

“The Puritans of Today”: The Anti-Whig Argument of *The Scarlet Letter*

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Abstract: This essay explores the polemical context in which Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote *The Scarlet Letter*. It pays particular attention to the Whig movement for moral reform in antebellum America, which sought to merge church and state. Democrats like Hawthorne took exception to this attempt to establish “moral government” in America. His novel argues for an ideal of personal freedom in moral matters and criticizes the Whig attempt to impose restrictive moral norms on human, especially sexual, proclivities that Democrats such as Hawthorne felt were embodiments of spirituality in nature. The novel refers obliquely to contemporary religious debates that have been ignored by scholars, such as that concerning Horace Bushnell’s *God in Christ*, a book whose presence in Hawthorne’s novel is palpable. Bushnell was put on trial for heresy in 1849, as Hawthorne was composing his novel. In the novel, Hawthorne enters those debates and takes the side of natural religion against the Whig ideal of moral government.

Keywords: religion, politics, Whig, Democrat, morality

Résumé : Le présent essai explore le contexte polémique où se situait Nathaniel Hawthorne lorsqu’il a écrit *The Scarlet Letter*. Il porte une attention particulière au mouvement Whig pour la réforme morale dans une Amérique antebellum qui cherchait à fusionner l’Église et l’État. Des Démocrates comme Hawthorne se sont insurgés contre cette tentative d’établir un « gouvernement moral » en Amérique. Son roman présente des arguments en faveur d’un idéal de liberté personnelle en ce qui a trait aux questions morales, et critique la tentative des Whigs d’imposer des normes morales restrictives aux tendances sexuelles des humains que des Démocrates comme Hawthorne considéraient comme le symbole de la spiritualité dans la nature. Le roman réfère obliquement à des débats religieux contemporains qui ont été ignorés par les universitaires en ce qui a trait au livre *God in Christ* de Horace Bushnell, un livre dont la

présence est perceptible dans le roman de Hawthorne. Bushnell a fait l'objet d'un procès pour hérésie en 1849, alors même que Hawthorne écrivait son roman. Dans son roman, Hawthorne s'immisce dans ces débats et se range du côté de la religion naturelle contre l'idéal Whig d'un gouvernement moral.

Mots clés : religion, politiques, Whig, Démocrate, moralité

To fetter the freedom of man is not only to act the part of tyranny, but to inflict a gross wrong . . . [against] the essential equality of men. . . . Endued, as they are, with the same appetites and desires, with conscience, reason, and free will . . . sharers of the same beautiful existence, handiwork of the same God, children of a common destiny, hastening on to an eternal world, who shall . . . affix the mark which shall debar either this one or that one from the full fruition of every blessing of existence—every gift of God?

—“Democracy” (attr. John L. O’Sullivan)

We all know then, what moral government is, and that men cannot exist in society without it. In that form of it called civil government, the lowest culprit in his prison knows its general nature, its principles, its end, and its absolute necessity to this end, as well as the judge who condemns him. . . . Now the object of a perfect moral governor is not merely to secure right moral action, but to secure it . . . by a peculiar influence—the influence of his authority . . . It is to bring his subject to . . . an act of obedience . . . involving . . . recognition of [the governor’s] right to rule.

—Nathaniel Taylor, *Lectures on the Moral Government of God* (1859)

Scholars of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) have paid surprisingly little attention to the ambient religious debates from which the novel draws much of the substance for its internal polemic.¹ A conflict between those who would use legislation to control personal morality and those who opposed such intrusiveness in the name of the doctrine of natural revelation is central both to the novel and to the culture wars of the era in which Hawthorne wrote. Historian Daniel Walker Howe argues that “without an understanding of the religion of the middle period, there can be no understanding of its politics” (“Religion” 121), and the same might be said of a work such as *The Scarlet Letter* that is concerned

with moral issues. To understand it fully, we must take into consideration the religious debates of the era.²

