailty and sorrow," I could observe that most critics of **The Scarlet Letter** seem to be interested in interpretations that over-emphasize the discussion of Hawthorne's text in terms of moral laws.

The concern of Hawthorne's critics with sinners and saints in **The Scarlet Letter** dates back to the very year of its publication. In some early reviews and criticism on **The Scarlet Letter**, it is already possible to find variations on the same theme -- the theme is adultery and the variations are the critics' condemnation or absolution of their favorite heroine, Hester Prynne: on one side a group of critics condemns Hester Prynne for her sinful relationship to Dimmesdale; on the other side a group of romantics sees her as a victim of society (love absolves Hester from her guilt); and right between these two groups, the transcendentalists act as mediators, claiming that Hester is neither a sinner nor a virtuous woman, but somebody

who has managed to transcend both love and moral values.

Arthur Cleveland Coxe's review on **The Scarlet Letter** perfectly illustrates the angry reaction of some traditional critics to Hester's adulterous move. Written in 1851, Coxe's "The Nauseous Amour of a Puritan Pastor" -- the title says it all -- not only disapproves of Hester's and Dimmesdale's behavior, but also accuses Hawthorne's novel of attempting to suggest sympathy for their sin: "...we honestly believe that 'the scarlet letter' has already done a little to degrade our literature and encourage social licentiousness." (1) But if Coxe sees Hawthorne's novel as immoral and its characters as "polluted," in other early critics' opinion Hester is said to be a virtuous person. George Bailey Loring's " Hester versus Dimmesdale," for instance, absolves the sinful woman and describes her as the most heroic person in all that drama, as someone who has managed to bid farewell to the world and retire to a holier place where she could find some peace. (2)

The defenders of Hester are many; since the day she was introduced to the public, Hester seems to have definitely won the admiration and compassion of several critics. The discussion of her crime, however, has never really escaped its moralistic character. Although Hester's apologists sometimes seem to look at her with more modern and understanding eyes, their discourses still put too much emphasis on the moral aspects of Hawthorne's story; instead of arguing about a fair judgement for Hawthorne's Hester, this group of Hester's advocates now disputes the best arguments to justify her innocence. For Darrel Abel Hester "is more a victim of circumstances than a wilful wrongdoer." (3)

Hester is not guilty of her crime since society is the only one to blame; and in order to make his romantic argument stronger, Abel even creates an important role for Hester in the novel: "her role in the story demonstrates that persons who engage our moral compassion may nevertheless merit moral censure. We sympathize with Hester at first because of her personal attraction, and our sympathy deepens throughout the story because we see that she is more sinned against than sinning." (4)

Also seeing Hester with romantic eyes, Seymour Gross and Ernest Sandeen firmly believe in her innocence. According to these two defenders of Hester, Hawthorne's heroine is innocent, for she has chosen to follow the laws of love rather than the laws of Puritan society. In "'Solitude, and Love, and Anguish': The Tragic Design of **The Scarlet Letter**," Gross argues that "Hawthorne does not imply that Hester is...an irresponsible libertine: it is simply that she cannot imagine any laws as taking precedence over the laws of love between a man and a woman." (5) Ernest Sandeen goes even deeper into the love matter in "**The Scarlet Letter** as a Love Story," affirming that "Hester can never honestly bring herself to regard her relations with Arthur Dimmesdale as 'sinful.'...True passion, even though adulterous, may not be a sin to be repented of, but a loveless marriage is...." (6) And again love is taken as a neutralizer of Hester's guilt.

To make their criticism sound a bit more scientific than the romantic, the transcendentalist, and the traditional interpretations of Hester's crime, some critics have looked for

the help of Psychoanalysis and other sciences to contribute arguments to Hester's defense. In "The Ruined Wall," Frederick C. Crew analyzes Hester's problem from a Freudian perspective and concludes that

> Hawthorne does not leave us simply with the sunday-school lesson that we should 'be true,' but with a tale of passion through which we glimpse the ruined wall -- the terrible certainty that, as Freud put it, the ego is not master in in its own house. It is this intuition that enables Hawthorne to see...to the bottom of his created characters, to understand the inner necessity of everything they do, and thus to pity and forgive them in the very act of laying bare their weaknesses.(7)

Using a more sophisticated approach, T. Walter Herbert, Jr. manages to put together in the same article on **The Scarlet Letter** Hawthorne's daughter, Hawthorne himself, and the cultural construction of gender -- in other words, some more variations on Hester's behavior: "Pearl's inhuman nature results from the sin of her parents, so the narrative manifestly asserts, and the sin is rooted in distortions of gender." (8)

The kind of classification and the illustrative passages I have presented so far are obviously attempts to summarize pages and pages of criticism on **The Scarlet Letter.** Frederic I. Carpenter's "Scarlet A Minus," was of great help in the identification of these groups of critics and their tendency to reduce the richness of Hawthorne's text by interpreting **The Scarlet Letter** without taking into account its most interesting characteristics -- its ambiguity: "In one sense the very imperfection of **The Scarlet Letter** makes it classic: its ambiguity illustrates a fundamental confusion of modern thought.

To the question 'Was the action symbolized by the scarlet letter wholly sinful?' it suggests a variety of answers." (9) But Carpenter has to be taken as an exception; going through the range of critical essays on **The Scarlet Letter** I could hardly find titles that seemed interested in changing the course of the old discussion. (10) The great majority of Hawthorne's critics still insists on finding the best explanation to Hester's conduct, perpetuating, thus, the traditional emphasis on morals.

Reviewing criticism on John Updike's **A Month of Sundays**, **Roger's Version**, and **S.**, I could observe that Updike's critics have been affected by the same crisis of originality which has been haunting Hawthorne's critics for more than a century. Even though there is not much criticism available on these three novels by Updike, (a few articles on **A Month of Sundays** (1974) and some reviews on **Roger's Version** (1986) and **S.** (1988)), in the few articles I could examine it was possible to detect in most of Updike's critics an inclination to concentrate their analyses on both the religious and the erotic aspects of his fiction. Sex and religion, then, become key words in their critical essays, and again what we have are variations on the same theme, just as in the great majority of Hawthorne's criticism on **The Scarlet Letter**.

The articles on **A Month of Sundays** provide good examples of the preference of Updike's critics for the study of the traditional sex/religion themes in Updike's texts. Donald Greiner, one of the most prolific critics of Updike's fiction, thoroughly believes that " sex and religion are not to be separated in Updike's novels. To do so is to deny the enigma

of sex and the natural frailty of all couples since the garden....Updike has taken the tension between religious stricture and sexual imperative as a primary theme." (11) Following Greiner's steps we have critics such as George W. Hunt, S.J. and George Steiner, who have produced genuine religio-critical readings of **A Month of Sundays.** Hunt argues that the creation of Reverend Thomas Marshfield, the protagonist of **A Month of Sundays**, is to be understood as an Updikean maneuver to promote "the elaborate wedding of sex/religion themes," (12) for it is impossible to "deny that there exists in Updike's fiction a religious dimension that both invites and rewards sophisticated theological analyses" (13); and George Steiner is sure that in **A Month of Sundays** Updike works "near the innermost of his concerns, that congruence -- at once farcical and tragic -- of sexuality and religious feeling in post-Puritan America." (14)

Not so religion-oriented as the critics I have just mentioned but also very much concerned with the religious character of Updike's texts, Suzanne Hennig Uphaus affirms in "The Unified Vision of **A Month of Sundays**" and in "**A Month of Sundays**" that "[this novel] attempts to redefine [the American] religious heritage by creating a paradigm of the contemporary religious scene in America. By paradigm she means that the symbolic action of the novel traces the movements that Updike feels have taken place in American religious history. Beginning with a long devotion, or marriage, to ethical action alone (Jane), it moves to a brief hedonism (Alicia), to a commitment to other-worldly faith devoid of physical action (Mrs. Harlow), and

finally to a unification of them all (Ms. Prynne)." (15)

But while some critics devote all their energies to the production of religious readings of Updike's texts, others prefer to over-emphasize the second most discussed aspect of his fiction -- the erotic. Robert Detweiler, for example, has put the discussion of Updike's Christianity aside and invoked some old Freudian symbols to make his own analysis of **A Month of Sundays**. In his article "**A Month of Sundays**: The Language of Libido," Detweiler comments: "The sheets to be sullied are a masturbator's linens as well as stationary, and this pun sets up the Freudian-defined tension of pen/penis, between writing and masturbation, the resolution of which is intended as Marshfield's sole/soul therapy." (16)

Frederick Crew's "Mr. Updike's Planet" and Alison Lurie's "The Woman Who Rode Away " -- the only two reviews I could find on **Roger's Version** and **S.** respectively, do not throw any new light on the traditional discussion of Updike's "scarlet letters." In a quite angry tone, Frederick Crews calls Updike's fiction ambiguous and accuses him of giving too much emphasis to his "urgently autobiographical preoccupations," (17) to Christianity, and to the sexual experience, but ends up affirming that "[Updike's] religious position is indispensible to any broad comprehension of his work," (18) -- a statement that surely echoes Updike's most traditional critics. Alison Lurie, who seems to have less reservations about Updike's work, in "The Woman Who Rode Away," reads **S.** as a remake of Hester Prynne's story, though she cannot see "any real connection between Hester and Sarah Worth (Updike's Hester), apart from her last name and the fact

that she has a daughter called Pearl." (19). According to Lurie, there is something wrong in Updike's Hester, for her attitudes simply do not fit Hester's original behavior. She protests: "Where Hester was independent, dignified, and passionate, Sarah is flighty, vain, and sensual. (Hester....would never have gone off to the seventeenth-century equivalent of the Ashram Arhat.)" (20) In her review of Updike's **S.** Alison Lurie takes the first step toward discussing the conduct of Updike's twentieth-century Hester, re-editing, this way, the same kind of debate that has been kept alive by most critics of Hawthorne's **The Scarlet Letter** in all these years.

1- Working on a New Reading of Hawthorne's and Updike's "Scarlet Letters"

Most analyses of Hawthorne's **The Scarlet Letter** and Updike's **A Month of Sundays**, **Roger's Version**, and **S.** do seem very much alike to me. Besides over-stressing the moral questions proposed by these texts, these articles favor an economical policy of interpretation which naturally tends to reduce possibilities of meaning. Instead of experiencing the richness of Hawthornes's **The Scarlet Letter**, its critics prefer to get themselves involved in some kind of quest for the "best" because "truest" interpretation of it. The same happens to Updike's critics. Although Updike's "scarlet letters" now wear a twentieth-century mask, their critics still seem to enjoy reading them with nineteenth-century eyes that cannot help keeping searching for "true" answers which may help them produce "true" interpretations of these texts. But

my question is: do these critics really manage to approach truth in their analyses?

I would say they do not; had one of these critics discovered a true explanation to these "scarlet letters," the workers in the scarlet letters industry would have already stopped working on other "true" interpretations of these very novels. Needless to say, then, whoever wishes to come up with a more "original" reading of Hawthorne's and Updike's versions of the scarlet letter episode -- one that will not monotonously echo the analyses I have reviewed so far -- will have to give up either condemning or justifying Dimmesdale's, Hester's, and Chillingworth's behavior in **The Scarlet Letter**, and their new strange attitudes in Updike's versions of it; in other words, he or she will have to renounce the truth-digger position, forgetting all about finding definitive answers to traditional moral questions.

Thus, to promote the displacement of the interpreter's strong commitment to truth by the concern with the question of truth seemed like an interesting alternative for breaking up with old patterns of interpretation. In this work, truth will cease to be an object of desire to become an object of study. By investigating rather than trying to approach truth in Hawthorne and Updike, I will be proposing a new way of looking at their "scarlet letters" which, I hope, will serve to enrich the discussion of these texts.

2- The Question of Truth in Hawthorne and Updike

The scarlet letter episode has become a quite curious case

in American literature. It involves two writers (Nathaniel Hawthorne and John Updike) from different centuries (nineteenth and twentieth centuries) in the production of different readings of the same story. Therefore, the texts are many, and meanings are multiple: Mr. Surveyor Pue's seventeenth-century manuscript, "The Scarlet Letter"; Hawthorne's version of Pue's manuscript, **The Scarlet Letter** (1850); and Updike's trilogy **A Month of Sundays** (1974), **Roger's Version** (1986), and **S.** (1988) which are twentieth-century versions of Hawthorne's **The Scarlet Letter** told by each one of its main characters -- Arthur Dimmesdale, Roger Chillingworth, and Hester Prynne. This study aims to discuss the question of truth as it is perceived by readers/narrators in Hawthorne and Updike. Their versions of the scarlet letter episode, I believe, constitute particularly suitable material for this kind of research.

Central to my investigation of the question of truth in Hawthorne and Updike is the assumption that from the nineteenth to the twentieth century the concept of truth has undergone a significant change. The analysis of the behavior of Hawthorne's and Updike's narrators can help provide more specific information about this evolution. Two questions appear as fundamental in this analysis: 1) Are Hawthorne's and Updike's narrators concerned with truth when approaching the scarlet letter episode?; and 2) If they are, do they finally manage to get to the true facts in the episode?

As to the first question, I would say that the answer is yes. Hawthorne's narrators are, but Updike's definitely are not.

While Hawthorne's narrators are interested in telling a story that looks like truth -- a kind of behavior that surely points to a strong commitment to truth. -- Updike's narrators prefer to move toward the multiplication of Hawthorne's single reality and away from truth by constructing a number of stories, which they offer their readers as possibilities, not as final solutions.

Concerning the second question, I would say that Hawthorne's narrators not only long for truth, but believe they have succeeded in finding it, whereas Updike's narrators neither worry about truth nor finally get to it. My purpose in this study is to show that there is a desire for truth in Hawthorne and a dismissal of the question of truth in Updike. Hawthorne's longing for truth has the support of nineteenth-century certainty; Updike writes in a century of profound uncertainty and is aware of the fact that it is now very hard to give his last word about what is true and what is false. Hawthorne's and Updike's response to truth, moreover, is reflected in their readers/narrators.

2.1- The Reader/Narrator

The readers of this dissertation will notice that here the well-defined figures of the reader and of the narrator have been put side by side to form the dual figure of the reader/narrator. In this study, Hawthorne's and Updike's narrators will be viewed as readers/narrators, that is, as active readers, that both affect and are affected by the text.

As far as I know, the word reader/narrator has never been

used by any literary theorist before. But although I believe its coinage to be mine, I have to admit that the idea of taking writers or narrators as readers and their stories as the texts or readings they produce is no novelty at all. Roland Barthes, when seeing the text as a productivity in "Text, Discourse, Ideology," talks about readers and producers working side by side: "the text is...the very theatre of a production where the producer and the reader of the text meet." (21) And Robert Crosman, just to mention another example of some critics' belief in the existence of a close relationship between readers and producers, in his article "Do Readers Make Meaning?" argues that the process of writing (and here I would risk saying the process of narrating) is in no way to be understood as antithetical to the process of reading for, as Crosman himself concludes, "the very act of writing...includes reading." (22)

Finally, it is also important to remark that the need to create such a term has arisen not only from the fact that the word reader/narrator is very much related to the production of textual meaning, but mainly from the wish to subtly tune in my audience to another fundamental assumption in this study: the distinct attitudes of Hawthorne's and Updike's readers/narrators to truth must be seen as a result of a shift in the concept of reader/narrator.

3- From Passiveness to Action: the Evolution of the Concept of Reader/Narrator

If there has really been a shift in the notion of truth from

the nineteenth to the twentieth century (from Hawthorne to Updike), this is surely related to the fact that there has also been a change in the concept of reader/narrator. Readers/narrators are, in different degrees, involved in a quest for meaning and truth; and it is only by examining the problematic question of meaning that we will manage to characterize an evolution in the concept of reader/narrator.

Literary critics, who also happen to be very much concerned with meaning and truth -- they are, after all, readers/narrators --, have extensively discussed the question of meaning. It all begins with the emergence of the concept of meaning as a fundamental instrument in literary theory. As Stein Haugon Olsen observes in "'The Meaning' of a Literary Work": "in the last half century...the concept of meaning has emerged as a tool not merely in the literary analysis of words and sentences, but it has also come to be used with reference to literary works themselves; locutions like 'the meaning of a poem,' 'the meaning of the work,' 'poetic meaning,' and 'literary meaning' have appeared in the formulation of central problems in literary theory." (23) Needless to say, this strong connection between the word meaning and the world of literary theory has created a lot of disagreement among theorists: it has gained some strong opponents as well as defenders. Although I do not intend to go into the discussion of the friends and enemies of hermeneutics, I think that the name of E.D. Hirsch, Jr. is worth mentioning. Hirsch's insistent, though consistent, defense of "the meaning" of the text (hermeneutical theory) has awakened the rage of several

critics, leading many of them to spend some time dreaming of a way of "pulling the rug from under Hirsch's feet." (24)

Literary theorists have not given up examining and arguing about the question of meaning; the discussion, however, has certainly evolved. The evolution clearly points to a migration of meaning from text to reader. Whereas former theorists, in particular the New Critics, believed meaning existed only in the text, the function of the reader being simply to discover passively this meaning. Reader-response critics believe meaning exist, totally or at least in part, in the reader. By totally or partially transferring to the reader the responsibility for producing meaning, these critics want to put an end to the New Critical belief in the objectivity of the text. Along with these critics, a new type of reader comes on the scene to play a different role in the process of producing textual-meaning: the well-behaved reader, who used to passively watch the text perform its solo, is now able to play the part of a "reader/narrator." He becomes, in this way, an active participant in the textual-meaning business.

This new type of reader, the "reader/narrator," will naturally lead to a revision of the whole question of true meaning (the question of truth) in the text. Now a property of readers (different readers who will produce different meanings) and not of texts, truth can no longer be one, but has to be many.

But this migration of meaning did not come easily. In fact, the evolution from passive to active reader was gradual and problematic. Wolfgang Iser, for example, starts with some very mild attacks against the text-centered assumptions of New

Criticism. The way he is described by Iser, this reader/narrator is but a text's assistant who can never be considered fully responsible for the production of textual meaning. In his phenomenology of the reading process Iser claims that the production of textual meaning results from an interaction between the reader and the text. The "gestalt" of a literary text or its "configurative meaning," says Iser, "arises from the meeting between the written text and the individual mind of the reader with its own particular history of experience, its own consciousness, its own outlook." (25) Iser's reader/narrator contributes to the production of textual meaning by filling in the blanks of the text with his/her imagination. Though indispensible, the reader Iser describes is in no way self sufficient; he/she simply adds meaning to the text's original structure of possible meanings, working as a co-creator of the literary work.