The leading public intellectuals of the early nineteenth century were theologians such as Lyman Beecher, Francis Wayland, Asa Burton, Nathaniel Taylor and Horace Bushnell. Those intellectuals who were not professional theologians—Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, George Bancroft and John L. O’Sullivan—were nevertheless steeped in religious ideas, and their writings resonate with a sense of the unquestioned truth of the doctrines of natural revelation. For the orthodox Protestant theologians such as Beecher and Taylor, God was a distant being who oversaw a sin-prone humanity that needed guidance from churchmen in order to attain salvation. In *Their Brothers’ Keepers: Moral Stewardship in the United States, 1800–1865*, Clifford Griffin writes, “These latter-day Calvinists still argued that only the Almighty could save souls—that men by their own acts alone could not merit redemption” (47–8). For intellectuals such as Bancroft and O’Sullivan, in contrast, as well as for more liberal theologians such as Burton and Bushnell, God was a presence in nature which guaranteed that human passion was intrinsically moral and that human striving could lead to salvation. In the chapter “The Rise of Religious Liberalism,” in his book *Churchmen and Philosophers*, Bruce Kuklick notes that, at this time,

[t]he issues of sovereignty, responsibility, grace, and depravity all found their critical substantive locus in the question of the will’s freedom—the most important recurring theme in the literature. . . . [N]atural theology was increasingly stressed. Newtonianism implied that knowledge of God was contained in nature. . . . For the liberals, at bottom, religion rested on the revelations to which the biblical miracles testified. Other bases for Christianity—experience, tradition, the authority of the church—were set aside. (44, 82–3)

These theological differences were not merely intellectual. The two major political parties of the era, the Whigs and the Democrats, appealed to religious ideas to justify their contending positions regarding everything from moral legislation to economic policy. A major difference between anticlerical Democrats and Whig evangelical conservatives was in their views of the proper relation of church and state.³ The Whigs, whom Daniel Howe characterizes as

“the evangelical united front in the polling place” (Howe, *Political Culture* 18), laid claim to the Puritan theocratic legacy that authorized public supervision of private morality. Wishing to create a “Righteous Empire” in the United States, in which what they called “moral government” would merge law and religion, Whigs sought to use legislation to bring about “moral purity and reform” (Kelley, *Cultural Pattern* 163). Modernizers, they believed in using government to promote business-friendly economic development through monopolies, charters, tariffs and publicly funded canals and roads. Having witnessed the disestablishment of the Christian churches in all the states, Whig religious conservatives turned, in mid-century, to education, especially in the Sunday School and public school movements, to ensure that Christian values and norms prevailed in America.⁴ Historian Ronald Formisano writes,

Henry Cabot Lodge once called the Federalists “the Puritan party,” and he might have said the same of the Whigs. The Federal and Whig parties both expressed the ancient Puritan concern for society as a corporate whole; both attempted to use the government to provide for society’s moral and material development. (*Transformation* 289)

Whigs found justification for their program of moral government in the reformed Calvinist theology that emerged in the early nineteenth century. While taking into account the emphasis on free will in post-Enlightenment America, theologians such as Beecher and Taylor nevertheless held that humans were innately prone to sinfulness. Beecher argued “that man is desperately wicked, and cannot be qualified for good membership in society without the influence of moral restraint” (qtd. in Bodo 153). In his famous 1828 sermon, *Concio ad Clerum: A Sermon On Human Nature, Sin, and Freedom*, Nathaniel Taylor preached,

What then are we to understand, when it is said that mankind are depraved *by nature*? I answer—that *such is their nature, that they will sin and only sin in all the appropriate circumstances of their being*. . . . By the moral depravity of mankind I intend generally, the entire sinfulness of their moral character. (qtd. in Ahlstrom 220–2)

This vision of the world justified the Whig claim that an elite of morally superior people should exercise moral government over others through the political state. Lee Benson notes that “[Whig] Horace Greeley’s *New York Tribune* argued that the state was a

proper instrument for the regulation of every 'evil' in society" (207). Michael Holt, in *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, points out that "to a far greater degree than Democrats, Whigs backed state intervention to regulate social behavior: temperance legislation, Sunday blue laws, and the creation of state-run public schools" (68).