But if in Iser's phenomenology of the reading process the reader/narrator appears as someone who merely co-operates with the production of textual meaning by deciphering what is implied in the text, in Norman Holland's "Transactive Theory" this very reader/narrator is given enough autonomy to become a self-sufficient producer of meaning. Like Iser, Holland sees the text participating in the process of textual-meaning production; he believes in a combination of text and reader -- a transactive reading. But what basically makes Holland's theory of reading differ from Iser's is the fact that in a transactive model there is no division of responsibilities between the text and the

reader (in Iser's theory the text provides part of the meaning and the reader/narrator creates the rest). In a transactive experience "the literent creates meaning and feelings in one continuous and indivisible transaction." (26)

Also very important in Holland's transactive theory of reading is the emphasis on the reader's identity. According to Holland, the reader/narrator is intensely active: as he/she approaches the text with his personal experience, he finally determines, even if unconsciously, the meaning of the text. Of course, the idea of readers responding to literature in a personal way is not only present in Holland's transactive theory of response. In Barthes's understanding of the reading process, readers are also said to leave their personal mark impressed on the texts they approach. Barthes believes in readers creating in the same way writers do. In other words, authors make their own meanings when writing their texts, and readers re-write these very texts, also creating their own meanings, the minute they start reading/writing (or reading/narrating) them.

The evolution of the concept of reader/narrator neither begins with Wolfgang Iser nor ends with Norman Holland and Roland Barthes. Before and after these theorists, many other reader-oriented critics have developed theories in which the reader/narrator was neither seen as much more dependent on the text than in Iser's phenomenology of the reading process or was given much more autonomy than in Holland's transactive theory and Barthes's view of the reading experience. Nevertheless it is not my intention to give a detailed account of the reader/narrator's position in each and every major current of Reader-response

criticism. In the theoretical section of this dissertation, I shall limit myself to the discussion of Iser's, Holland's, and Barthes's view of the reader/narrator and of his/her role in the reading process. Iser, Holland, and Barthes represent distinct moments in the history of Reader-response criticism, that is to say, distinct ways of examining the reader/narrator reading and responding to the meaning and truth of literature. And these different notions of "reader/narrator" are definitely relevant for the comprehension of Hawthorne's and Updike's readers/narrators.

4- From Certainty to Ambiguity: the Reader/Narrator and the Question of Truth in Hawthorne and Updike

Having migrated from passiveness to action, the reader/narrator has lost contact with the territory of certainty and moved toward the space of ambiguity. The contrast between Hawthorne's and Updike's readers/narrators evinces this very shift in the notion of truth. Whereas Hawthorne's readers/narrators try to discover truth in the "text" of events, Updike's readers/narrators are aware of their role as producers, or inventors of truth. If the Iserian reader/narrator of Hawthorne's **The Scarlet Letter** has used language as an instrument to fight the inevitable "tribe of unrealities" (27) and reach truth, the self-sufficient readers/narrators of Updike's versions of the scarlet letter episode have allowed these "unrealities" to take over as they can only understand truth as the free play of

language and meanings in which there is no possibility of final certainty for readers/narrators. In this sense, that nineteenth-century subject with a will to truth, who believed in the possibility of getting to the true and definitive meaning of the text, has metamorphosed into a subject condemned to ambiguity, who has given in to language and no longer desires to take part in endless quests for certainty.

Notes

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Alison Lurie, "The Woman Who Rode Away," in **The New York Review**, (May 12, 1988), p. 3.

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Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process," in **Reader-Response Criticism**, ed. Jane Tompkins (London: The John Hopkins Press, 1984), p. 59.

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CHAPTER ONE

FROM PASSIVENESS TO ACTION: THE EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT OF READER/NARRATOR

This chapter aims at a general discussion of the evolution of the concept of reader from the last century to the present days. If there is really a distinction between nineteenth and twentieth-century readers, it certainly lies on the fact that the notion of reader has gone through a considerable transformation in all these years. The reader first appears as a mere consumer of textual meaning and then as a co-operator of the text; but it is only later on that the reader will manage to revolutionize the meaning-production scene by ceasing to be a passive spectator to become the artist himself. And if before the emergence of this new kind of reader there was a clear separation between consumers and producers of textual meaning, now we have to admit that it is no longer possible to separate consumers from producers in the process of textual-meaning production or to think about writers who are not readers at the same time and vice-versa. As Jane Tompkins remarks in "An Introduction to Reader-Response Criticism," "reading and writing [have joined] hands, [changed] places, and finally [become] distinguishible only as two names for the same activity." (1)

Before the boundaries that used to keep reading apart from writing started being destroyed, readers and writers, texts and readers were described as belonging to completely distinct

worlds: there was the world of action, of productivity, where meaningful texts and writers were said to be fully in charge of meaning production; and the world of passiveness, where readers played the role of discoverers of meanings that were obviously not theirs, and had to live with the idea that meaning-making was an exclusive privilege of texts and authors. In the critical works of E.D. Hirsch, Jr.(2) and in the text-centered assumptions of New Criticism, this distinction was very much stressed. Although Hirsch and the New Critics have located meaning in different places -- the author and the text -- , they have both blocked the reader's access to the domain of productivity.

Hirsch has built a quite consistent theory to prove the impossibility of readers, texts, and writers invading each other's territory. For Hirsch, each text holds in itself an original meaning, which he called "permanent and "legitimate," and this meaning, "can be nothing other than the author's meaning." (3) The author's job was to make intentional meaning; the reader's was simply to realize it. The way Hirsch saw it, a reader may even construe acceptable, because coherent meanings, but he can never produce "the original" meaning of a text. Any reader in search of "good meaning" would then have to play the detective and find out what the author really meant. Hirsch explains:

> Of course the words of a text can be respoken from a new perspective and a new meaning formulated. Of course ...the reader can become a self-imaging author. But a text cannot be interpreted from a perspective different from the original author's.(4)

While Hirsch over-emphasized the author, the New Critics focused attention upon the text. Neither the author's intention nor the reader's response should be seen as sources of meaning for the text was the one and only "right" place to look for it. "Critical inquiries, argued W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, are not settled by consulting the oracle,"(5) nor are critics to confuse the text with its results (with the audience's reactions to the text).(6) The New Critics adopted, thus, a quite formalist attitude. The protagonist of the New Critical arguments, the text was to be studied in detail, the words on the page being the real suppliers of literary meaning. As Cleanth Brooks has affirmed in "Poet, Poem, and Reader," "If we ignore the poetic form, we may hopelessly distort the meaning.... [The] proper study of the poem is the study of the poem."(7) So, the reader -- whose reactions, I insist, should not be considered relevant to the process of textual-meaning production --, with some practice and dedication, could finally unveil the meaning which was hidden in the text. By then, the reader was definitely being haunted by the stigma of passiveness.

No one can deny that the New Critical theoretical moves have contributed strong marks of passiveness to the notion of reader; yet, it is interesting to observe that it was also within the universe of New Criticism that a new critical position concerning the reader started to develop. According to Jane Tompkins, the reader's response to the text was first discussed in the beginning of the twentieth century -- "Reader-response criticism could be said to have started with I.A. Richard's discussions of

emotional response in the 1920s or with the work of Louise Rosenblatt in the 1930s"(8) -- but it was only from the 1950s on that the idea of readers as potential producers of meaning could be subtly perceived between the lines of texts still crammed with New Critical assumptions. Though very discretly, this different way of understanding the role of the reader in the process of textual-meaning production anticipates some radical changes in the concept of reader. In other words, the moment the New Critics' and other former "anti-reader" critics' theories start being contested by the new orientations of the Reader-response movement, the traditional reader begins his metamorphosis. The text is then no longer the absolute "owner" of meaning. The once passive, unproductive reader gains access into the territory of action, the responsibility for producing meanings being totally or at least partially transferred to him. The old passive reader is now a reader/narrator, an active participant in the process of textual-meaning production. At this point it becomes really hard to tell consumers from producers in the meaning-production business; readers and writers, and -- why not? -- readers and narrators have finally "joined hands."

The emergence of this new type of reader, which here I have called reader/narrator, surely revolutionizes the meaning-production scene. When the reader was just the discoverer of meaning and not its producer, it was much easier to believe that texts had a single meaning waiting to be unfolded by the readers. Now, with the migration of meaning from text to reader, the whole process of meaning production came to be associated with the idea of uncertainty. To affirm that meaning is a property of readers

is to leave the safe domain of the text, assuming that different readers will respond differently to texts and that therefore meaning cannot possibly be one, but has to be many. Also, this shift of emphasis from text to reader has led to a re-examination of the image of literary critics as owners of truth. If meaning is determined by the reader's response (and readers are many) so, the literary critic, who is a reader/narrator himself, will have to cope with the idea that his readings of a text are only possibilities in the midst of other possibilities.

But the status of active reader as well as the revolutionary changes it has generated in the meaning-production scene was not a simple conquest for the passive reader. The shift from passiveness to action took some time to be completed and many were the obstacles the reader/narrator had to overcome before he could be seen as an independent producer of meanings. Even among the literary theorists who saw the reader/narrator as a fundamental element in the process of meaning production, there was some disagreement as to the reader/narrator's degree of responsibility in this very process. Some believed that the reader/narrator shared the responsibilities for producing meaning with the text; others were convinced that the reader/narrator could perfectly make meaning by himself. The fact is that different "readers/narrators" have read this new type of reader -- the reader/narrator -- in completely distinct ways.

Oscillating between the text-centered arguments of the New Critics and the reader-oriented assumptions of Reader-response Criticism, Wolfgang Iser has opted for staying in-between these

two tendencies. According to him, neither the text nor the reader alone are the real producers of meaning, for meaning can only be built when these two isolated poles -- the text and the reader -- manage to converge: "The meaning of the literary work remains related to what the printed text says, but it requires the creative imagination of the reader to put it all together."(9) In fact, the meeting of texts and readers Iser has in mind goes beyond the merely mechanical convergence of two elements; it is an "interaction," an "interplay between text and reader,"(10) to use Iser's words. So, in his phenomenology of the reading process, rather than focusing upon either the reader's response or the text's original structure, Iser will concentrate on the dynamic relationship between texts and readers -- "If one loses sight of [this] relationship," Iser comments, "one loses sight of the virtual work."(11)

A balanced text-reader relationship is definitely a basic condition for the grasping of the literary work. For Iser, the text is expected to motivate the reader's mind, though the text can only arouse the reader's curiosity if it leaves some "unwritten" room for the reader to write it by himself. If the written text is too clear, the reader might feel that he is not needed in the game, and then he will probably quit it; but chances are that the reader will also refuse to take part in this interactive process if the text is excessively obscure. The text, then, has not only to attract the reader's attention to the game, but also to keep the reader's imagination busy by allowing him to be creative, productive, i.e., an active participant in the play. The fact that he is stimulated to respond to the text with his

own imagination, however, does not mean that this reader/narrator is self-sufficient. The reader/narrator Iser describes in his phenomenological approach of the reading process, for the sake of consistency, has to respect certain limits imposed by the text. In other words, the text must pay respect to the reader's creativity in the same way that the reader must pay respect to the written words on the page, the result of this pact being what Iser calls the literary work.

The question now arises as to how the reader/narrator, once motivated to become the text's partner, comes to "interact" with it. Iser believes that texts and readers/narrators interact more or less in the same way people do, and in an attempt to throw some light on his own view of the reader-text interaction he mentions R. D. Laing's findings on interpersonal relations. Laing argues that in every personal relationship there is a central gap that both separates and unites one person to the other. This unfilled space, which Laing calls "nothing," results basically from people's inability to perceive the way they perceive one another. In any person-to-person relationship we can see each other, we observe one another's conduct, and yet we are both invisible to each other. (12) This "nothing" therefore is exactly what stimulates people to interact. Since we cannot experience the way the others see us, we are led to fill in these gaps with our own interpretation of what we believe is the other people's view of ourselves.

Laing's theory on interpersonal relations has definitely served as a basis for Iser's phenomenological view of the reading

process. Even though Iser is aware of the fact that we cannot by any means see the process of reading as a form of social interaction, he is convinced that both interactive situations -- the reading experience and the person-to-person relationship -- share several points in common. According to Iser, the whole process of text-reader interaction depends on small interruptions in the time flow of reading, which he calls the blanks or the gaps of the text. In other words, the same "no-thing" that leads people to interact in Laing's theory of interpersonal relations promotes the "interplay" between texts and readers in Iser's "phenomenology." Whenever Iser's reader/narrator meets one of these blanks, he will be induced to fill in this empty space with his own imagination -- "whenever the reader bridges the gaps, communication begins. The gaps function as a kind of pivot on which the whole text-reader relationship revolves." (13) Once all these gaps arising out of the lines of the text have been filled, the reading experience will be complete: not only the text-reader interaction will have been accomplished, but also the "gestalt" or the "configurative meaning" of the text will have been formed. Thus, by filling in these blanks, the reader/narrator will have the opportunity to contribute his own meanings to the text's original structure of possible meanings, becoming himself an active participant in the reading process. To the conventional activity of the passive reader Iser's reader/narrator has added the creative task of writers (narrators): the reader/narrator not only reads the literary text, he also helps to write or narrate it.

Creative, participant, active, but not independent. The

reader/narrator Iser describes is in no way free from textual constraints. Although stimulated to take active part in the reading process, Iser's reader/narrator must have his activity controlled in some way by the text. (14) "Through the process of reading," Iser says, "[we formulate] something that is unformulated in the text and yet represents its intention." (15) So, when this reader/narrator is invited to co-operate with the text by filling in its blanks with his own projections, he is not to impose new meanings on the text's original structure of possible meanings, but to make it expand. For Iser, the text has to be seen as an inexhaustible source of meanings, and the readers/narrators' different responses to a single text provide unquestionable evidence of that. In short, we can say that, the way Iser puts it, meaning is primarily in the text, though it can only be completely brought to the surface with the help of the reader/narrator's creative mind (on terms set by the text, of course). Iser's reader/narrator has definitely made a big step toward "productivity," and consequently away from the New Critical text control, but he has still got a long way to travel until he can be called an "autonomous" reader/narrator.

Wolfgang Iser's phenomenological view of the reading experience was soon checked by the ever-changing moves of literary criticism. Once an innovation, the idea of readers/narrators as participants was now about to be regarded as just a "half-innovation" -- a useful bridge to a newer and much more "daring" understanding of texts and readers. Norman Holland, for example, acknowledges the importance of the kind of theory

Iser has developed (he calls it a "biactive theory"), arguing that it has started the whole migratory movement of meanigs from text to reader. In a biactive theory, "literents do find more in texts than just what is 'there'" (16); but in a second moment he cannot help moving on to the discussion of its problem. He comments:

> Nevertheless, the biactive theory seems to me to have two difficulties. First, it is really two theories, a new theory of reader activity plus the old text-active theory in which the text does something to the reader. The bi-active theory builds on the false text-active theory; it thus guarantees it can never be more than half right.(17)

In fact, Holland cannot possibly accept this "clear" division of responsibilities between texts and readers/narrators. For the basic question is: if it is true that readers/narrators create within certain limits set by the text, then how come their responses to a text can be so different from each other? In other words, Holland argues that if every text really contains an original structure of meanings waiting to be expanded by the readers/narrators' imagination, we obviously should expect to find at least a partial uniformity in the readers/narrators' responses to a single text. It is also Holland's opinion that, had Iser put more emphasis to the reader/narrator's ability to create and less to the text's restraining participation in this creative process, this kind of question would certainly not arise. Thus, what Holland suggests is that Iser's biactive theory should be revised. Of course, this revision would have

to point to a total transference of meaning from text to reader/narrator, the reading experience becoming a kind of personal transaction "in which the literent builds the response, and the text simply changes the consequences of what the literent brings to it." (18)

Holland believes in readers/narrators freely responding to literary texts rather than filling in the blank spaces of a pre-structured outline. In his transactive theory of response, readers/narrators are released from text control. The reading process, the way Holland sees it, is a personal experience -- the reader/narrator experiences the literary text in the same way he experiences life (19); so, the only limits the reader/narrator will have to pay respect to are his own limits (something like "personal constraints"). These "personal constraints," or to use Holland's words, this "unique identity theme " (20) of a reader/narrator is to be understood as his whole life-story, i.e., his social, biological, and cultural background plus any kind of experience he has happened to have up to the reading moment. When Holland's reader/narrator approaches a literary text, he projects, even if unconsciously, his own identity into it, and then produces the meanings which suit him (or his identity) better -- "Each reader re-creates the work in terms of his own identity theme." (21) Also, it is important to observe that in such cases the text simply plays the role of "the other" element in the transaction; it neither contains or dictates nor helps the reader to create meanings. The production of textual meaning is exclusively the reader/narrator's job in a transactive model. As Holland himself explains,

> the literent creates meaning and feeling in one continuous and indivisible transaction One cannot separate...one part coming from the text and another part coming from the literent. In a transactive model, I am engaged in a feedback loop no part of which is independent from the other parts. The schemata, conventions, and codes I bring to bear may be literary, biological, cultural, or the results of economic class, but it is I who bring them to bear with my unique identity. It is I who start the loop and I who sustain it. It is I who ask questions of the text in my personal idiom and I who interpret the answers. (22)

With Holland's transactive theory of response the reader/narrator is given the autonomy he lacked in the text-oriented assumptions of New Criticism and in Iser's phenomenology of the reading process. The act of reading now includes the act of writing. The reader is now the one in charge of creating meanings when re-creating or re-writing a literary text. The passive reader, the decipherer of somebody else's meanings, has been transformed into a creative reader or, as I have been calling him in this dissertation, a reader/narrator.

This new notion of reader (the reader as writer or narrator) is also very much stressed in Roland Barthes's view of the reading process. Barthes sees the text as a productivity, a territory where consumers and producers meet to work on the production of textual meanings. The reading moment is described, then, as a kind of game in which the reader "[subverts] the relation between writing and reading, between the sender and the receiver of the text," (23) by creating his own meanings. Barthes argues that this new way of understanding the text has provided

the necessary conditions for the emergence of a new concept of reader. If the text is really doomed to "perpetual production," as Barthes affirms, so it cannot be said to be a property of authors, but mainly of readers/narrators. He explains:

> The theory of the text brings with it, then, the promotion of a new epistemological object: the reading (an object virtually disdained by the whole classical criticism , which was essentially interested either in the person of the author, or in the rules of manufacture of the work, and which never had any but the most meagre conception of the reader, whose relation to the world was thought to be one of mere projection. (24)

Like Holland, Barthes sees readers as extremely creative beings who relate to the text in a quite personal way. For these critics the activity of reading can be defined as a unique personal adventure, a moment of free choice of meanings, an act of pure action/creation.

So far I have discussed the main changes in the concept of reader from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, showing that the nineteenth-century extremely passive reader has gradually metamorphosed into a "reader/narrator" in the twentieth century --first becoming a semi-creative reader/narrator, a co-operator of the text, and then turning into a real creative reader/narrator , an independent creator of textual meanings. I shall now proceed to show that this evolution in the notion of reader/narrator is reflected in the behavior of Hawthorne's and Updike's readers/narrators. The analysis of Hawthorne's and Updike's readers/narrators' versions of the scarlet letter episode will not only reveal the differences in their behavior,

but also help us characterize them as readers/narrators whose attitudes perfectly fit the distinct types of readers/narrators I have discussed in this theoretical section. While Hawthorne's readers/narrators act just like a typically Iserian reader/narrator, filling in the blanks of a pre-organized outline, Updike's transform the reading moment into a quite personal experience, freely creating meanings just like any of the readers/narrators described by Holland and Barthes would surely do.

Notes

1
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2
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W.K.Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," in **Critical Theory Since Plato**, Hazard Adams (New York: Harcourt, 1971), p. 1022.

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See Wimsatt and Beardsley's "The Affective Fallacy," in **Critical Theory Since Plato**, pp. 1022-1031.

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Jane Tompkins, "An Introduction to Reader-Response Criticism," p.X.

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Wolfgang Iser, **The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response** (Baltimore: The John Hopkins UP, 1978), p. 142.

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Wolfgang Iser, "Interaction Between Text and Reader," in **The Reader in the Text**, eds. Susan Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980), p. 106.

11
Iser, "Interaction Between Text and Reader," p.107.

12
See Iser, **The Act of Reading**, p. 165.

13
Iser, "Interaction Between Text and Reader," p. 111.

14
Iser, "Interaction Between Text and Reader," p.110.

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Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," in **Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism**, ed. Jane Tompkins (Baltimore: The John Hopkins UP, 1984), p. 62.

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Norman Holland, "Re-Covering 'The Purloined Letter': Reading as a Personal Transaction," in **The Reader in the Text**, eds. Susan Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980), p. 366.

17
Holland, "Re-Covering 'The Purloined Letter'," p.366.

18
Holland, "Re-Covering 'The Purloined Letter'," p.367.

19
See Holland, "Unity Identity Text Self," in **Reader-Response Criticism**, ed. Jane Tompkins (Baltimore: The John Hopkins UP, 1984), pp. 118-133.

20
Holland, "Re-Covering 'The Purloined Letter.'" p. 367.

21
Holland, "Unity Identity Text Self," p. 126.

22
Holland, "Re-Covering 'The Purloined Letter,' " p. 367.

23
Roland Barthes, "Text, Discourse, Ideology," in **Untying the Text: A Post Structuralist Reader**, ed. Robert Young (Boston: Routledge & Kegan, 1981), p.44. See also Barthes's "From Work to Text," pp. 73-81.

24
Barthes, "Text, Discourse, Ideology," p.42.

CHAPTER TWO

THE HAWTHORNIAN QUEST FOR TRUTH IN **THE SCARLET LETTER**

"...if a man, sitting all alone, cannot dream strange things, and make them look like truth, he should never try to write romances." (NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE - **THE SCARLET LETTER**)

On a June summer morning, in Puritanic seventeenth-century New England, a woman called Hester Prynne steps out of the prison-door carrying a baby in her arms. On the breast of her gown a letter A made of fine red cloth and exquisitely embroidered with gold thread glows before the restless crowd of Boston inhabitants who anxiously watch the adulterous woman with the illegitimate child pass by. To stand for some time on the scaffold, exposed to the critical eyes of the public and to wear the scarlet letter A for as long as she lives, is the punishment that, according to the Puritanic laws, best fits Hester Prynne's crime.

Hidden among the crowd two tormented men keep their eyes on Hester: the incognito husband and the mysterious lover. Concealed under the identity of Roger Chillingworth, Hester's betrayed husband is back and longing for revenge. Through his scientific knowledge doctor Chillingworth tries his best to defeat his enemy, Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale. This battle leads the trio Chillingworth/Hester/Dimmesdale to an amazing denouement with no real losers or winners. After seven years of silent suffering and

deep pain, Dimmesdale yields to Hester's wish to flee. On the day of their departure the reverend changes his mind and chooses to reveal his love for Hester and for his daughter Pearl. Once the secret is unfolded, Dimmesdale dies leaving no room for Chillingworth's revenge. Hester Prynne and Pearl leave New England but, later, Hester returns. The scarlet A remains on her bosom for the rest of her life. Dead, Hester Prynne is buried in the burial-ground beside which King's Chapel has been built; there, Hester and Dimmesdale rest together under the same tombstone.

This could be just a sad story; this could be a true sad story. Told or read this way, as in the brief plot summary I have just presented above, the scarlet letter episode is neither a true nor a false story, it is simply another unpretentious piece of fiction. Told or read by Hawthorne's readers/narrators, the scarlet letter episode is given a significant touch of realism -- the fictitious events in the narrative are meant to be facts and the whole episode seems to acquire the status of true story. Hawthorne's readers/narrators are definitely willing to get close to the true meaning of the text. And I would say that this strong will to truth will lead these readers/narrators to make use of as many artifices as possible to cover up fiction and prove the authenticity of their accounts. In other words, every movement of Hawthorne's readers/narrators in **The Scarlet Letter** will aim at "[making a number of] strange things look like truth." (1) A detailed description of these readers/narrators' maneuvers will help reveal not only the kind of games they play with the narrative, but also the kind of players they are, providing,

thus, a clear idea of their mechanisms of reading/narrating in their intense search for truth.

Before the reader of **The Scarlet Letter** can have access to the story of Hester Prynne's misfortunes he/she will have to go through the several pages that form "The Custom-House," a sketch presented as introductory to the novel. Preceding these introductory pages, a preface anticipates the kind of information the reader will find in "The Custom-House": an account of Hawthorne's experience in the Custom-House of the port of Salem. Intended as a response to the excitment this sketch has created in the local community, these prefatory remarks also seem to function as a preparation for the atmosphere of reality that the readers/narrators' quest for truth will produce in the following pages of Hawthorne's **The Scarlet Letter.** In this preface, the authoritative-like voice that speaks in the author's name demonstrates great concern with the authenticity of the information provided in "The Custom-House." Besides stressing the sincerity of Hawthorne's impressions and the accuracy of his descriptions -- which "could not have been done with a livelier effect of truth" (TSL 33) -- this very voice defines "The Custom-House" as a "sketch of official life" (TSL 33). The genuine quality of his reading/narrative emphasized, it is its reader/narrator's duty now to avoid losing contact with "reality" and run the risk of creating some credibility gaps in "The Custom-House sketch.

"And now...I again seize the public by the button, and talk about my three years' experience in a Custom-House" (TSL 35). The

same "I" that in the passage quoted above playfully promises to favor the reader with Hawthorne's autobiographical revelations, is the one who is going to conduct the reading/narrative in "The Custom-House" -- Hawthorne's first reader/narrator in **The Scarlet Letter.** This persona's voice will start working on the construction of a more respectable fiction -- one that has an "effect of truth" -- from the very beginning of its account. On the third line of the Custom-House sketch the words "autobiographical impulse" remind the public of the reader/narrator's wish to "stand in some true relation with his audience" (TSL 35), searching for/telling facts and not just pure fiction. But before the Custom-House edifice and officers become his object of acute observation, Hawthorne's reader/narrator makes sure that his "sketch of official life" has its definite purpose explained:

> It will be seen, likewise, that this Custom-House sketch has a certain propriety, of a kind always recognized in literature, as explaining how a large portion of the following pages came into my possession, and as offering proofs of the authenticity of a narrative therein contained.... In accomplishing the main purpose, it has appeared allowable, by a few extra touches, to give a faint representation of a mode of life not heretofore described, together with some of the characters that move in it, among whom the author happened to make one. (TSL 36)

And once again the reader/narrator's concern with the "defictionalization" of his story becomes evident. He needs proofs of the authenticity of his reading/narrative and, for this reason, he will produce a collection of pieces of real life mingled with some "extra touches" of fiction to keep him by the

side of truth. When specifying the purpose of the Custom-House sketch, Hawthorne's reader/narrator will reveal his attitude toward truth and the reading/telling of stories. To him, there seems to be no room for pure fiction in literature: a few touches of unreliable material are perfectly acceptable if, and only if, you can count on a great thick portion of reality to give support to fiction, to make it look like truth. In fact, any other kind of attitude concerning the production of literature would sound quite contradictory for a Hawthornian reader/narrator, going totally against Hawthorne's classic definition of "romance."

Hawthorne characterizes romance as a moment of integration between reality and imagination, a real writer of romances obviously being the one who has the ability to keep himself commited to both the real and the imaginary. It is important to observe, however, that even though the idea of romance as "double allegiance" to reality and fiction must be respected in Hawthorne, the romancer is expected to put enough emphasis to the "real details" of the narrative so that this reality may contaminate fiction and make it look like truth. As Michael Davitt Bells comments in **The Development of American Romance**, "[for Hawthorne] the romancer is free to depart from the novelist's obligation of 'very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience,' but he is admonished to make only 'a very moderate use' of these imaginative 'privileges.'" (2) Thus, throughout his reading/narrative, Hawthorne's reader/narrator will see that this balance between fantasy and reality is kept; yet, I again insist,

that more powerful than this "balanced mixture" is Hawthorne's reader/narrator's will to truth, his predominant inclination to make "truth" prevail.

The reader/narrator's description of the Custom-House edifice and officers very well illustrates his obsession with truth. The description includes the minutest details of the external aspect of the Custom-House edifice -- "its front...ornamented with a portico of half dozen wooden pillars supporting a balcony beneath which a flight of granite steps descends towards the street" (TSL 37). Inside the Custom-House, the reader/narrator's eyes will concentrate on the "general slovenliness of the place" (TSL 39) with its cobwebbed rooms and dirty-looking aspect. The furniture, "a stove with a voluminous funnel; an old pine desk...; two or three wooden-botton chairs, exceedingly decrepit and infirm" (TSL 39), needless to mention, the rest perfectly suits the decadent atmosphere of the house. Almost presented as part of the furniture, the Custom-House officers also deserve the reader/narrator's attention. Most of them are described as old gentlemen who used to spend their office-hours hovering from a semi-lethargic state to one of complete sleepiness. The reader/narrator's ironic comments, however, although worth mentioning, are not to become the main issue in this chapter; for it is not the content of his reading/narrative what really counts in this discussion, but the way he performs it. The accuracy of the reader/narrator's descriptions, his insistence in giving details that may provide his account with credibility such as a real town (Salem), a real street (Derby Street), a real

epoch (the days of old King Derby), a room and its measure ("about fifteen feet square" (TSL 39)), and a great number of references to the historical past of America (the Quaker's persecution, the martyrdom of the witches, the Puritanic modes of living) are the important points to be observed and discussed here.

The reader/narrator goes on with his detailed descriptions and critical comments about the Custom-House officers and its permanent inspector -- "the Custom-House in himself" (TSL 55) -- until he reaches what is supposed to be the most exciting and expected moment in this introductory sketch:

> 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. One of the most remarkable occasions, when the habit of bygone days awoke in me, was that which brings it within the law of literary propriety to offer the public the sketch which I am now writing. (TSL 58)

Having the so-called "law of literary propriety" on his side, the reader/narrator now believes himself authorized to use the past as an instrument capable of producing evidence that may provide his reading/narrative with a touch of authenticity. After announcing the revelation of these proofs, the reader/narrator's next step will be tracing them back, providing all necessary information about the origin of these documents, their content, and how, where and who found them.

With this purpose in mind, the reader/narrator quits his ironic comments about Custom-House people to continue his

descriptive peregrination within the walls of the old edifice where his eyes finally reach the second story of the Custom-House. In this story "a large room in which the brick-work and naked rafters have never been covered with panelling and plaster" (TSL 58) shelters some kind of matter that is certainly very precious to this reader/narrator -- official documents and some manuscripts containing information about the past of Salem. In other words, materials of the local history, facts involving real people, which the reader/narator will promptly mention in an attempt to add more credibility to his findings:

> Here, no doubt, statistics of the former commerce of Salem might be discovered, and memorials of her princely merchants, - old King Derby, -- old Billy Gray, -- old Simon Forrester, -- and many another magnate in his day. (TSL 59)

This second room, with large quantities of documents and manuscripts inside, works as a frame of reality to the discovery of Mr. Surveyor Pue's account of the scarlet letter episode. The scene in which the reader/narrator describes the moment he starts undoing the small package that contains old documents, a manuscript, and a rag of scarlet cloth could not be more illustrative of this reader/narrator's concern with the realistic effect of the text. For he opens this "small package done up in a piece of old yellow parchment...and faded red tape [which has] the air of some official record of some period long past" (TSL 60) in the same way he reads/narrates a text: "as if a treasure...would be brought to light" (TSL 60) and many secrets would be unveiled. Once the truth is brought to light, it is necessary to barricade it with convincing effects of reality.

Surveyor Pue, for example, is described as having been a "Surveyor of his Majesty's Customs for the port of Salem, in the province of Massachusetts Bay" (TSL 60) and his document brings the seal of Governor Shirley on it; also, to show that Surveyor Pue is not merely a character who has come out of his imaginative mind, the reader/narrator offers proofs of Pue's death:

> I remembered to have read (probably in Felt's Annals) a notice of the decease of Mr. Surveyor Pue, about fourscore years ago; and likewise, in a neswpaper of recent times, an account of the digging up of his remains in the little grave-yard of St. Peter's Church, during the the renewal of that edifice. (TSL 60)

Together with Surveyor Pue's document comes a piece of red cloth embroidered in gold with the shape of a capital letter A, the most concrete proof that the reader/narrator's could have ever produced. With the help of the reader/narrator's careful examination -- so careful that he even bothers about taking its precise measure : "By an accurate measurement, each limb proved to be precisely three inches and a quarter in lenght" (TSL 61) -- this letter A becomes an increasingly a useful conveyor of realism.

But the best is yet to come. Now that the reader/narrator has presented an official document and a real object, he may move to the description of "a small roll of dingy paper" (TSL 62) -- Mr. Surveyor Pue's manuscript -- which brings his version of Hester Prynne's life and explains her connection to the scarlet letter A. The revelation of the explanatory manuscript is certainly the perfect moment for the reader/narrator to assert

openly the authenticity of his reading/narrative: "...it should be borne carefully in mind, that the main facts of that story are authorized and authenticated by the document of Mr. Surveyor Pue" (TSL 63). For those who may get really interested in his story, the reader/narrator makes a special invitation -- to take a look at the living relics themselves; and for those who may still doubt the honesty of his reading/account, he confesses to have contamined Mr. Pue's truth with some fiction "as if the facts had been entirely of [his] own invention" (TSL 63). In other words, the reading/narrative of the scarlet letter episode is both Mr. Pue's, who has contributed an outline that here is claimed to be authentic -- "What I contend for is the authenticity of the outline" --, and the reader/narrator's, who has helped dress it up. For Hawthorne's reader/narrator, imagination must be neither discarded completely nor fully embraced. There must be a balance between reality and fiction: his reality is always a little unreal; his unreality must always look very much like reality.

In the Custom-House sketch Hawthorne's reader/narrator manages to cover up the imaginary with a generous layer of actuality, performing, thus, the role of a realist censor in a "tribe of unrealities." (3) The seeds of his reading/tale do not come out of the blue: he places them in a small package, he puts the package in a room, the room in a building (the Custom-House), and the building in a town (Salem). Having emphasized reality in "The Custom-House," Hawthorne's first reader/narrator has accomplished his task and he may now quit the scene, giving room to Hawthorne's second reader/narrator, whose function will be to read/narrate every single detail about the scarlet letter episode

from "somewhere between the real world and Fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each other imbue itself with the nature of the other" (TSL 66). Like the reader/narrator of the Custom-House sketch, Hawthorne's second reader/narrator will try to keep himself tuned in to both "the real and the imaginary," but, as we shall see in the paragraphs that follow, his obssessive insistence in producing a reading/narrative that looks like truth will show that he really does his best to let the "Actual and the Imaginary" fill themselves with each other's nature, provided that the Imaginary looks more like the Actual.

The farther one keeps from an episode, the closer one gets to its truth. This seems to be the "motto" that guides the reader/narrator's behavior in **The Scarlet Letter.** Rather an attentive observer than an active participant or creator, Hawthorne's second reader/narrator opts for objectivity -- a choice that had already been announced in a passage of the Custom-House sketch in which the reader/narrator mentions his "desire to put [himself] in [his] true position as editor...of the most prolix among the tales that make up [his] volume" (TSL 36). He has apparently found out that the best -- because safer -- way not to compromise his reputation of mere spectator and honest reader/teller is to limit himself to arranging a collection of fully detailed scenes alternated with some sporadic comments on them. The commentary about the rose-bush at the prison door in the opening chapter of **The Scarlet Letter**, for example, perfectly illustrates this reader/narrators's concern with both faithfulness and detachment, two of the artifices that,

I insist, he believes will help make his fiction look like truth:

> This rose-bush...has been kept alive in history; but whether it had merely survived out of the stern old wilderness...-- or whether, as there is fair authority for believing, it had sprung up under the footsteps of sainted Ann Hutchinson, as she entered the prison door, -- we shall not take upon us to determine. (TSL 76)

The reader/narrator's attempt to reach truth through non-involvement actually places him in the position of an editor, but a very well-informed one. He knows about every thing, either present, past, or future -- "Chillingworth's studies, at a previous period of his life, had made him...acquainted with the medical science of the day" (TSL 141) --, he has explanations for every event in the story -- "This outward mutability indicated, and did not more than fairly express, the various properties of [Hester's] inner life" (TSL 114) -- , he talks to the reader -- "under the appellation of Roger Chillingworth, the reader will remember, was hidden another name" (TSL 140) --, he can reproduce what the characters say -- "'Thou wilt love her dearly,' repeated Hester Prynne" (TSL 223) --, and he is able to penetrate the characters' mind, capturing their very emotions, thoughts, and reactions -- "O exquisite relief! [Hester] had not known the weight until she felt the freedom!" (TSL 220). In one word, the "super-reader/narrator" of **The Scarlet Letter** reigns from the outside: his position, invulnerable; the authenticity of his reading/narrative, under his protection.