Democrats opposed the Whig desire to merge church and state and to use law to regulate personal behaviour. "The Puritans of today," a Democratic newspaper editor wrote in 1852, "like the Puritans of 1700, conceive themselves to be better and holier than others, and entitled—by divine right as it were—to govern and control the actions and dictate the opinions of others" (Kelley, "Portrait" 79). If Whigs thought of themselves as "the party of decency and respectability, the guardians of piety, sober living, proper manners, thrift, steady habits, and book learning" (Kelley, *Cultural Pattern* 166), Democrats portrayed them as religious zealots who constituted a threat to civil liberties. William Cullen Bryant held that "our civil and religious liberty exists, not in consequence, but in spite of the spirit and genius of Puritanism" (qtd. in Howe, *Political Culture* 89). In one fictional debate between a Democrat and a Whig in a pamphlet from 1854, the Democrat contends that "all legislation having any other object but the protection of rights is not only injurious to morality, but is in itself immoral and wicked" (qtd. in Benson, 206–7). Robert Kelley notes, regarding these debates,

Central to the ideology of Anglo-American, freethinking intellectuals was a conviction that clerics must be kept out of politics, that their moral preachments were arrogance and their attempts to control the lives of others a continuing danger to freedom of thought and belief. This led many Democratic intellectuals to reject abolitionism, for it emerged out of the camp of the enemy: zealous, moralistic, church-and-state Yankeeism. (*Cultural Pattern* 171)

If Whig political theory drew on reformed neo-Calvinist theology to justify its ideal of moral government, Democratic political theory turned instead to the theological doctrine of natural revelation. Democratic intellectuals such as O'Sullivan and Bancroft believed that nature, because infused with divinity, should be allowed to follow its own course without theocratic interference. Morality arose spontaneously from natural processes, and no legislation

and no moral discipline were needed to control passions that, because natural and therefore divinely inspired, could not be sinful. Natural revelation located divinity in everyone, without distinction of "rank," an appealing idea in an era when egalitarian ideals fuelled immigrant aspirations. Bancroft writes, "The barbarian who roams our Western prairies has like passions and like endowments with ourselves. He bears within him the instinct of Deity, the consciousness of a spiritual nature, the love of beauty, the rule of morality" (414). By placing the "rule of morality" in nature rather than institutions or laws, Democrats sought to undermine the Whig justification for moral government by a holy elite.

Democrats used similar arguments to oppose Whig pro-business economic policy. They believed that a benevolent nature, if left on its own, would make all right with the economic world.⁵ Whig "improvements," especially banks and chartered monopolies that favoured the economic elite, did more harm than good by making people dependent on government instead of on their own natural talents. Democrats argued for a model of economic self-government that would approximate the self-regulating laws of nature that are God's creation: "[T]he voluntary principle, the principle of Freedom, suggested to us by the analogy of the divine government of the Creator; the natural laws which will establish themselves and find their own level are the best laws" ("Introduction" 7). America should place trust in "the same fundamental principle of spontaneous action and self-regulation which produces the beautiful order of [nature]" ("Introduction" 7). At the core of the theory was an ideal of self-dependent manhood: "[By] throwing men upon their own energies for success, [free trade] would accustom them to the practice of self-dependence and train them to habits of perseverance and economy" ("History" 305).

Sexual morality was a crucial site of conflict between the contending parties. In 1843 in Michigan, when Democrats "amended and loosened the laws relating to adultery and fornication which had made those sins criminal offenses," Whigs characterized the change as an outrage that struck "at the foundations of our social system" (Formisano, *Birth* 124). If Whigs devoted their energies to institutions such as the Magdalen Society that spread moral discipline amongst prostitutes and domestic workers, Democrats were more inclined to be critical of moral institutions that discriminated along gender lines in the allocation of moral punishment. In an 1846

essay—"The Legal Wrongs of Women"—in *The Democratic Review*, the anonymous writer argues, "The injustice is sufficiently flagrant which permits a man, whether single or married, to lead a licentious life without losing caste, while a poor girl, betrayed through her affections into guilt, almost inevitably becomes castaway through public scorn" (482). That this argument is central to *The Scarlet Letter* should alert us to how steeped the novel is in these contemporary debates.