With so much knowledge and power in hand , the reader/narrator seems to feel more at ease in his pursuit of

truth. In his descriptions of places, he does his best not to let truth escape from his control by emphasizing concrete things, sometimes very small details, that may give support and add credibility to the story. In the first chapters of **The Scarlet Letter**, for example, the emphasis on concreteness becomes clear. Before the reader/narrator introduces the main characters and facts in the episode, he describes the prison-door -- "an iron clamped oaken door" (TSL 77) --, a wooden edifice, and a rose-bush; then he moves to the description of the market-place with its "grass-plot before the jail, in Prison Lane" (TSL 77) and its scaffold. There are, of course, some people in these scenes, but the clothes they wear, their features and behavior are what really matters in the reader/narrator's description; these people are but living samples of the puritanic way of life: "A throng of bearded men, in sad-colored garments and gray, steeple-crowned hats, intermixed with women, some wearing hoods, and others bareheaded..." (TSL 75). Needless to say, even though imagination is not entirely discarded in his reading/account, this reader/narrator is quite fond of realism. As he himself declares at the end of "The Prison-Door" chapter, "our narrative is now about to issue from that inauspicious portal" (TSL 76). In other words, his reading/narrative has its root in reality, and here, reality takes the shape of a heavy oak door and an old rose-bush. Truth is "on the threshold of [his] narrative," just like this rose-bush: "Finding it so directly on the threshold of our narrative...we could hardly do otherwise than pluck one of its flowers and present it to the reader" (TSL 76).

"'Goodwives,' said a hard-featured dame of fifty, 'I'll tell

ye a piece of mind. It would be greatly for the public behoof, if we women....should have the handling of such malefectress as this Hester Prynne'" (TSL 78). The reader/narrator's worry about truth can also be observed in his work with the main characters. The passage above is a good example of that; the voice we hear saying the name of Hester Prynne for the first time in the story is not the reader/narator's, it belongs to somebody who is standing in the market-place, witnessing Hester's walk to the scaffold. The crowd's voice turns the wearer of the scarlet letter into a more "palpable" character, helping the reader/narrator to move some steps toward truth. Hester lives, for "real" Boston inhabitants have legitimized her existence. The same happens to the characters of Roger Chillingworth and Arthur Dimmesdale; their first appearance in the story is the result of a common effort of both the reader/narrator and the "actual" people of Boston who give support to their status of real characters. Chillingworth enters the scene through Hester's eyes, the reader/narrator's voice, and Chillingworth himself: "'I am a stranger, and have been a wanderer, solely against my will'" (TSL 88); and Dimmesdale has his name mentioned for the first time in this same conversation: "'[Hester Prynne] hath raised a great scandal, I promise you, in godly Master Dimmesdale's church'" (TSL 88). After introducing the main characters, the reader/narrator keeps playing the same game, inserting dialogues here and there in his narrative -- a kind of sprinkling of reality in his fiction. But the insertion of dialogues is just half a way to the achievement of a realistic effect; the reader/narrator's own

words will produce the other half. His comments about Chillingworth, Hester, and Dimmesdale will bring the kind of detailed information that only a "sensitive observer" (TSL 81) can provide. And in the reader/narrator's case, this sensitiveness can be translated as ability to read minds and hearts. He does not limit himself to the description of the main characters' physical appearance, but tries to grasp their true selves when analysing them. This attitude places the reader/narrator in a very delicate situation: the same wish to reach truth that leads him to present a detached account of the episode, impels him to offer a quite parcial view of the main characters. The reader/narrator's descriptions and comments about these characters, I would say, seem to impose some labels on them -- Hester is a strong woman and a martyr, a victim of the strict laws of Puritanic society; Dimmesdale is a "professional teacher of truth" (TSL 173); and Chillingworth, the "Leech," is Satan himself.

This kind of contradictory behavior points to a predominant will to truth in Hawthorne's reader/narrator's reading/account. First he acts as if his function were that of a mere observer, then he allows other people to talk (dialogues), and mentions other people's versions or opinions about some events and characters; but this reader/narrator believes in truth, and because of that, he cannot be too democratic about meanings. If it is truth what he wants, then it is necessary for him to say the last word about everything concerning the episode. In relation to the scarlet letter A, for example, he acts exactly this way. Throughout his reading/narrative, Hawthorne's

reader/narrator makes reference to the scarlet letter A and its possibilities of interpretation -- A for Angel (TSL 177); A for Able (TSL 180), -- because as he himself declares, his intention is "to hold nothing back from the reader" (TSL 231). But even though this reader/narrator does not omit the ambiguous character of the letter A, I would say that he tends to neutralize it by commenting on the existence of an "original signification" to this mysterious letter:

> Such helpfulness was found in Hester, -- so much power to do, and power to sympathize , -- that many people refused to interpret the scarlet letter A by its original signification. (TSL 180)

The reader/narrator does not say exactly what this original signification is (he is possibly implying that A is for Adulterous), but he mentions the possibility of this letter having only one original signification.

The reader/narrator of **The Scarlet Letter**, I repeat, always has good explanations for every event in the story, especially for those that may be considered improbable. Every time he feels that improbability may threaten the reliable character of his reading/narrative, the reader/narrator comes up with a logical explanation that will reinforce the idea that truth is what he is really looking for. The appearance of a huge letter A in the sky is one of these events that deserve some kind of logical or scientific-like explanation on the part of the reader/narrator. About the improbable phenomenon he says: "Nothing was more common, in those days, than to interpret all meteoric

appearances, and other natural phenomena...as so many revelations from a supernatural source" (TSL 174); and he goes on with his explanation, for it is necessary to throw some more light on Dimmesdale's vision:

> We impute it, therefore, solely to the disease in his own eye and heart, that the minister, looking upward to the zenith, beheld there the appearance of an immense letter, the letter A, -- marked out in lines of dull red light. Not but the meteor may have shown itself at that point, burning duskily through a veil of cloud; But with no such shape as his guilty imagination gave it;or,at least, with so little definiteness, that another's guilt might have seen another symbol in it. (TSL 175)

Every improbable fact must be followed by a logical explanation of it, and every sign of unreality has to be allied to a mark of reality just like in this passage of "A Flood of Sunshine": "A wolf, it is said, -- but here the tale has surely lapsed into the improbable, -- came up, and smelt of Pearl's robe, and offered his savage head to be patted by her hand" (TSL 222). The reliability of the episode is permanently under the reader/narrator's surveillance; and as long as he manages to keep its invulnerability, it becomes much easier for him to preserve his image of unsuspicious reader/teller.

But it is in American history that the reader/narrator will find his most useful effects of truth. To make sure that his reading/narrative really acquires a realistic effect, the reader/narrator will see that history works as a neutralizer of fiction, something that will help him take away the fictional quality of his story. In **The Scarlet Letter** the reader/narrator

will make history follow every step of his reading/narrative: no matter what scenes or characters are being described, history will always be around in an attempt to make the fictional events of the scarlet letter episode merge into the historical facts of the Puritanic seventeenth-century New England. On the night of the Minister's vigil, historical figures such as Governor Bellingham, Governor Winthrop, Reverend John Wilson, and Mistress Hibbins fill the improbable events of chapter twelve — Dimmesdale's outcry and the appearance of a great letter A in the sky — with some touches of institutionalized truth; Dimmesdale preaches the Election Sermon just like any respectable New England clergyman would have done, and the New England Holiday is portrayed in detail, the historical quality of these public events being quite stressed:

> Wrestling-matches, in the differing fashions of Cornwall and Devonshire, were seen here and there about the market-place; in one corner, there was a friendly bout at quarterstaff; and — what attracted most interest of all — on the platform of the pillory, already so noted in our pages, two masters of defence were commencing an exhibition with the buckler and broadsword. (TSL 246)

American history is undoubtedly one of the reader/narrator's favorite and best allied in his search for truth. In **The Scarlet Letter**, I would say, there are almost as many historical citations as fictional events and all this concern with history certainly has as a starting-point the reader/narrator's wish to thoroughly mix fiction with the purest reality.

The reader/narrator's strong desire to reveal the true facts in the scarlet letter episode is also reflected in his attitude

of admiration toward truth. The state or quality of being true is made an object of worship in the reader/narrator's version of the episode: to be true, to tell the truth, to look for the truth of things become central issues in his reading/narrative -- Dimmesdale is said to be "a professional teacher of truth" (TSL 173), a "true priest," and a "true religionist" (TSL 145); his sermon can throw "a shower of golden truths upon the crowd" (TSL 262); Hester asks Dimmesdale to "exchange [that] false life [of his] for a true one" (TSL 215); and Dimmesdale's flock is described as "hungry for truth" (TSL 209). Besides that, the word truth is everywhere in the text, as if the reader/narrator had chosen to emphasize the idea of being true or telling/searching for the truth through language -- the language of truth. To tell exactly how many times the word truth and its derivatives appear in the pages of **The Scarlet Letter** would be really a hard job; I have, thus, selected some sentences and expressions which, I believe, are very good examples of the reader/narrator's strong will to truth: "Not to hide the truth" (TSL 188); "it is true" (TSL 181); "in very truth" (TSL 209); "And be the stern and sad truth spoken" (TSL 218); "The truth seems to be" (TSL 222); "The same was true as regarded the acquaintance whom he met" (TSL 232); "heaven-breathing Gospel truth" (TSL 234); "in truth" (TSL 224); "it truly seemed" (TSL 147); and "what, methinks, is the very truth" (TSL 137).

Such attitude towards truth could only lead the reader/narrator to give special attention to the conclusion of the scarlet letter episode; for every "true story" must have an

effective ending which will not only reveal its denouement, but also provide conclusive evidence of the authenticity of the narrative that has been just presented. Hawthorne's **The Scarlet Letter** is not an exception to this rule. The last two chapters of the novel contain this kind of concluding information and the reader/narrator's final remarks. In "The Revelation of the Scarlet Letter," the reader/narrator describes the triumph of truth over falsehood, the exact moment in which all secrets are unveiled: Dimmesdale admits his love for Hester, ackowledges Pearl as his daughter, and reveals the red letter A on his breast. This could perfectly be the last chapter of **The Scarlet Letter** -- the "minister's expiring breath" (TSL 269) would silence the reader/narrator's voice and it would be up to the reader's imagination to decide whether there was really a red letter A on Dimmesdale's breast, or to wonder what happened to the lives of Hester Prynne, Pearl, and Roger Chillingworth after the minister's death. An ending like this, however, would totally go against the reader/narrator's wish to get close to the true facts of the scarlet letter episode; thus, the reader/narrator has decided that as well as an introductory chapter ("The Custom-House"), **The Scarlet Letter** should have a concluding one.

In the chapter entitled "Conclusion," the reader/narrator goes on with his "hold-nothing-back-from-the-reader" philosophy, affirming that there are several theories concerning the final scene of the scarlet letter episode -- "After many days....there was more than one account of what had been witnessed on the scaffold" (TSL 270) -- and reminding his audience that any reader could choose among these different versions:

> The reader may choose among these theories. We have thrown all the light we could to acquire upon the portent, and would gladly, now that it has done its office, erase deep print out of our own brain. (TSL 270)

Although in a very subtle way, the reader/narrator tries to give his last and true word about the red letter A on Dimmesdale's breast, affirming that "certain persons, who were spectators of the whole scene, and professed never once to have removed their eyes from the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale, denied that there was any mark whatever on his breast" (TSL 279/71); finally, to make people sure that this, or rather, that his is the correct version, he calls these persons "highly respectable witnesses" (TSL 271), and adds:

> The authority which we have chiefly followed -- a manuscript of old date, drawn up from the verbal testimony of individuals, some of whom had known Hester Prynne, while others had heard the tale from contemporary witnesses -- fully confirms the view taken in the foregoing pages. (TSL 271)

In the excerpt above, the reader/narrator quits his momentary liberal ideas about the reader and the free choice of meanings, and reminds his audience of the "authority" that has not only filled his mind with all these pieces of reliable information about the scarlet letter episode, but also helped him produce evidence in support of his version. In other words, he seems to be trying to "warn" the public not to trust any other accounts, but his.

The word "authority" apparently restores the

reader/narrator's energies; after mentioning Mr. Surveyor Pue's manuscript, he takes his breath, and announces that he has some more "truths" "to communicate to the reader" (TSL 272). In the last pages of **The Scarlet Letter** the reader/narrator presents, thus, a detailed description of the main facts that took place after the minister's death. These facts, however, -- Roger's Chillingworth's death, the great amount of property he left to Pearl, Hester Prynne's and Pearl's departure to the "New World," and Hester's return to New England -- are not relevant to this discussion; what is really worth analyzing in the last pages of Hawthorne's **The Scarlet Letter** is the effort made by the reader/narrator to make these facts look like truth: Old Roger Chillingworth's testament, affirms the reader/narrator, was executed by Governor Bellingham and the Reverend Mr. Wilson -- history meets fiction again; "the gossips of that day believed -- and Mr. Surveyor Pue, who made investigations a century later, believed, and one of his recent successors in office, moreover, faithfully believes, -- that Pearl was not only alive, but married and mindful of her mother" (TSL 274) -- again the reader/narrator invokes the name and authority of Mr Surveyor Pue, putting a lot of emphasis on the word "believe," or on its strong connection with the idea of telling/being sure of the truth; and finally, the reader/narrator informs with great precision the place and the way in which Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale have been buried, so that there can be no doubt about their quality of true characters:

> And, after many, many years, a new grave was delved, near an old and sunken one, in that

> burial-ground beside which King's Chapel has since been built. It was near that old and sunken grave, yet with a space between, as if the desert of the two sleepers had no right to mingle. Yet one tombstone served for both. All around, there were monuments carved with armorial bearings. (TSL 275)

Throughout his reading/narrative, Hawthorne's reader/narrator was allowed to participate actively in the meaning-production process by filling in the blanks of a pre-structured outline with his own imagination. Like any typically Iserian reader/narrator, however, he believes that meaning is primarily in the text. He knows that his "creative contributions" cannot but serve the purposes of the text's original structure of possible meanings. Therefore, I again affirm that the search for final truth and certainty is this Iserian/Hawthornian reader/narrator's main concern in **The Scarlet Letter**. For this very reason, such a "truth-digger" like Hawthorne's reader/narrator could never have run the risk of losing sight of the protagonists of the scarlet letter episode until they were proven dead. Now that the main characters in the scarlet letter episode are resting in their graves, Hawthorne's reader/narrator probably believes that they are at last safe from being contamined by the distracted mind of a "less conscientious" reader/narrator, one that might not be so fond of truth as he is. But what if Dimmesdale, Chillingworth, and Hester Prynne are given the chance to come back to scene and read/narrate their own first-person versions of the scarlet letter episode without having to bother about reading/telling the truth?

Notes

(1) Nathaniel Hawthorne, **The Scarlet Letter** (New York: Penguin, 1986), p.66. (All further references to this novel are cited in parentheses after the quotations, like this: [TSL 66]).

(2) Michael Davitt Bell's **The Development of American Romance: The Sacrifice of Relation**, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), p.7.

(3) this expression is used by Hawthorne in "The Custom-House," p. 45.

CHAPTER THREE

THE LANGUAGE GAMES OF THE UNCONSCIOUS IN

A MONTH OF SUNDAYS

> Voici une scene.Ou je ne suis pas. I must make an image in my mind....I heard two accounts and must synthesize. Worse, I must create. I must from my lousy fantasies pick the nits of truth. What is truth? My fantasies are what concern you? How you do make me preen, Ms.Prynne."(JOHN UPDIKE -**A MONTH OF SUNDAYS**)

The Reverend Mr. Thomas Marshfield, American, aged 41, maried to Jane Marshfield -- the daughter of his former professor of Ethics, Doctor Reverend Wesley Augustus Chillingworth -- seems to have transgressed some moral principles of the Christian Church. An affair with Alicia Crick, the church organist, is Marshfield's first incursion into the world of adultery. After that, it becomes impossible for him to refrain from this kind of "transgressive" behavior and a series of adulterous moves take place. Not only his wife is betrayed, but also his organist/mistress. Every female parishioner in need of spiritual guidance is seen as a potential lover; and spiritual guidance, the way Marshfield interprets it, naturally means "sexual comfort." In the eyes of his bishop and Church, the Reverend Thomas Marshfield has commited a crime and his sinful body and soul must be either punished or recuperated. To spend a month in an omega-shaped "theurapeutic resort" in the middle of the desert, filling blank sheets with the topics that interest him most under the surveillance of Ms. Prynne, is the Reverend's best and only

alternative to reach redemption. After a month of intensive therapy -- writing, poker, golf, and many Daiquiris -- , Marshfield is ready to go back home and start all over again; he finally leaves, but not without spending some moments in Ms. Prynne's inviting arms. Marshfield's "distraction" remains "intractable."

Any similarities between the plot summary I have just presented in the former paragraph and Nathaniel Hawthorne's **The Scarlet Letter** are not the fruit of mere coincidence. In **A Month of Sundays**, John Updike, more than a hundred years later, "ressurects" Hawthornian figures such as Hester Prynne, Chillingworth, and "the wretched minister" Arthur Dimmesdale, re-examines them from a twentieth-century perspective, and grants Dimmesdale/Marshfield enough autonomy to read/narrate his own version of the old episode. Thus, Updike's and Hawthorne's readers/narrators will move toward extremely opposite directions, with different aims in mind, and different roles to play: while the reader/narrator of **A Month of Sundays** moves away from truth to produce his own texts and meanings, the reader/narrator of **The Scarlet Letter** only has eyes for the "real meaning" and the true facts in the scarlet letter episode. The description of Marshfield's performance as a reader/narrator in **A Month of Sundays** will not only reveal his indifferent attitude to truth but also show that, as a reader/narrator of his own story, Marshfield will not play the role of a decipherer of truth. He must be its fabricator instead. Marshfield's reading/narrative will not include scarlet letters that can burn hands, manuscripts to be investigated, authentic outlines to be followed, and

riddles to be solved; it will simply present Marshfield's "revelations." Whether true or false, they are to be neither trusted nor doubted, but perhaps merely enjoyed.

> Forgive me my denomination and my town; I am a Christian minister, and an American...My keepers have set me before a sheaf of blank sheets -- a month's worth, in their estimation. Sullying them is to be my sole therapy. (1)

When Updike's reader/narrator begins his reading/narrative he has got nothing but sone blank sheets, his memory and perception, and a very suspicious first-person voice. Ms. Prynne, the manageress, says Marshfield, "tells me to write...about what interests me most" (AMOS 15), imposing no rules to his narrative. An obedient guest, Marshfield takes Ms. Prynne's advice as an order. His reading/narrative is like a collage of recollections, scenes that have been recorded in his memory, images that keep coming and being replaced by others -- nothing has been planned in advance, no "authentic outlines" have been elaborated or chronologically organized. Marshfield chooses the topics as they come. Sex, golf, politics, religion, women, each one of these subjects can be made a "potential topic" to be discussed: "I felt, being served this morning, dealt with reverentially, or dreadfully, as if in avoidance of contamination. A potential topic: touch and the sacred. God as Supreme Disease. Noli me tangere. Germs and the altar" (AMOS 9). Having blank sheets in his hands instead of a "burning-hot" piece of red cloth and an ancient manuscript, Updike's reader/narrator seems more like a constructor of truths and meanings and less like their

discoverer. Unlike Hawthorne's reader/narrator, Marshfield is interested in telling stories which may be both true and false. As he himself states in the first paragraph of his journal, he is writing for theurapeutical reasons only. In other words, here language is not used to reveal an object, but to heal a subject.

With no predetermined rules to control his reading/narrative,Marshfield feels free to transform his first-person account into an amusing game. To begin with the seriousness of Hawthorne's **The Scarlet Letter**, I would say that Marshfield destroys it completely, promoting dramatic changes in the "original version" of the old episode. The triangle Dimmesdale/Hester/Chillingworth is expanded, and though the main conflict is kept -- the love triangle, adultery, punishment --, Marshfield's version is quite different from the one provided by the readers/narrators of **The Scarlet Letter**. In **A Month of Sundays** the famous triangle changes roles: instead of an adulterous Hester Prynne, an adulterous clergyman, who betrays his wife Mrs. Marshfield, nee Chillingworth (not the villain of Hawthorne's story, but Marshfield's father-in-law). Dimmesdale/Marshfield is not exactly what one could describe as a "professional teacher of truth" who offers his parishioners "showers of golden truth" when preaching his sermons; in fact, Marshfield gives his female parishioners much more than that, providing them not only spiritual advising, but also sexual comfort. Hester Prynne, Dimmesdale's secret lover, becomes his keeper, the manageress of the spiritual resort, "a large lady, undeformed but unattractive, no doubt chosen for that very quality in their sensitive post" (AMOS 10), and the polemic

scarlet letter A she used to wear on her bosom seems to have been transformed into an omega -- not a finely embroidered letter, but an omega-shaped resort; not the solid Custom-House edifice, but a "False-bottomed topper" (AMOS 8) building; not the first letter in the Greek alphabet, but the last.

But changing roles is not the only game Updike's reader/narrator plays with his reading/narrative. Marshfield's first-person account is a great opportunity for him to develop an extremely playful style while reading/narrating what he ironically calls his "revelations": "Mock not my revelations. They are the poor efforts of a decent man to mitigate an indecent bind, an indecent airtight puzzle" (AMOS 79). Marshfield plays with the meaning of words and sentences, and I would say that his language games are essentially subjective, ambiguous, the predominant "Cartesian" quality of Hawthorne's reader/narrator being exchanged for a Freudian one. There are Freudian slips followed by "explanatory" footnotes everywhere in Marshfield's text -- "All middle-aged men, we sit each at our table cleaning dry throughts*...." (AMOS 9) As the footnote tries to explain, "throughts" was written when the narrator tried "to type" "throats" and was thinking "thoughts." In **A Month of Sundays**, we no longer have a unified self who means to read/tell the truth, but a divided self whose reading/discourse is determined by the unconscious. Unlike Hawthorne's, Updike's reader/narrator cannot keep control over language, he prefers to simply let it flow: "Aven* less sleep than the night before....[and a footnote explains] * And a return of auspicious

misfingerings. This one hard to read -- was going to begin with "Again"? A longing for haven. A half-hope of heaven? (AMOS 239). Marshfield also plays some little games with the visual effect of words; he splits sentences, leaving them unfinished at the end of a chapter/day to be continued on the next chapter/day: "...after you've had your" [and on the next page, beggining the chapter] "Fun? 'Way with me?" (AMOS 99/100); he repeats the same words several times (maybe an indication that he does not know what to do with the sentence and that he is probably waiting for his unconscious to react): "My father's house house house hou" (AMOS 24). Besides that, Marshfield also makes comments about his own reading/text, criticizing it -- "I hate this day's pages. The depression grows fangs, this second week" (AMOS 79) -- , complaining about some words -- "'love' (old whore of a word, we'll let you in this once, fumigated by quotation marks)" (AMOS 33) --, admitting the informality of his reading/text -- "These sentences have come in no special order. Each of them has hurt. Each might have been different, with the same effect" (AMOS 26),-- and questioning his own words -- "What do I mean, writing that?" (AMOS 39).

Not only does Marshfield play with words and sentences, transforming his reading/narrative into a playful combination of images, passages of his life, and conjectures, but he also promotes a collage of modes of narration. Story, drama, essay, and poetry coexist in Marshfield's reading/text. To the first-person narrative which is the predominant mode of narration in **A Month of Sundays**, Updike's reader/narrator adds some dramatic scenes: "Enter, chatting, JANE MARSHFIELD, in austere yet

attractive housedress, and ALICIA CRICK, bundled in wool, carrying pastel books of music" (AMOS 111); some paragraphs of pure rhetoric: "Why else, I ask you, did Jesus institute marriage as an eternal hell but to spawn for each sublimely defiant couple, a galaxy of little paradises? ... We are an adulterous generation; let us rejoice" (AMOS 59); and also some passages in which prose acquires such a poetic rhythm, that the sentences sound like verses in a poem: "I overreach. Swing easy, I tell myself day after day. The Milky Way is a dragon. My characters recede. I know you are praying for me, Ms. Prynne" (AMOS 166). Such a playful way of presenting an account certainly does not help Marshfield to build a *reputation of searcher of the truth*; quite the contrary, it only helps to characterize him as a quite suspicious reader/teller who manages to move more and more away from truth while reading/narrating his story.

Written without an outline, and directions to follow, Marshfield's reading/narrative is quite unpredictable, full of surprises. Ms. Prynne, his keeper, appears as one of these "surprises." Marshfield suspects that Ms. Prynne has been reading his journal -- "You've read it before (I do feel someone is reading these pages, though they have the same position on the desk when I return from golf, and my cunning telltales arranged with hairs and paper clips have remained untripped), I know (AMOS 49) -- and the idea of writing to an audience immediately leads him to transform his theurapeutic monologue into an informal talk between a "sinful clergyman" and a supposed "ideal readeress." From this moment on, Ms. Prynne becomes an important piece in

Marshfield's game; he plays hide-and-seek with her -- "(find it yourself, you prying Prynne)" (AMOS 141) --, calls her his "beloved readeress" -- "(You and I, reader; without you there would be the non-noise of a tree crashing in the inhuman forest) (AMOS 239) -- , and ends up making use of his power of argumentation to reach both redemption and Ms. Prynne:

> Have I been a bad guest? ... No, I've been a fun boy, faithful to my vows of obedience .... anxious under all my impudence to return to the world as a good exemplar if not a good exemplum. I want my merit badge. You, Ms., pynne it on me. At night if you wish, but I'm fresher and more phallic in the morning. Incline into me, and hear me cry." (AMOS 264)

Marshfield's demands are satisfied: Ms. Prynne finally knocks at his door as he had already suggested to her, and they spend the morning together,just like Marshfield had planned. At least, this is what he writes in his journal; whether Ms. Prynne is merely a mirage and he is not telling the true facts in this episode, nobody will ever know. Updike's reader/narrator, I insist, is not worried about offering proofs of the authenticity of his reading/narrative; constructing a story without trying to hide its fictional quality is what really matters to him. Marshfield writes to seduce his reader and not just to convince his audience of the authenticity of his reading/account.

Right on the first page of Updike's **A Month of Sundays** an epigraph informs us that "This principle of soul, universally and individually, is the principle of ambiguity." (2) This epigraph, I would say, perfectly fits Marshfield's behavior as a reader/narrator: ambiguity is also the guiding principle of

the Reverend's divided self and his reading/narrative. In other words, Thomas Marshfield's journal is essentially ambiguous and ambiguity does not seem like a real problem to him. Updike's reader/narrator willingly cultivates uncertainty and accepts the vagueness of his words. He confesses not to be sure about the manageress' name: "Seemed to be the manageress. Named, if my years, still plugged with jet-hum deceived me not, Ms. Prynne" (AMOS 10); admits the possibility of his account being the product of his imagination: "Or perhaps these words were never spoken, I made them up, to relieve and rebuke the silence of this officiously chaste room" (AMOS 42); and ends up asking himself: "Did I dream this?'" (AMOS 269). In one of the many passages he addresses Ms. Prynne, Marshfield complains about having to construct a story, and suggests: "If you would leave me a multiple-choice questionnaire as does the Ramada Inn" (AMOS 133). While Hawthorne's readers/narrators are not economical of words at all (they need to be precise, clear, convincing), Updike's reader/narrator believes that a multiple-choice questionnaire would perfectly do its office. And this seems like a wonderful way of talking to Ms. Prynne about love. To the almost rhetorical question "why do we love each other" Marshfield finds a great answer -- a multiple-choice questionnaire; it is up to his "ideal readeress" now to choose one of the options:

> I love you because (a) you are there (b) you run this haven ably (c) you never complain (d) you seem to be alone (e) you read what I write.
>
> You love me because (a) I am here (b) I need you. (AMOS 264/265)

If Hawthorne's reader/narrators behave in a typically Iserian way, using their creative capacity to serve the purposes of the text's original structure of possible meanings, Updike's Marshfield is the exact equivalent of the readers/narrators described by Holland and Barthes. Free from text control, Marshfield transforms the reading experience into a completely autonomous personal adventure. No concluding paragraphs close Marshfield's reading/narrative. He simply quits it. Because therapy time is over, Marshfield can now stop the reading/fabricating process. His account/reading, he comments, is "not a very edifying or conclusive [one].... And nor is [its] end clear" (AMOS 239/240); but Marshfield is surely not worried about producing crystal-clear endings and solid accounts. Rather than filling in the blanks of an "authentic outline," Updike's reader/narrator has chosen to count but on his imagination to fill a number of blank pages.

Notes

(1) John Updike, **A Month of Sundays** (New York: Knopf, 1975),p. 7. (All further references are cited in parentheses after the quotations, like this: [AMOS 7]).

(2) The maxim is Paul Tillich's (AMOS 5).

CHAPTER FOUR

ROGER'S VERSION: GOD AS FACTUAL CENTER X GOD AS ABSENT CENTER

"We all know what happens to facts: they get ignored, forgotten. Facts are boring. Facts are inert, impersonal." (JOHN UPDIKE - **ROGER'S VERSION**)

Until the moment an extra-marital relationship has put an end to the his religious career, Roger Lambert used to be a respectable minister. This adulterous move, however, was not strong enough to send Roger away from the "faith business." Once a sinful minister, now a Divinity School professor, Roger Lambert still coexists with saints, heretics, a few dead languages, and a harmless daily dose of religious-talk. Life at Divinity School is not exactly what one could define as an exciting adventure, but here Professor Lambert has certainly had the chance to experience the pros and cons of a peaceful existence which would have never been disturbed had not Dale Kohler -- a typical professional student disguised underneath the title of a research assistant for a special computer graphics project -- invaded his life to try to convince Roger and humanity that he, Dale Kohler, could trap God in a computer screen and prove His existence. Kohler definitely brings a lot of action into Roger's quiet life: a scientific religious impasse; a problematic niece and her helpless little daughter, both finally accepted by Roger as protegees; and some more adulterous

experiences such as Dale's affair with Esther, the professor's wife, and Roger's affair with his niece Verna . Dale Kohler's dreams do not come true: God does not materialize in the screen of his computer. Dale is then advised to forget about the "old buffer," and returns to his hometown with Verna. Roger's life is back to normality : "the shadows of Divinity School," his favorite heretics, his wife and son, and an "unreachable" God.

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's **The Scarlet Letter** the reader/narrator's eyes of acute omniscient observer have labelled Roger Chillingworth as a devilish man of science. According to this extremely well-informed reader/narrator, "old Roger Chillingworth" is a mysterious physician who, although "throughout life had been calm in temperament, kindly, though not of warm affections, but ever, and in all relations with the world, a pure and upright man" (TSL 250), radically changes his behavior after finding himself in the position of a betrayed man, becoming a kind of Satan's emissary: "Had a man seen old Roger Chillingworth [examining his patient Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale], he would have no need to ask how Satan comports himself, when a precious human soul is lost to heaven, and won into his kingdom" (TSL 159). Of the two male characters involved in the love triangle Dimmesdale/Hester/Chillingworth, the former has been proclaimed the hero of the story, while the latter has obviously been stigmatized as its villain. Also, to make things worse for the physician, the reader/narrator of **The Scarlet Letter** has chosen to name Chillingworth the "Leech," surely in an attempt to call his audience's attention to the worst side of Roger's vengeful mind . In the passages he describes

Chillingworth's physical appearance, this very reader/narrator has been careful enough not to miss any details that could help stressing the villain's ugliest and most repulsive characteristics. Roger is presented as someone who has got not only a machiavellian soul, completely devoid of scruples, but also a badly shaped body: "He was small in stature, with a furrowed visage, which, as yet, could hardly be termed aged....it was sufficiently evident to Hester Prynne, that one of this man's shoulders rose higher than the other" (TSL 87). Roger Chillingworth, the way this reader/narrator portrays him, is both morally and physically deformed. Evil, thy name might as well be Roger Chillingworth.(1)

In John Updike's **Roger's Version** Roger is back and ready to turn Hawthorne's **The Scarlet Letter** inside out. Free from the Hawthornian reader/narrator's perspective, Roger seems to have said no to his former subservient condition of observed character to become the observer himself. **Roger's Version** is something like Roger's coup d'etat : once a mere marionette depending on the reader/narrator's authoritative third-person voice to pull Roger's strings and give him life, now a reader/narrator producing a first-person reading/narrative which goes totally against the Hawthornian reader/narrator's strong belief in absolute values, definite roles, detached and objective descriptions, and incontestable facts. Roger, who is probably tired of being known by all as the betrayed husband, devilish villain, and defeated man of science of Hawthorne's **The Scarlet Letter**, opts for breaking up with all the strict

principles that have not only given life to the character of "old Roger Chillingworth," but also have made him look like truth. A detailed description of Roger's behavior as the reader/narrator of his own version of the scarlet letter episode will help to show that in **Roger's Version** Updike's reader/narrator simply refuses to absolutize, promoting the multiplication of pre-established roles and meanings, and the demolition of solid and indestructible facts. The traditional wish to search for/tell real facts is replaced by an indifferent attitude toward truth and a strong desire to undermine the absolute quality of Hawthorne's reader/narrator's text.

Roger's strongest weapon is his word, his testimony, his version. In Updike's **Roger's Version** the reader/narrator will see that the self-assured third-person voice of Hawthorne's reader/narrator fades away, giving room to his own witty first-person voice:

> I have been happy at the Divinity School. The hours are bearable, the surroundings handsome, my colleagues harmless and witty, habituated as they are to the shadows. To master a few dead languages, to parade sequential moments of the obdurately enigmatic early history of Christianity before classrooms of the hopeful, the deluded, and the docile -- there are more fraudulent ways to earn a living. (2)

This change from third to first person places this reader/narrator in a very suspicious position; for Roger is now the only person in charge of meaning-production. But unlike Hawthorne's reader/narrator, Roger is not afraid of the inevitable subjectivity that surrounds the pronoun "I." Updike's reader/narrator and his "I voice" gravitate toward unreliability

with the same determination Hawthorne's reader/narrator and his detached third-person voice have marched toward truth. Constructing an unauthorized version of "the old episode" is all that seems to count to Roger. Rather than being recognized as the bearer of truth, he prefers to be "accused" of being the owner of his own story, the producer of his own meanings.

A liar, perhaps. But a very skilful one. Updike's reader/narrator knows that even a liar needs a good story; and if dismantling Hawthorne's reader/narrator's truth is really his main objective, Roger will surely need much more than a very good story. He will also have to fabricate a reader/narrator, someone to "wear" his own first-person voice: a Roger who is both "old Roger" and some other new Roger, whose story is both predictable -- because it echoes Roger Chillingworth's story -- and unexpected -- since this Roger, who introduces himself as Roger Lambert, tells his audience this same old story in a quite different way. Thus, in Updike's **Roger Version** we get acquainted with Roger Lambert, the reader/narrator in charge of Roger's account, the owner of the ready tongue and the smart eyes which will function as a producer/provider of information in **Roger's Version** : dialogues ("'We haven't yet introduced ourselves. I, of course, am Roger Lambert.' 'Dale Kohler, sir. I really appreciate your seeing me'"(RV 4/5)), comments ("His handshake was just as I expected: bony, cool as wax, and too earnestly firm in its grip. He did not seem to want to let go" (RV 5)), descriptions ("She was charming, I saw: ...She wore a brick-red wool dress with a wide scalloped neckline; for a

nineteen-year-old, she carried her bosom low, and was equally heavy and down-sleeping in the hips...her complexion was shallow and her bleach-streaked twisty hair fell in damp-looking careless coils to her shoulders, so there was something Pre-Raphaelite, tubercular and ethereal, about the glow she gave off." (RV 107)), self-examination ("I am a depressive. It is very important for my mental well-being that I keep my thoughts directed away from areas of contemplation that might entangle me and pull me down" (RV 4)), and digressions ("The pleasures of a pipe. The tapping, the poking, the twisting, the stuffing, the lighting " (RV 6)). Roger's audience cannot escape his unauthorized words and tendentious comments: Roger reads/narrates his story his way; we just listen to it and decide whether we will take it or leave it.