As an inhabitant of a Whig stronghold—Salem, Massachusetts—Hawthorne would have been keenly aware of the Whigs' use of Puritanism as a justification for a strong government role in promoting business-friendly economic development and the moral "improvement" of the population. In 1849, while Hawthorne was composing *The Scarlet Letter*, regular advertisements for a history of the Puritans in the town's Whig newspaper, the *Salem Gazette*, made explicit links between Puritanism and Whig policies. According to the advertisements, the book, a republication of William Hubbard's *General History of New England*, praised "the hardy Puritan pioneers who for God, for Conscience, and for Humanity braved the perils of the ocean . . . [and] planted on this rocky shore the principles that have made us what we are." Those "principles" sustained "the best" of New England, "its Manufactures, its Commerce, its Public Buildings . . . its contributions to the public and private nature of the great stack of New England industrial and productive accumulations" (*Salem Gazette*).⁶ As the Whigs styled themselves neo-Puritans, the Puritans, according to the *Advertiser*, were proto-Whigs. The Sunday School Union, a typical Whig evangelical organization, which emphasized rote learning, Puritan-style, of religious doctrine, also held its annual meeting in Salem in the summer of 1849. And the Whig governor of Massachusetts, George Briggs, made clear, with calls for public days of fasting in November of the same year, that he felt religion and government served a common purpose: "The Holy Scriptures declare, that if men will 'acknowledge God in all their ways, he will direct their paths'" (*Salem Gazette*). It must have been a trying place to live for a Democrat who was "beyond the church," as his sister-in-law Louisa Hawthorne put it in a letter to Sophia Peabody (qtd. in Fick 155).

What this polemical context suggests is that, in 1850, a depiction of Puritans as less moral than they claimed to be or as being as prone to the very passions they condemned in others would have been an especially appealing polemical gesture for a Democrat to make.

Kelley notes that "Most Whigs believed . . . [t]he nation was rightfully to be thought of as a single moral community to be welded together in holy living, to be fashioned in the image of New England's 'citty on a hill'" (*Cultural Pattern* 163). *The Scarlet Letter*—I will argue—by asking how Puritans can pretend to govern others' morality if they themselves are subject to the same natural passions as everyone else, implies a similar question regarding the Whigs who sought to establish moral government in America in the mid-nineteenth century.

The story of *The Scarlet Letter* is framed by a rejection of moral government, "whatever priests or legislators ha[ve] established" (199). The anachronistic "legislators" (there were none in America in the 1640s) should have alerted readers that, when Hester points Dimmesdale the way to freedom, away from "the clerical band . . . or the church" (199), her gesture has a contemporary resonance. The major themes and concerns of the novel acquire an added significance when considered in this polemical context. The Custom House sketch comes to seem a meditation on the negative effect of Whig economic policies on the people's moral health. Dimmesdale's election-day sermon becomes more pointedly Democratic in tenor and substance, and his death, rather than seeming a gesture of abdication, instead takes on the air of a martyrological indictment of Whig religious institutions that, in the eyes of Democrats, fostered hypocrisy and promoted an unhealthy sense of guilt and self-punishment regarding natural inclinations. Hester's fate, in the polemical context, seems less a model for a vague sense of compromise with slavery than a more affirmative and positive example of non-institutional religion and of a natural piety that owes nothing to the moral guidance of orthodox churchmen.

In reconsidering the novel in light of the culture war between Whigs and Democrats, I will concentrate on the Custom House chapter, the conflict between Hester, Pearl and the Puritan authorities, and Dimmesdale's fate.