In Roger's reading/narrative, I insist, there is no room for "the absolute." Wathever was meant to be clear in Hawthorne's reader/narrator's account must become blurred in Roger's version. Roger Chillingworth, the wicked villain of Hawthorne's **The Scarlet Letter**, comes back as Roger Lambert, no longer the Hawthornian unified "self," but a divided man, a perfect combination of stigmas, qualities, and beliefs -- "inbetweeness" itself; neither the villain nor the hero; not unquestionably guilty, but far from innocent; neither out of the religious business nor a religious fanatic; both betrayed and betrayer. An essentially ambiguous character, Roger Lambert holds within himself a bit of Chillingworth and Dimmesdale. In **Roger's Version** he maneuvers Dimmesdale out of his original position, placing himself in the territory of faith (Roger Lambert is a professor

at Divinity School); but Updike's reader/narrator knows that any radical move to "the other side" can place him in a definite position, in the hero's position, so he chooses to keep some of the old villain's characteristics. In his own reading/version of the old episode we learn that Roger is a former minister who has quit ministry for a very embarassing reason: adultery. Also, he considers "[his] years spent in the active ministry, before meeting and marrying Esther....if not exactly wasted, as a kind of pre-existence, the thought of which depresses [him]" (RV 87), and now, as a scholar, among all the personages in the history of Christianity, Roger Lambert has elected the heretics as his favorite ones -- "Again and again...one is compelled to notice how pleasanter, more reasonable and agreeable, the heretics in hindsight appear than those enforcers who opposed them on behalf of what became Roman Catholic orthodoxy" (RV 78). As a religious man, he has his own way of dealing with that; when accused of belonging to the "other party," Roger promptly replies: "The Devil's party, you mean? Not at all. I have my own style of faith" (RV 87). Hawthorne's Dimmesdale was definitely by the side of faith; Roger has now unorthodoxily moved himself to Dimmesdale's original side.

Roger's allegiance to unorthodox faith places him by the side of subjectivity, the same subjectivity he longs to achieve in his reading/narrative. Subjectivity, he comments, "is religion's proper domain" (RV 217). When Updike's reader/narrator vehemently rejects the idea of God as fact -- "But my faith, poor thing or no, leads me to react with horror to your attempt...to

reduce God to the status of one more fact, to deduce Him" (RV 87/88) -- he is, in a way, also refusing to cope with Hawthorne's reader/narrator's objectivity and hunger for real facts. To take God as a fact is not only to admit that truth can be reached (and that it is only one), but also to put an end to the endless game of possibilities Updike's reader/narrator wishes to play. He uses Karl Barth's words to stress his belief in this kind of game:

> "Man is a riddle and nothing else, and his universe, be it ever so vividly seen and felt, is a question....The solution of the riddle, the answer to the question, the satisfaction of our need is the absolutely new event....There is no way which leads to this event." (RV 40)

Thus, the more Roger refuses to trap God and also his reading/account in a frame of reality, the more he moves away from truth and emphasizes his belief in the impossibility of one really getting to it.

Roger's tone of voice also perfectly fits the indefinite quality of Updike's reader/narrator. While Hawthorne's reader/narrator has insisted on adopting the same solemn tone of voice throughout **The Scarlet Letter**, one that could convince his audience of both the impartiality and the veracity of his reading/narrative, Updike's Roger has opted for a lighter and much more flexible tone. The voice we hear in **Roger's Version** is essentially ironic, especially when addressing Dale Kohler. In these moments Roger's remarks are sometimes caustic; to one of Dale's attempt to convince him that "God is showing through," the professor ironically answers: "'Twenty-eight is a very common age, actually...for people to turn back to religion'" (RV 19).

And as Professor Lambert gets more and more hostile, his remarks become more and more corrosive: "'If He is omnipotent, I would think it within its powers to keep hiding. And I'm not sure it isn't a bit heretical of you to toss the fact of God in with a lot of other facts. Even Aquinas, I think, didn't postulate a God Who could be hauled kicking and screaming out from some laboratory closet, over behind the blackboard'" (RV 57). But Roger is not really interested in producing a tone of voice that may lead his audience to put labels on him, and if in some passages of **Roger's Version** he sounds essentially ironic, in others he gets extremely serious, allowing some kind of inner voice to be heard: "I have a dark side, I know, a sullen temper, an uprising of bile that clouds my vision and turns my tongue heavy and ugly; it is the outward manifestation of my tendency to be depressed" (RV 9); or quite playful, sorting out his feelings toward Dale, in a kind of weekly shopping-list of feelings:

> (a) physical repugnance, at his waxiness, and the unreachable luminescence of his eyes, steady as a pale blue light burning in his skull;
> (b) loathing of his theories, which couldn't have anything much to them, though some would need an expert to refute;
> (c) envy of his faith and foolish hope that he could grab the hoary problem of belief by a whole new tail;
> (d) a certain attraction,reciprocating what seemed to be his sticky adherence to me, since this second visit to my office served no clear purpose;
> (e) a grateful inkling that he was injecting a new element into my life, my stale and studious arrangements;
> (f) an odd and sinister empathy: he kept inviting my mind out of its tracks to follow him on his paths through the city. (RV 90)

Also, Roger's voice sometimes acquires, a certain tragicomic tone

in a few moments of his reading/narrative. According to Roger, Esther goes to Dale's apartment (he says they are having an affair), a scene that Roger considers worth describing; but in a "pseudo-detached" third-person voice. The tone of his description is one of tragi-comedy. It sounds comic because Roger, even when hidden behind a serious tone of voice, cannot help being ironic — "She becomes his mistress, a hundred-pound packet of shameless tender carnality. They strip, they fuck. But first — wait, willing words! — they kiss" (RV 194); and tragic because the situation itself seems quite dramatic. And here, I would say Roger is essentially ambiguous. His voice reveals a feeling of anxiety, no doubt; but it also expresses the veiled pleasure and excitment of a voyeur — "With gloveclad finger, Esther, my Esther — I can feel her heart beating!" (RV 192).It could not be different: Roger's is a divided voice in a divided "self."

Professor Lambert seems like the perfect "disguise" for someone who wishes to dismantle Hawthorne's belief in truth. Masqueraded as Roger Lambert, Updike's reader/narrator manages to occupy Dimmesdale's position without having to discard Chillingworth's characteristics and name; one may say he is Roger Chillingworth, Dimmesdale, and someone else, and yet one may not be really sure about that. Updike's reader/narrator's "multi-directional" reading/narrative transforms the question of identity, at least of Roger's identity, into a matter of belief. The reader/narrator of **Roger's Version**, Roger Lambert, is the result of his own ability to fabricate meanings while reading his life-text. Roger's version of himself and of others is not to be

taken as a fact: it is to be faced as a possibility among several other possible fabrications.

The distaste of Updike's reader/narrator for types that can be easily defined has led him to create not only a "miscellaneous" Roger, but also a quite puzzling Dimmesdale. In **Roger's Version** the respectable, eloquent, and venerable Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, the heroic and wretched minister of Hawthorne's **The Scarlet Letter** is turned into Dale Kohler, "a research assistant for a special graphics project" (RV 87) who works at the University Computer Research Center; someone that, judging from his initial talk, could be the perfect type to be labelled as a "man of science": "'Artificial intelligence is what the higher-ups [in the Cube] really care about -- you know, yoking hundreds of minis together to modulize the problem, trying to develop rules that keep the search tree from expanding exponentially, using heuristics to generate new heuristics, and so on. But in the meantime it's data processing and bionics and now graphics that keep the wheels greased, or the bread buttered, or whatever'" (RV 4). But Dale Kohler is not really the scientist he seems to be at first sight; according to Updike's reader/narrator, Dale is also very much interested in the faith business. Dale's facade of man of science hides the mind of a naive religious fanatic who believes he can lend a "scientific" hand to religion by trapping God in the screen of his computers and proving His existence: "'The most miraculous thing is happening'....'The physicists are getting down to the nitty-gritty, they're really just about pared things down to the ultimate details, and the last thing they ever expected to happen

is happening. God is showing through'" (RV 4).

By dreaming of turning God into fact, Dale Kohler wants to do away with the inevitable subjectivity of religion. So, he goes all the way down to "the other side" to meet Roger Lambert at Divinity School and ask the professor to help him go on with his bizarre project. Just like in Hawthorne's **The Scarlet Letter**, science and faith meet again to fight great battles, except that this time it is not up to Hawthorne's serious and objective reader/narrator to read/narrate these scenes; it is now Updike's reader/narrator's turn to read/tell them in his best disestablishing style. Read/told from Roger Lambert's perspective, things get quite blurred: on the one side we have Roger himself, -- whose name recalls Hawthorne's Roger Chillingworth's -- quite interested in the religion business, but not with the same fervor shown by the minister in the old episode; and on the other side we have Dale, apparently deeply commited to science, just like Hawthorne's Chillingworth, but extremely enthusiastic about religious matters, just like Reverend Dimmesdale. Updike's reader/narrator has definitely succeeded in stressing the ambiguous characteristics of these characters which Hawthorne's reader/narrator has tried to suffocate at all costs.

Updike's reader/narrator does not seem to be afraid of words such as partiality, tendenciousness, and lack of objectivity. In **The Scarlet Letter** Roger Chillingworth was objectively defined as both physically and morally deformed -- Hawthorne's reader/narrator swears that he was telling the truth. In **Roger's**

Version. Roger, who is not commited to truth and objectivity at all, takes his own conclusions about Dale Kohler's physical appearance: "He was, I saw as he came in the door, the type of young man I like least: tall much taller than I, and pale with an indoors passion. His waxy pallor was touched along the underside of his jaw with acne, like two brush burns, and his eyes in their deep bony sockets were uncanny, sheepish, unutterably cold pale blue, pale almost to colorlessness....His dirty looking hair, somewhat curly brown hair, I could see at his temples, was already beginning to thin" (RV 3/4). From the very first moment Roger sees Dale, he demonstrates antipathy toward him, shooting his worst thoughts at Kohler, but again Roger's ambiguous character takes over, and he ends up both despising and playing the father to the young pseudo-scientist.

As in Hawthorne's **The Scarlet Letter**, in Updike's **Roger's Version** Roger and Dale fight several battles, except that this time these are not silent battles involving readers/discoverers of hearts and secret truths, but quite noisy and wordy ones. Even though Roger rejects Dale's ideas -- "'I am absolutely convinced that my God, that anybody's real God, will not be deduced, will not be made subject to statistics and bits of old bone and glimmers of light in some telescope!'" (RV 88).-- he decides to help Dale (as Chillingworth helped Dimmesdale) get his grant and go on with his project. Roger, however, has kept the villanous touch of Hawthorne's Chillingworth, and I would say he manages to defeat Dale. Roger arranges a casual meeting between Dale and the scientist Kriegman, who after listening to Dale's theories about God, declares: "'God? Forget the old

buffer."...'If what you've given me is all there is to your theories, young fella, you've got a long way to go'" (RV 307). And this is the end of Dale Kohler's dreams and project.

Hester Prynne, the cause of all disagreements between Roger Chillingworth and Dimmesdale in **The Scarlet Letter**, could not have been forgotten in **Roger's Version**. An extremely complex and polemic character, Hester Prynne receives a special treatment in Hawthorne's reader/narrator's reading/account of the old story. Although Hawthorne's reader/narrator works hard to set Hester free from ambiguous readings, I would say that in **The Scarlet Letter** Hester appears as a divided woman: divided between her love for Dimmesdale and her desire to protect his reputation; or between resignation and rebellion. In this passage, for example, Hawthorne's reader/narrator's description of her behavior suggests this conflictuous duality in Hester's character: "She was patient, -- a martyr indeed, -- but she forbore to pray for her enemies; lest, in spite of her forgiving aspirations, the words of the blessing should stubbornly twist themselves into a curse" (TSL 109); and when Hester, in the forest, throws the scarlet letter away, takes off the cap that hid her long hair, and tells Dimmesdale that they should leave together, her rebellious side emerges; or rather, Hawthorne's reader/narrator lets it emerge, for as he himself states, he is not supposed to hold anything back from his audience. To prove his impartiality and will to truth the Hawthornian reader/narrator provides "another view of Hester," (3) but duality is not a welcome word in his reading/narrative, and Hawthorne's reader/narrator ends up

finding a very good label to the female protagonist of Hawthorne's **The Scarlet Letter.** In the chapter called "Conclusion," Hawthorne's reader/narrator buries a martyr, the heroine of the scarlet letter episode. In other words, this reader/narrator "neutralizes" Hester's image of ambiguous character imposing a definite role on her.

While Hawthorne's reader/narrator chooses to avoid ambiguity, Updike's Roger opts for incorporating it to his reading/text by letting the character of Hester Prynne be expanded, multiplied. In **Roger's Version**, rather than one woman protagonist, we have two, Esther and Verna, who seem to share some common points with Hawthorne's Hester. Esther, whose name echoes Hester's, is Roger's second wife -- a relationship that resulted from one of Roger's adulterous experiences and made him quit the ministry; Verna is Roger's niece, a young woman who, like Hester Prynne, lives on the outskirts of the town, not "[in a] small thatched cottage" (TSL 105), but in a rotten building in the marginal side of the city, which Roger defines as "a yellow brick Camelot of low-cost housing" (RV 58). Verna,moreover, has a daughter who, in a way, has caused her to become an undesirable figure in her community, just like Hester Prynne. Pearl, Hester's daughter, is the fruit of a sinful intercourse with Reverend Dimmesdale; Paula, Verna's daughter, is the fruit of Verna's intercourse with a black man.

Esther could possibly stand for Hester Prynne's more mature and repressed side, whereas Verna could perfectly be the impulsive and rebellious Hester. Esther is the kind of woman who does her best to keep her image of respectable married lady

untouched, enjoys listening to classical music, works at a Day Care Center, doing a kind of job in which, like Hester, she is supposed to render assistance to people; Verna, on the contrary, has no image to preserve. Extremely impulsive, Verna seems to be much more interested in having fun than in anything else, and in her manner, comments Updike's reader/narrator, "there is something of learned vulgarity, imitated, I [suppose], from punk girl singers, and from Cher and Bette Midler" (RV 109). Unlike Esther, Verna is not the one who gives assistance to people, she is the one who needs it.

Esther and Verna, however, are not as simple and easily definable as they look. Like Dale and Roger Lambert, they are also good examples of ambiguous characters, non-unified "selves." We could call Verna and Esther impulsive, rebellious, mature, and repressed, and yet these adjectives would not be enough to describe the unpredictable and complex women characters Updike's reader/narrator has fabricated. Esther and Verna are a mixture of good and evil, impulsiveness and repression, rebellion and resignation. Esther has a respectable image she wants to preserve, but according to Roger, she does not hesitate about having an affair with Dale Kohler and spending an afternoon "'in one of these old three-decked all broken up studio apartments'" (RV 159), where students like Dale live. Verna, the rebellious girl, has some contradictory moments of conventionality, and while having an expensive French meal with his uncle Roger, she confesses: "'I want structure, Nunc'" (RV 318). The end of Roger's reading/narrative brings the most unexpected facts about

these women's ambiguous moves: Verna gives up "annoying" society with her rebellious attitudes and decides to return to her parents' house with Dale Kohler, while the respectable and "well-behaved" Esther, in a quite rebellious way, informs Roger that she is going to church and that she has a very special reason for doing that:

> "Where on earth are you going?" I asked her.
> "Obviously," she said, "to church."
> "Why would you do a ridiculous thing like that?"
> "Oh --" She appraised me with her pale green eyes. Wathever emotions had washed through her had left an amused glint, a hint or seed. In her gorgeous rounded woman's voice she pronounced smilingly, "To annoy you."(RV 329)

By giving life to such divided, and consequently ambiguous "selves," Roger rearranges, or rather, disarranges the basic structure of **The Scarlet Letter**. Old events meet new events in **Roger's Version**; meanings are multiplied. First, Roger leads Hester Prynne to share his exclusive position of one and only desired woman; she is now in competition with another woman character; second, he seems to succeed in finding a way of getting rid of his exclusive image of "betrayed husband": Esther's affair with Dale is inevitable, and so is Roger's affair with Verna. Roger continues to be a betrayed husband, but Esther/Hester becomes a betrayed wife, too. They are all quits now; third, Roger messes up the famous love triangle, -- Chillingworth/Hester/Dimmesdale -- the same one Hawthorne's reader/narrator has tried to perpetuate in his version of the scarlet letter episode. Updike's reader/narrator's version of the

"old love triangle," actually, is kaleidoscopic: patterns keep constantly changing and taking indefinite shapes that could possibly fit no geometrical descriptions or figures. In the beginning there was Roger, his wife, and Esther, which become Roger and his wife Esther; and then change to Roger, Esther, and Verna; or Roger, Esther, Dale, and Verna. It's all a question of juxtaposing elements, just like in Roger's reading of Dale's thoughts about the problem: "Dale nods, thinking of Esther and myself, himself and Verna. Juxtapositions" (RV 303).

Heroes, heroines, villains, winners, losers, triangular love affairs. In **Roger's Version** Updike's reader/narrator rejects all these labels by choosing to move in the direction of uncertainty, playing games with Hawthorne's reader/narrator's truth, fabricating his own meanings, multiplying possibilities. Ask who the hero, heroine, or villain in Roger's reading/narrative are, and you will surely have problems to tell one from the other. Roger could have chosen to put himself in the hero's position (after all, this is his version of the episode; it is up to him to fabricate whatever meanings he likes), labelling Dale as a villain. But that would make things too clear for a reader/narrator who prefers them blurred. Probably aware of his "evil" participation in the old episode, Roger will not forget to play with his own villainous side. When attempting to figure out what kind of religious man Dale was, Roger makes some "unorthodox" comments about how villains can be heroes and vice-versa:

And [Dale] was certainly less organized-religion-

> oriented than I thought proper for one of his fervor. Thanksgiving in a Cafeteria? Christmas in a brothel? Of course, the Church has always been recharged unorthodoxly. Augustine was a lawyer. Pelagious himself had no ecclesiastical status, and may have come to Rome as a law student. If the salt lose its savor, wherewith indeed? Jesus himself. John the Baptist: raggedy outsiders. Insiders tend to be villains. Like me, I would smilingly tell my incredulous, admiring students. (RV 91)

Rather than definite sides and reduced possibilities, we are presented here with inbetweeness or anything that can set the protagonist and the other characters in **Roger's Version** free from the imprisoning and "boring" limitations of truth. In other words, rather than owing obedience to the text's "original meanings," like a well-behaved Iserian semi-creative reader/narrator would certainly do, Updike's Roger opts for wandering around the uncertain, and therefore, uncentered roads usually travelled by Hollandian and Barthean readers/narrators. That's Roger's choice: "We all know what happens to facts: they get ignored, forgotten. Facts are boring. Facts are inert, impersonal" (RV 219).