The Scarlet Letter opens with an odd meditation on the negative moral effects of people's economic dependence on Uncle Sam. Whig economic policy called for the government to subsidize economic development that, according to Democrats, served the interests of the Whig economic elite. In Whig hands, government had been used to create, as Hawthorne puts it in *The Life of Franklin Pierce*, "commerce where it did not exist" (29).

Government assistance for business was also seen by Democrats as an obstacle to the free development of the talents of the industrious classes—the labourers, artisans, farmers and small businessmen who were natural Jacksonian constituencies.

Commentators on the Custom House have focused on Hawthorne's account of his Puritan ancestors and on the description of the romance aesthetic. Yet these topics occupy only a few pages of the text. The rest of the sketch is concerned with the negative moral consequences of dependence on government for one's economic well-being. According to Rush Welter, Democrats were especially concerned with the moral effects of politics on society, and in their eyes, Whigs, by asking for government subsidies for business, were undermining the ideal of self-dependence that was the foundation of moral citizenship. Democrat Gideon Welles, in 1847, articulated this position: "One man looks to government for assistance, his neighbor relying on his own energies asks only for protection. . . . [T]heir fundamental opinions . . . distinguish between the democrat and the anti-democrat" (qtd. in Brock 23).

In his account of life in the Custom House, Hawthorne portrays those who accept government support as having lost contact with the spirit in nature. He compares them to quadrupeds, whose "torpid," "sluggish," and "dependent" behaviour contains "a very trifling admixture of moral and spiritual ingredients" (14). Hawthorne notes that "the greater part of my officers were Whigs" (13), and he is especially severe in his evaluation of the Inspector: "He had no soul, no heart, no mind." His father "had created an office for him," and like the others, he suffered "moral detriment from this peculiar mode of life" (18). The negative consequence of having a powerful government make jobs for people by fostering economic development is that it makes people lose contact with their own "native energy," "original nature," and capacity for "self-support." To Democrats such as Bancroft and O'Sullivan, such loss was the same as losing contact with revealed divinity in nature. For this reason, perhaps, Hawthorne compares such a dependent state of being to "a quality of enchantment like that of the Devil's wages" that deprives one of one's "soul" (39). In a recognizably Democratic gesture, Hawthorne characterizes Whig policies that interfere with nature as immoral.

Hawthorne offers himself as an example of why government support of any kind in economic life is detrimental to the "moral and

intellectual health" of people. Having become dependent for support on the government by taking the surveyor's job at the Custom House, Hawthorne suffers the same moral harm as his Whig co-workers. Like the Whigs, he loses contact with divinity revealed in nature: "Nature,—except it were human nature,—the nature that is developed in earth and sky, was, in one sense, hidden from me; and all the imaginative delight, wherewith it had been spiritualized, passed away out of my mind" (26). In this light, the account of romance aesthetics acquires a political resonance. Hawthorne twice uses the word "spiritualize"—the same word he uses to characterize the alienation from nature brought about by dependence on government—to describe how romance transforms reality. When "spiritualized," life's details "seem to lose their actual substance, and become things of intellect" (39). That Hawthorne regains his ability to "spiritualize" nature once he leaves the Custom House is proof that freedom from dependence on government is morally salutary. When he puts aside "the strong arm of Uncle Sam" that raises and supports him, he is able to regain his "original nature, the capability of self-support," and this takes the form of his exercising his natural talent as a writer. He regains "his soul . . . its sturdy force, its courage and constancy, its truth, its self-reliance, and all that gives the emphasis to manly character" (39).

What is striking about the Custom House sketch is the identification of theology, politics and aesthetics. Whig economic policies are criticized on Democratic theological grounds. They distance the individual from nature and from natural revelation. The romance aesthetic, by abstracting imaginatively from the facts of sense perception—the basis, according to orthodox neo-Puritan epistemology, of moral truth—allows access to spirit in nature.⁷ Exercising one's natural talents in an economic sense, similarly "spiritualizes" the world. Spontaneous natural action, for Democrats, mimes divinity in nature. The Democratic objection to Whig economic policy is that it denies the individual the ability to achieve the moral good through self-dependence by drawing on her or his own natural (and therefore divinely inspired) talents. The novel continues this argument by portraying the Whig policy of merging church and state as having a similarly immoral effect on people whose natural moral powers are extinguished by moral supervision. The "consecration" that is their natural impulse is reviled rather than revered.