Notes

(1) I could not help playing with Updike's words. See **A Month of Sundays**, p.18: "Perfidy, thy name might as well be Bork."

(2) John Updike, **Roger's Version** (Knopf: N.Y., 1986),p.3. (All further references to this novel are cited in parentheses after the quotations, like this: [RV 3]).

(3) See chapter thirteen of Hawthorne's **The Scarlet Letter**, pp.178-185.

CHAPTER FIVE

S. FOR MULTIPLICITY

"Well, I'm not sure anybody can give an account that isn't somewhat distorted."(JOHN UPDIKE -S.)

Some yoga classes, several weekly appointments with her therapist, and a "hundred" years of boredom -- New Englander Sarah Price feels ready for big changes. Leaving her husband, Doctor Charles Worth, and all the material facilities he represents -- a comfortable house with a heated lap pool and a pair of matching Mercedeses in the garage -- is Sarah's first step in the direction of a new life; her second and much more radical one, is joining an alternative community in Arizona, where she is supposed to worship the Arhat, a kind of messenger sent from Buddha, and wait for the moment when the Hindu philosophy he "preaches" will finally release her from the dangers of ego. While undergoing this ego-detachment process, however, Sarah cannot help keeping in touch with the rotten Occidental world she has just left behind. After all, Mrs. Worth needs to cancel all the appointments she has with her dentist, her therapist, and her hairdresser; she has to babysit at a distance for her, mother who seems to be alive and kicking in a Florida Condo; she is dying to tell her new experiences in the ashram to her friends from the yoga group; she needs to take good care of her stocks and money at the bank; and also, Sarah feels she owes some explanations and advice for her daughter Pearl. Sarah lady-like looks and efficiency lead her to end up playing

the role of the Arhat's assistant, accountant, and lover. The Hindu Arhat, or rather, the Jewish American Arthur Steimetz turns out to be a fake, the whole ashram is tumbling down, and Mr. Charles Worth is taking Sarah's best friend and confidant as his second wife. Sarah feels deceived, betrayed, but she soon finds a way out of this embarassing situation: she gets rid of her sari, puts on her old Mrs. Worth's disguise and flies incognito to the Bahamas, along with a fat Swiss bank account in which part of the Arhat's fortune lies from now on. In Samana Cay, in a seaside cabana, Sarah safely reads books, "embroiders letters to the 'old world'," and laughs.

In Hawthorne's reader/narrator's intense search for the true facts in the scarlet letter episode Hester Prynne is surely the character who offers more resistance to his ambiguity-neutralizing doses of "golden truth." To impose the well-defined images of "wretched minister" and "devilish man of science" to the characters of Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth respectively, does not seem like a very hard task for Hawthorne's reader/narrator; but when it comes to the character of Hester Prynne, this "tall young woman with a figure of perfect elegance....dark and abundant hair, marked brow and deep black eyes," (1) who has been condemned for having had an extra-marital relationship with the community's most respected minister, and compelled to wear a red letter A on her bosom for the rest of her life, living isolated with her illegitimate offspring in the outskirts of the town, desperately trying to conceal the identity of both her forbidden lover and her revengeful husband, things may get a little bit more complicated to the self-assured

Hawthornian reader/narrator, his truth running the risk of acquiring a significant ambiguous touch. For how can a woman like Hester Prynne -- the protagonist of such a tragic and complex episode -- wear the unambiguous cap of a benevolent martyr? I would say she cannot. But Hawthorne's reader/narrator's will to truth makes him find a way to filter Hester's unwanted spots of ambiguity -- Hester Prynne, the martyr, ought to look like truth. And in the last chapter of **The Scarlet Letter**, before burying this very kind martyr, Hawthorne's reader/narrator, in his above suspicion voice authoritatively concludes:

> [In New England] had been her sin; here her sorrow; and here was yet to be her penitence.....In the lapse of the toilsome, thoughtful, and self-devoted years that made up Hester's life, the scarlet letter... became a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe.....And, as Hester Prynne had no selfish ends, nor lived in any measure for her own profit or enjoyment,people brought all their sorrows and perplexities, and besought her counsel... Earlier in life, Hester had vainly imagined that she herself might be destined prophetess, but had long recognized the impossibility that any mission of divine and mysterious truth should be confided to a woman stained with sin, bowed down with shame, or even burdened with a lifelong sorrow. (TSL 279-275)

In **A Month of Sundays** and **Roger's Version**, Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale and old Roger Chillingworth, free from the bossy third-person voice of Hawthorne's reader/narrator, have had the chance to produce their own readings/accounts of the scarlet letter episode. Now, in John Updike's **S.**, it is Hester Prynne's turn to get rid of the restraining chains that kept her connected to the Hawthornian reader/narrator, and read/voice her own version of the old story. Like the readers/narrators of **A**

Month of Sundays and **Roger's Version**, the woman protagonist and reader/narrator of Updike's **S.** will turn her reading/account into an amusing game to be played according to extremely anti-Hawthornian rules -- no definite roles, no definite facts, and no desperate quest for truth; just a collection of written and taped messages in which a twentieth-century Hester Prynne reads/narrates a story that would sound very much like Hawthorne's reader/narrator's oversimplified because overcontrolled version of "the-wearer-of--the-scarlet-letter's" tale had it not been invaded by so many "strange" figures behaving in such an ambiguous way. A description of Sarah Price Worth/Hester Prynne's behavior as a reader/narrator will show that in Updike's **S.** the reader/narrator makes no great efforts to keep ambiguity away from her reading/text: while Hawthorne's reader/narrator keeps trying to repress each and every sign of ambiguity, Updike's Sarah just opens her reading/narrative's door and gently lets it in.

The law of Hawthorne's reader/narrator is no law for Updike's Sarah (2). Using the first-person singular, Sarah opts for constructing a reading/account of her own in which Hawthornian qualities such as objectivity, reliability, and strong commitment to truth are replaced by their opposites. To begin with Hawthorne's reader/narrator's so-praised expression "authorized version," I would say that Sarah totally rejects it. Hawthorne's reader/narrator, in an attempt to enclose his reading/narrative in a solid frame of reality, -- presents a series of documents and manuscripts that, according to this reader/narrator, brings the signatures of historical figures,

real authorities. In **S.**, Updike's Sarah throws away these authenticated papers (and consequently the possibility of providing her story the status of authorized version), and gives her audience some taped texts, a few short messages written in a hurry, and a bunch of informal letters -- the most unauthorized and unreliable material Sarah could have ever produced -- with neither official stamps nor important signatures to make it look like truth.

Such an "unreliable material" seems like the perfect corpus for a reader/narrator who is neither interested in the pursuit of truth nor afraid of looking ambiguous or being called a liar. Updike's Sarah is exactly this kind of reader/narrator. Each of her moves will send Sarah more and more away from truth. Sarah brings back to life the character of Hester Prynne and manages to transform Hawthorne's reader/narrator's most repressed character into a creature of multiple "selves." Sarah Price Worth, or Mrs. Worth, or Sare, or Ma Prem Kundalini, or simply K. or S. -- a multiplicity of names/women housed in the body of only one character, -- is both the New Englander housewife who has sworn off the pleasures and the unimportant preoccupations of a bourgeois existence, and the one who, in the best Updikean reader/narrator ambivalent style, keeps hovering from highly spiritual matters to trifles. In Sarah's first letter to her husband, for example, she promises to change her being : "The woman you 'knew' and 'possessed' is no more. I am destroying her. I am sinking into the great and beautiful blankness which it is our European/Christian/Western avoidance maneuver to clutter and

mask with material things and personal 'achievements.' Ego is the enemy. Love is the goal" (3),-- but she cannot avoid extremely "European/Christian/Western" details such as the lawn boys ("Do leave a note for the lawn boys...to set their big wide reel mower a notcher higher" (S 3)), the helper ("You may wish to speak to Mrs. Kimball about coming now more than once a week" (S 4)) , the dust and dirt ("The thing about dust that men don't realize is it doesn't just sit there, it sinks in" (S 5)), and obviously, her money ("If you decide to sell the house or any part of our joint holdings, I will ask an appropriate settlement in exchange for your freedom" (S 13)). Updike's reader/narrator cannot help being one and many at the same time. Like the pendulum of a clock, Sarah keeps swinging backward and forward; she can reach both extremes, and yet she cannot stick to any of them for too long.

Even when completely absorbed in the ashram's "anti-ego trip," Sarah's moves are quite indefinite. Her letters to the Occident talk about a new Sarah, quite "undisturbed, empty of impurities" (S 98), "non-attached from material things" (S 95), and free from the laws of consumer society (S 95); but these same letters also reveal a Sarah who keeps yielding to her Occidental memory and manners. Like Hester Prynne, who used to appease people's "sorrows and perplexities" (TSL 275) through a few words of comfort, Updike's reader/narrator enjoys giving advice to people, except that Sarah's pieces of advice do not seem exactly to aim at helping wounded, wasted, wronged, misplaced women and their erring and sinful passions (TSL 275), but at attempting to

have access to both worlds -- the one she says she has quit and the one she believes she has just embraced. In **S.** the referential function of language is lost. Sarah uses language for personal reasons only. Sarah's advising seems more like advertising; in a letter to her mother, for example, Updike's reader/narrator makes public all her knowledge and attachment to typical western medicinal gadgets when advising, or almost advertising, a specific kind of sunblock -- "I do hope....you are using a Number 15 sunblock.....With PABA -- not only does it prevent further damage but it helps mend the DNA damage that has occurred, along with the zinc and A and E you should be taking as I think I wrote you before ... or the best pills, which are the ones made from fishliver oil " (S 97/99).

Sarah's decision to read/tell her own account of the scarlet letter episode from such an oscillatory perspective definitely challenges Hawthorne's reader/narrator's truth. Updike's reader/narrator breaks **The Scarlet Letter** into several pieces, mixes them up, and re-arranges the old story in a completely different order. The "re-arranged" character of Hester Prynne is a very good example of this kind of process. In the hands and mind of Hawthorne's reader/narrator the Hawthornian Hester Prynne is metamorphosed into something like a puzzle made up of unmatchable pieces. No matter how hard we try to put Sarah together, the parts of the puzzle will never perfectly match. While Hawthorne's reader/narrator takes trouble providing information about Hester's "dark and abundant" hair (TSL 80), Updike's Sarah prefers to stay away from truth by revealing the fake color of her hair -- Darkest Brown, thanks to Clairol; and

in a letter to her hairdresser Sarah writes: "...I'll pick up some Clairol at the drugstore -- Darkest Brown I think is better for me than the Natural Black, which tends as we know to kill the gleam" (S 21).

A true heroine and martyr like the woman protagonist of **The Scarlet Letter** is not allowed to tell lies. Hawthorne's reader/narrator's Hester Prynne is not used to telling lies; she omits information, keeps painful secrets, but never lies; Updike's reader/narrator, on the contrary, never hesitates about fabricating stories or adding "untrue" details to her reading/narrative. Sarah is not afraid of producing pure fiction, one that cannot possibly count on "authentic outlines" to make it look like reality. Thus, Sarah openly lies to her hairdresser -- "I'm afraid I'm going to miss my hair appointment next week...My husband and I are taking a quite unexpected vacation in the romantic Far West" (S 21); gives false information to the Arhat's assistant -- "I explained to her I had left my successful doctor husband on a more or less sudden inspiration and all I could bring away was eleven thousand dollars. I had thought of saying ten, but eleven sounded like it really was all I had" (S 38); deceives the misleading Arhat himself, recording their secret talks and transfering half of his fortune to her own bank account; and sees that both the Arhat and Charles acquire an unfaithful touch (the Arhat deceives the whole world, Charles deceives Sarah, and Sarah, as I have just mentioned before, deceives both of them -- a quite deceitful trio). Besides that, since Sarah makes no great efforts to build herself an image of

absolutely unsuspicious reader/narrator, there is always the possibility of taking Updike's reader/narrator's version of the scarlet letter episode as a product of her imaginative mind. Sarah transforms language into an instrument of manipulation. While in **The Scarlet Letter** language is used to discover truth, in **S.** it is used to fabricate the "truths" that suit Sarah's personal aims better.

Hawthorne's reader/narrator would certainly be shocked to know that his Hester Prynne, whom he described as a woman with "no selfish ends [who] lived in any measure for her own profit or enjoyment" (TSL 275), and never cared to use articles of comfort and luxury (TSL 274), is now picturing herself as a quite money-oriented person. Sarah's attitude toward money also tells a lot about the ambiguous quality of Updike's reader/narrator. The more she stresses her wish to get rid of the garbage" (S 45), the more she gets voluntarily caught in it. Money is definitely the most popular subject in Sarah's tapes and letters. In her letters to Charles, for example, money is Sarah's favorite topic: "I *withdrew half of our joint accounts, all the ones I could find* records of -- the 5 1/2% checking, the savings account at 6 1/2%, and the capital account in Boston at 7 1/4%" (S 5); in her letters to her mother Sarah even plays the finance expert: "My advice would be to rake off the interest every six months when you roll [the CDs] over...but keep the capital in these no-risk certificates and let Daddy's portfolio -- all that heavenly old IBM and AT&T he picked up for almost nothing -- enjoy the bull market...." (S 27); to her daughter Pearl she writes: "[Your father] has total charge of the family finances now....and I live

here as free and as poor as the gray-throated flycatchers that dip about in the lenghtening lavender shadows -- poorer, since I'm not quick enough to catch flies in my bill" (S 92); and in all her short letters to different banks -- which show how fast she can move when it comes to catching flies in her bill -- the main issue is obviously money: "I am very interested in opening a credit-deferrable charge account with the Arhat Book and Gift Shop of Samana Cay....")S 158); "Enclosed find endorsed checks totalling $66,403.27 for deposit to my account, #0002743-911" (S 159).

Hawthorne's reader/narrator would also be amazed with Updike's reader/narrator's rebellious behavior. Updike's Sarah is far from being a "silent rebel" just as Hawthorne's reader/narrator wanted his Hester to be. Updike's Sarah reads/narrates her story as she wishes, working with possibilities of meaning other than the ones imposed by Hawthorne's reader/narrator's reading/account, and keeping herself distant from the Hawthornian quest for truth. She behaves in an ambiguous way, she does not care about precise information, and to make things more and more blurred, Sarah mixes up Sanskrit and English, using the product of this linguistic melange -- almost a code language -- to read/tell her version of the old episode. The most interesting thing about Sanskrit, Sarah tells us in one of her letters, is that every Sanskrit word has several meanings: "I feel quite 'aklishta' (undisturbed, empty of impurities, only like every Sanskrit word there's more to it than that, there's a whole lotus of meanings)" (S 98). Also, Sarah

decides to replace Hester Prynne's well-behaved occupation by a more rebellious one -- Hester Prynne used to embroider letters; Sarah writes them: "Think of these letters as what I do instead of embroidery" (S 158); she takes revenge of those who have deceived and humiliated her -- in a farewell letter to the Arhat, for instance, she experiences the taste of victory: "In my allocation of recently received artha [material success], more than half has been left in your discretionary fund" (S 249/250); and protests against the idea of becoming the protagonist of an old sad story, and being transformed into a historical figure by a truth-oriented" reader/narrator: "You must...have been stoned or coked or whatever out of your fuzzy heads -- to make me an ancestor in the family album, a filled-in slot in the genealogical chart, a sad old story buried amid the rubbish in the custom-house attic" (S 206). Updike's reader/narrator will not let any dictatorial third-person voice control her life-story and guide her steps to the final chapter where a sad-ending awaits her -- two dead lovers lying in separate "old and sunken" (TSL 275) graves; in an attempt to avoid that, Sarah strongly asserts:

> I'm not ready, I'm still learning how to live, to be. I've reached the solar-plexus chakra and I'm still climbing. I'm having fun, honey. (S 206)

Updike's reader/narrator's "reading/narrative game" would never be complete had she forgotten about the old Hawthornian riddle: the scarlet letter A. A professional searcher of truth, Hawthorne's reader/narrator obviously did not mean

to turn the red badge on Hester Prynne's bosom into a menacing focus of ambiguity, but the fact is that the scarlet letter keeps inviting different readings, as Hawthorne's reader/narrator himself comments in this passage: "...many people refused to interpret the scarlet letter A by its original signification. They said it meant Able; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength" (TSL 180). Hawthorne admits the idea of this letter A having different meanings, but tends to narrow down these possibilities of meaning by emphasizing the existence of an original meaning to the letter A. In **S.** Updike's reader/narrator plays with the ambiguous quality of initials instead of trying to control it; the letter A makes room for the letter S, not Hester's richly embroidered badge, but a signature, a mark left at the end of some of Sarah's letters, or the title of her reading/version, to which her audience may attach a multiplicity of meanings: S for Sarah, S for safe, S for sex, S for stealing, or simply S for the longest "s"s in the Arhat's strange accent. Just name it. Playing the "letter game" is postponing the discovery of a solution for the old riddle and choosing to work with multiple possibilities. In other words, it is behaving just like Updike's reader/narrator in **S.**.

In **S.** Updike's reader/narrator also produces her own remake of the famous Hawthornian love triangle -- Dimmesdale/Hester/Chillingworth -- except that in her version this geometrical affair has its shape deformed due to the new elements Sarah keeps adding to it. Like Hawthorne's reader/narrator's Hester Prynne, Sarah experiences a conventional

love triangle situation, divided between two men: her husband, Doctor Charles Worth (whose name sounds like Roger Chillingworth's), our man of science in **S.**, and Arthur Steinmetz (like Arthur Dimmesdale) or the false Arhat, the religious man in Updike's Sarah's life. But Updike's reader/narrator is in no way interested in geometrical figures, a triangular relationship; there must always be much more to it than that in Sarah's reading/narrative. Thus, she expands the triangle, attaching new affairs to each one of the members of the traditional triangle. Sarah leaves Doctor Charles Worth, becomes the Arhat's favorite lover, and experiences an homosexual relationship; the Arhat or Arthur Steimetz, thanks to the Hindu philosophy he preaches, unconditionally welcomes a variety of sexual partners; and Doctor Charles ends up marrying Sarah's best friend, not to mention his wife's complaints about some quick affairs with nurses. Updike's reader/narrator undoubtedly manages to operate big changes in Hawthorne's reader/narrator's love triangle; and this move, I again insist, takes Updike's Sarah really far from truth and from Hawthorne's reader/narrator strong desire to reach it.

Hester Prynne's and Sarah's "elf-child" also takes part in Updike's reader/narrator's game: Pearl is surely one of the unmatchable pieces that make up Sarah's reading/narrative. In **The Scarlet Letter** Hawthorne's reader/narrator sees that Hester's daughter has a nice and true happy-ending, and to make sure that his audience will trust the genuineness of his version he invokes authorities, documents, and suggestive words such as the verb "to believe" to help him read/narrate this passage: "...there were indications that the recluse of the scarlet letter was the object

of love and interest of some inhabitant of another land. Letters came, with armorial seals upon them, though of bearings unknown to English heraldy...In fine, the gossips of that day believed, -- and Mr. Surveyor Pue, who made investigations a century later, believed -- and one of his recent successors in office, moreover, faithfully believes, -- that Pearl was not only alive, but married and happy, and mindful of her mother" (TSL 274). But this is not what Updike's reader/narrator reads/tells about her "priceless elf-child" (S 158) in some of the informal letters she writes. Without any documents or investigations to prove the authenticity of her version, Sarah understands that Pearl totally disapproves of her mother's decision to undertake "the flight from ego" (S 153) in the company of the Arhat; also, Sarah tells us that her little Pearl is pregnant and about to leave Yale because she is going to get married to Jan, a Dutch playboy, the son of a wealthy family of "beermakers" and fake counts, as Sarah angrily puts it: "Jan sounds totally milky to me, and his parents too, though they've curdled into butter -- little square pats stamped with some phoney armorial seal" (S 204).

After getting acquainted with Sarah's and Hawthorne's reader/narrator's completely different readings/accounts of the scarlet letter episode some people might feel tempted to ask which one of these readers/narrators is telling the truth. I would say that the main question here should not be who is telling the truth , but who wishes to get close to it. Sarah, for all I have told about her behavior as a reader/narrator of Updike's **S.**, is definitely not the Iserian type of

reader/narrator who, being slave to textual constraints, longs to stay by the side of truth. Like the readers/narrators described by Holland and Barthes, Sarah takes the reading experience as a moment of free choices of meaning. For Sarah, reading/narrating does not mean frustrating the reader's desires on behalf of the text's, but making the reader's wishes come true in the text. Ask Updike's reader/narrator whether she is telling the truth about the scarlet letter episode and she will probably come up with a multiple-choice questionnaire for you to choose the answers that will suit you better. After all, for Updike's reader/narrator picking up "the correct" answer is not the most important thing to be done; since working with several possibilities is what really counts in the kind of game she plays.

Notes

(1) Nathaniel Hawthorne, **The Scarlet Letter** (New York: Penguin, 1986), pp.80-81. (All further references to this novel are cited in parentheses, like this: [TSL 80-81]).

(2) See Hawthorne's reader/narrator's words on p.182: "The world's law was no law for [Hester's] mind."

(3) John Updike, **S.** (New York: Knopf, 1988),p.12. (All further references to this novel are cited in parentheses, like this: [S 13]).

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has aimed at discussing the question of truth in Hawthorne and Updike through the analysis of the narrators' behavior in Hawthorne's **The Scarlet Letter** and Updike's **A Month of Sundays**, **Roger's Version**, and **S.**. Two basic assumptions have served as a starting point for this discussion : 1) there has been a change in the concept of truth from the nineteenth to the twentieth century; and 2) there has also been an evolution in the notion of reader, which can be seen as responsible for this new conception of truth. Assuming that readers are now behaving differently, I then proceeded to show that a migration of meaning from text to reader has caused that old passive reader to become a "freer," and consequently, more creative figure in the process of textual-meaning production. The discussion of Wolfgang Iser's, Norman Holland's, and Roland Barthes's views of the reading experience has helped me characterize this "creative reader" as well as describe his metamorphosis: at first he is a semi-creative reader, not completely free from textual constraints (Iser), but then he gradually becomes an autonomous reader by transforming the moment of reading into a quite personal experience in which meanings are no longer property of the text, nor depend on a negotiation with it, as they now belong exclusively to the reader (Holland and Barthes). It is important to say, moreover, that in this study, I have denominated these active readers (the "co-creators" and the "creators") as readers/narrators for this term would not only possibly emphasize the creative quality of these readers, -- here

the activity of reading was to be understood as including the activity of writing or narrating-- but also help me connect the two basic assumptions of this dissertation. My next step was to take Hawthorne's and Updike's narrators as Iserian and Hollandian or Barthean readers/narrators consecutively, and then, through the description of their behavior, show that there is a strong concern with truth in Hawthorne and a dismissal of the question of truth in Updike. Having completed the discussion, I believe, it is now time to provide some concluding remarks on the subject.

Examining the readers/narrators of Hawthorne's **The Scarlet Letter**, I could observe their willingness to engage in challenging quests for truth. Enveloped in a typical nineteenth-century atmosphere of profound certainty, Hawthorne's readers/narrators, who can definitely be defined as unified selves in a century of predominant certainty, could not but head toward truth, believing that they would surely get to it. Even when an ambiguous set of possibilities of meanings crosses these readers/narrators' way, -- and in these moments truth seems quite volatile -- their strong commitment to truth leads them to transform menacing subjectivity into controlled objectivity. Hawthorne's readers/narrators allow, or rather, they even invite "the tribe of unrealities" to take part in their reading/narrative, but they never let fiction take it over. In their search, language is a means to discover truth; thus, language has to be kept under the surveillance of these readers/narrators, their unified voices always ready to narrow down the "game of possibilities" so that no possible deviations from the way to truth may occur. In short, I would say that in

Hawthorne a strong individual commitment to truth not only triggers an intense search for it, but also generates the belief that truth is a "dream come true." In other words, Hawthorne's readers/narrators get themselves involved in a quest for a truth discovered out of their own will to it.

As we move on to the twentieth century, however, we leave behind all those nineteenth-century beliefs in certainty, unified selves, and will to truth. If truth was meant to be (and believed to be) reachable and clear in Hawthorne, now, in Updike, truth has become "as clear as looking the sun in the eye." (1) Hawthorne's search for truth explodes in multiple points of view in Updike. The Hawthornian unified selves and voices are split up into many selves and many voices (Updike's readers/narrators) whose attitude to truth perfectly matches their fragmented character. Being made up of so many different pieces, Updike's readers/narrators can no longer believe that truth is "on the threshold of [their reading/narrative]."(2) Nor are they concerned with that. Rather than praising truth and cultivating the belief that it can be easily discovered, these readers/narrators plunge into subjectivity and choose to stay there. Their choice could not have been different. Updike's readers/narrators have replaced the old desire for truth for the desire to make their own wishes come true in the text. Had they chosen to follow Hawthorne's readers/narrators' steps, these desiring selves would have had to apply all their energies to the task of controlling subjectivity in a way to make it look like objectivity, allowing, thus, that their own desires could be

overwhelmed by the strong desire for truth. For all I have observed about these readers/narrators, I would say that whereas in Hawthorne they read/narrate out of their strong will to truth, in Updike, they do that prompted by their subjective desire to construct meanings. Their reading/narrative of the scarlet letter episode is then a moment of playing subjective games with language, giving up the attempt to have it under control, and giving in to its power to produce ambiguous meanings. "Homo sapiens" has been replaced by "homo significans."

In **A Month of Sundays** a first-person reader/narrator dissociates language from its supposedly main function, the referential, by connecting it to the idea of language as therapeutical game. The game consists in filling a number of blank pages with the topics that interest one most. Needless to say that the language of the unconscious "dictates" the other rules of this game. Reverend Tom Marshfield's narrative is thus a collection of casual topics, sentences to be continued, Scripture quoted from memory, Freudian slips, and blurred images to be described, i.e., several ambiguous language games which proliferate out of his own unconscious. Marshfield's "revelations," as he himself calls his journal, cannot but reveal this reader/narrator's wish to make his own desires/meanings come true in the text. The Reverend's language games are played so intensely, that not even Ms. Prynne, the nineteenth-century figure of the "ideal readeress" can help yielding to it: the quiet readeress ends up quitting her passive position of observer to actively take part in Marshfield's play.

Subjectivity is also the reader/narrator's choice in **Roger's**

Version. Like Marshfield, Roger is just another rebellious first-person reader/narrator who has dissented from the nineteenth-century quest for the ultimate truth. In **Roger's Version**, this reader/narrator plays the game that will keep truth suspended, unreachable, and activate the production of different shades of truth -- the game of uncertainty : on the one side Roger rejects the idea of God as fact, for he sees God as truth that cannot be revealed, as absent center; on the other side, Dale insists in searching for a factual God, a factual center. Dale's search for a factual center comes to an end when he finally realizes that God is not showing through the screen of his computer. The ambiguous quality of God's invisibility is preserved, and so is Roger's game of possibilities.

In **S.** the game of uncertainty proceeds through the impossibility of matching the multiple selves and voices of the reader/narrator. Sarah seems to be many women at the same time, and yet, she seems to be none of them. Each one of her moves reveals a different Sarah and each new reavealed Sarah both neutralizes the one before and points to a different piece of this quite complex puzzle of selves and voices. The "original meaning" is lost in Sarah's game. In her letters, messages, and tapes she fabricates her own "truths." A desiring reader/narrator, she uses language to suit her own purposes, producing whatever meanings she desires. In other words, in Sarah's reading/narrative a continuous flow of desire keeps producing a continuous flow of subjective language.

To sum it up, then, I would say that having exchanged will

to truth for desire to fabricate their own meanings, twentieth-century readers/narrators have moved more and more away from truth. As desiring selves, they are doomed to produce subjective language games which can no longer lead to truth. They have stepped in to the territory of ambiguity, and this move has placed them somewhere above or below the nineteenth-century quest for truth.

I have previously compared Hawthorne's reader/narrator to the figure of the reader as defined by Iser, and shown how both the Hawthornian and the Iserian readers willingly move in the direction of truth. Another way to understand this reader/narrator in search for truth is to see him as analogous to the poet in search for the center in Wallace Stevens's "A Primitive Like an Orb." (3)

If one manages to visualize the uninterrupted movements of a clock rotating around an absent center, it is quite easy to understand how Stevens's poem is structured. "A Primitive Like an Orb" rotates around an unnamed sun/center, and each one of its moves is an attempt to name the sun, to pin it down, and thus get close to "the real thing," filling in the absent center. The unnamed sun is then "The essential poem at the centre of things,/The Arias that spiritual fiddlings make [1,2], or "A giant, on the horizon, glistening [64], or "...the virtuoso [that] never leaves his shape/Still on the horizon elongates his cuts,/And still angelic and still plenteous,/Imposes power by the power of his form" [77-80]. In other words, Stevens's "A Primitive Like an Orb" is made up of successive attempts to do away with the barriers that make it so difficult to approach and

reveal the original center. In Stevens's poem, sun is the "forbidden" word, the central logos which is quite hard to be reached, -- "...But it is, dear sirs,/a difficult apperception, this gorging good,/Fetched by such slick eyed nymphs, this essential gold" [4-6] -- its existence impossible to be proved, undermined as it is by the problematic game of possibilities that keeps emptying out the "solid" center. Yet, Stevens seems to be certain that the sun or "the essential poem at the centre of things" [1] is a "reality" above any kind of suspicion; in the second stanza, for example, the poet affirms that

II

> We do not prove the existence of the poem.
> It is something seen and known in lesser poems.
> It is the huge, high harmony that sounds
> A little and a little, suddenly,
> By means of a separate sense. It is and it
> Is not and, therefore, is. In the instant of speech,
> The breadth of an accelerando moves,
> Captives the being, widens -- and was there. [9-16]

In his poem Stevens definitely "preaches" the existence of an ultimate truth/center, though he is aware of the difficulties one may face when trying to provide evidence of it. For him, the set of possibilities or "the lesser poems," rather than making the real sun/center blurred, serve as a concrete proof of its existence. Thus, each one of his attempts to name the sun directly can but reinforce the sun/center's true and original quality, its function as main source or creator, as it is suggested in these excerpts:

IV

One poem proves another and the whole,
For the clairvoyant men that need no proof:
The lover, the believer and the poet.[25-27]

VI

The essential poem begets the others. The light
Of it is not a light apart, up-hill.[47-48]

VII

The central poem is the poem of the whole,
The poem of the composition of the whole,
The composition of blue sea and of green,
Of blue light and of green, as lesser poems,
And the miraculous multiplex of lesser poems,
Not merely into a whole, but a poem of
The whole, the essential compact of the parts,
The roundness that pulls tight the final ring.[49-56]

Hawthorne, for all I have concluded about his readers/narrators' behavior in **The Scarlet Letter**, seems to have developed the same kind of attitude toward the problematic question of real center versus absent center. In **The Scarlet Letter**, Hawthorne not only moves in the direction of the ultimate truth/center "like a treasure-seeker in a dark cavern," but he is sure of its existence, for as his reader/narrator comments, "few secrets can escape an investigator, who has opportunity and license to undertake such a quest, and skill to follow it up" (TSL 146). The game of possibilities or the impossibility to "name" this truth directly is again a problem to be solved. Throughout the narrative of the scarlet letter episode, for

example, Hawthorne tries to define the real meaning of the red letter A on Hester's bosom. Adulterous is the word that is never mentioned in **The Scarlet Letter.** The word adulterous is to Hawthorne what the word sun is to Wallace Stevens -- the word that can never be named directly. Thus, like Stevens, Hawthorne's keeps jumping from one possibility of meaning to the other. -- A is said to be for Able or A is said to be for Angel -- a series of successive though unsuccessful attempts to name the letter A, and then reach the ultimate truth/center: "'A great red letter in the sky, -- the letter A, -- which we interpret to stand for Angel...'"(TSL 177); "The letter was a symbol of [Hester's] calling....They said it meant Able; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strenght" (TSL 180). In short, Hawthorne rotates around and absent center believing, just like Stevens believes, that all these possibilities of meaning originate from "the essential [meaning] at the centre of things," and in no way point to an inevitable ambiguity or the imposssibility of getting to the "truth" about the scarlet letter episode.

In his analysis of Wallace Stevens's "A Primitive Like an Orb," Hillis Miller sees the question of truth (real center versus absent center) from a completely different perspective. In "When Is a Primitive Like an Orb?" Miller challenges the poet's belief in the existence and power of the center. For Miller, much stronger than this supposedly real center is the ambiguity it creates -- the center as its own destroyer: trying to establish a center, one will have to deal with an ambiguous set of possibilities, and once into this kind of game, one will be

condemned to move around an absent center rather than gravitating toward it. The way Miller sees it, even though "A Primitive Like an Orb" is basically logocentric, it believes in the center and aims at reaching it, Stevens's poem can but reinforce the idea that every promise of revelation of sun/center can only be a false promise. The poet establishes several relations of likeness with the sun, but none of them really equals or reaches it. According to Miller, then, what we have in "A Primitive Like an Orb," is a series of "revelations," each one of them broken by the next promise of revelation, which will never be able to unveil the real sun or solve the enigma at "the centre of things," for these are only glimpses of the center, mere possibilities lost in the very game of possibilities. In Miller's view, Stevens's search for truth paradoxically leads him away from truth, as the search is made possible only by the endless substitution of one inadequate metaphor for another. In such a quest, the more the searcher for truth uses language, the more he becomes the impotent victim of its infinite play of sign substitutions. He becomes, indeed, a prisoner in the prison-house of language. Doomed to play with language without ever hoping for a final discovery of meaning, Updike's readers/narrators also have their home in this prison-house.

Taking Steven's poem as the unnamed sun/center that cannot possibly be reached, Miller avoids producing a kind of interpretation that would end up reducing the "multiple sun" to only one word, to its proper name. Such an interpretive move, would certainly interrupt the play of language and stop the flow of possibilities. It is Miller himself who affirms that

> to reduce the sun to its seeming proper name...would mislead the reader into thinking that the "subject" or the "object" of the poem, its controlling head meaning, is the literal, physical sun, whereas the sun, named in riddling condensations and displacements in the poem is only one in a chain of such dislocations naming "the essential poem at the centre of things."(180)

In Miller's analysis, thus, the sun, the word that can never be named directly, remains unuttered, "the centre of things," unreachable, and we

> [are] left with a paradoxical space at once inferior and exterior, objective and linguistic, a space of elements organized as rotating things around a center that cannot be named or identified as such and that is, moreover, not at the center at all but "eccentric," out beyond the periphery, like a thunderstorm over the horizon. (181)

Updike's readers/narrators' attitude to truth, which in this dissertation I have already compared to Holland's and Barthes's readers/narrators' indifferent reaction to it, can very well exemplify this "paradoxical space" Miller describes as inevitable. In Updike, Stevens's and Hawthorne's will to truth is transformed into desire to produce ambiguous language games and it is now lost in a kind of "void." In **A Month of Sundays**, **Roger's Version**, and **S.**, Updike's readers/narrators not only rotate around an absent center, just like Miller says Stevens's poem does, they make no effort to try to reach it. Aware of the impossibility of escaping this "eccentric" position, these readers/narrators give up reaching "the sun" and opt for

concentrating their energies in the play of language. Reverend Marshfield moves around the scarlet letter episode and he does not intend to get to it -- he is writing for therapeutical reasons only, he is in no way commited to the telling of facts or to any kind of quest for the center. Roger Lambert totally rejects the idea of a God that can be scientifically proved. God, the way he sees it, must remain an unreachable absent center around which he is willing to keep rotating; and finally, Sarah, who in her multiple voices is a perfect example of absent center. The "true facts" about the episode as well as the real Sarah, Roger, and Marshfield, just like the unnamed sun in Stevens's "A Primitive Like an Orb," belong to a "void territory," "out beyond the periphery." To use Miller's words, they are "like a thunderstorm over the horizon."

Notes:

1
See Hillis Miller's "When Is a Primitive Like an Orb?" in **Textual Analysis**, ed. by Mary Ann Caws (New York: MLA, 1986), p.180. All further citations from this text will henceforth be identified by page numbers only.

2
See Hawthorne's **The Scarlet Letter**, p.56. All further references to this novel are cited in parentheses, after the quotations, like this: (TSL 76).

3
Ilha do Desterro: Trends in Contemporary American Criticism, ed. by Sergio Luiz Prado Bellei, No.22 (Florianopolis: editora da UFSC, 1989), pp.94-96. Citations from this poem will henceforth be identified by line numbers only.

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