The novel opens by evoking what, in Democratic eyes, was the Whig ideal of moral government, a world in which, as

Hawthorne puts it, "religion and law were almost identical" (50). From the outset, Hawthorne, by using terms such as "natural dignity" and "free will," characterizes Hester in terms that suggest Democratic resistance to such government. Hester fulfils the Democratic ideal of a nature at odds with restrictive moral rules and given over to the free expression of self-regulating laws. She grudgingly accepts her punishment, but her extravagant creativity in stitching the scarlet letter is suggestive of imaginative resistance. That Hester exercises her imagination to transform a stigmatic emblem into an object that embodies "spirit" also aligns her character with Hawthorne's theological ideal of revealed divinity in nature accessible through the imagination—"artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy [that it] seemed to express the attitude of her spirit" (53).

Perhaps the most interesting word, for my argument, that Hawthorne associates with Hester is "christianize": "It was the exhilarating effect—upon a prisoner just escaped from the dungeon of his own heart—of breathing the wild, free atmosphere of an unredeemed, unchristianized, lawless region" (201). Ronald Formisano describes the "evangelical impulse to Christianize America, that ubiquitous energy radiated by New England Protestantism to create the moral, homogeneous, commonwealth. . . . Thus, the Whig party . . . became the evangelicals' best hope to Christianize America" (*Transformation* 61, 104). Hester is often read as embodying a general antinomianism, but a word like "unchristianized" lends her resistance a more specific historical inflection as a fictional expression of the Democratic argument that the Whig ideal of moral government was an offence to civil liberties.

Given how important the Puritan legacy was to Whigs, perhaps the most interesting moment in Pearl's characterization is when she dances on the graves of the Puritans. She is described as embodied spirit, and that for Hawthorne meant that she is aligned with the idea of revealed divinity in nature. Like nature, her spontaneous actions are inherently spiritual. Toward Dimmesdale, for example, she gives "marks of childish preference, accorded spontaneously by a spiritual instinct" (124). Pearl embodies the idea that natural impulses, however at odds with moral laws, cannot be crimes if divinity resides in nature: "It was as if she had been made afresh, out of new elements, and must perforce be permitted to live her own life, and be a law unto herself, without her eccentricities being reckoned to her for a crime" (135). The antithesis of the Whig

theological concept of innate sinfulness, she represents the idea that passionate natural behaviour should not be subject to restrictive moral laws or branded with harmful moral judgements. In her repeated calls to Dimmesdale to "be true," she articulates the Democratic conviction that, as long as one is true to nature, either in the form of revealed divinity or as one's own "original nature," one cannot but be moral.

It would be a mistake to suggest that the novel is an allegory in which all terms match up with the contemporary debate between Democrats and Whigs. Nevertheless, the fact that the Whigs had a positive conception of Puritan moral government, while Democrats found it alien to their own ideals, suggests that a Democratic writer's portrait of Puritan governors, especially, might evoke Democratic arguments against the Whigs. The governors are, in fact, described in terms that are evocative of Whig ideas and culture. Democrats accused Whigs of aspiring to create an aristocracy in America and of being overly loyal to English cultural models. In the Province House tales that Hawthorne published in the early issues of the *Democratic Review*, he uses the term "rank" to characterize English governors who trample on the rights of Americans. The term reappears in the novel in association with the fictional governors. He describes them, in terms that echo Democratic characterizations of Whigs, as aristocratic "men of rank" who are charged with "the guardianship of the public morals" (162; see Ashworth 34–47). The governor's mansion is characterized in terms that recall English models, and a significantly placed *Chronicles of England* sits on a table in the hallway. Moreover, the governor behaves toward them in a way that embodies the high-church Yankeeism that historians ascribe to Whigs. He asks Pearl to prove that she has submitted to church discipline by reciting the Catechism, and he threatens to deprive an unwed mother of her child.⁸

Roger Chillingworth is, in some respects, the double of the governors. He demonstrates that their apparent distance from passion in fact conceals passions far worse than those they condemn in others. Chillingworth takes pleasure in disciplining others for their pleasures. Hawthorne is quite clear in his evaluation of the difference. Hester and Dimmesdale's passion is counted a "consecration" in natural religious terms, while Chillingworth, in equally religious terms, is condemned for having abused the "sanctity" of the human heart. This way of characterizing Chillingworth has a

contemporary resonance with Democratic arguments against Whig moral government. Democrats characterized Whig intrusiveness in others' moral lives as a species of abuse. One Democrat writing in the *Boston Globe* on 22 April 1841, described Whigs as "men who can fathom all the mysteries of the human heart; who have studied all the direct and indirect ways of approaching the citadel of integrity, and all the means of undermining or sapping its integrity" (qtd. in Kohl 32).⁹

In the character of Chillingworth, Whig moral government is represented as an assault on the theological foundations of Democratic political theory. To pursue others' sins, as Whigs would have government do, is to pervert nature and harm natural spirituality. Given the prominent role the world "spiritualize" plays in the articulation of Hawthorne's argument, it is noteworthy that Chillingworth is characterized as having "lost the spiritual view of existence" (119). As elsewhere in the novel, such a loss of access to spirit in nature is associated with a departure from the naturalist principles of democracy. Hawthorne uses a vocabulary that draws on Chillingworth's name to describe the negative effect of Puritanism on Hester and Dimmesdale's aspirations for freedom from moral supervision. The word "chill" occurs in the forest scene as the antithesis of natural passion, natural freedom, and by implication, natural divinity: "Arthur Dimmesdale put forth his hand, chill as death, and touched the chill hand of Hester Prynne" (190). The word "chill" suggests the denial of divinely inspired natural impulses of the kind that are evident especially in Pearl and the refusal to recognize their true "worth," a phrasing that recalls Hawthorne's earlier description of spirit in nature as "the true and indestructible value."

"Chill," in the novel's political typology, also stands opposed to terms such as "heart" that Hawthorne associates with the democratic multitude. He uses it on the first pages of the book in regard to divinity: "the one heart and mind of perfect sympathy" (3). And throughout the novel, it is used to characterize democracy. In the election sermon, Dimmesdale's voice, for example, is described as having "blended into one great voice by the universal impulse which makes likewise one vast heart of the many" (250). In *The Life of Franklin Pierce*, he uses the same metaphor to characterize Pierce's democratic effect on his audiences: "It was the influence of a great heart pervading the general heart, and throbbing with it in the same pulsation" (50). "Chill," in contrast, is used to

characterize harm to democracy: "This frankness, this democracy of good feeling, had not been chilled by the society of politicians" (*Life* 18). Chillingworth's abuse of the sanctity of the human heart is thus an offence to the natural divinity that underwrites the Democratic ideal of an egalitarian community. To exercise moral supervision over private morality is to harm democratic equality by presuming moral superiority over others.

Initially a servant and a captive of moral government, Dimmesdale comes eventually to be associated with Democratic values. He moves from an acceptance of restraints on his natural, passionate self to the freely chosen revelation of his spiritual nature. As with Hawthorne himself in the Custom House, this rediscovery of "original nature" occurs as a recovery of a lost natural talent, a theme that evokes the Democratic economic argument against Whig governmentality—that it suppresses the natural talents of working men in favour of what Hawthorne calls "monopolized labor" (7). As Hawthorne was able, finally, to write his novel, Dimmesdale is able to write his election-day sermon "with such an impulsive flow of thought and emotion, that he fancied himself inspired" (225). That it is "inspired" suggests that it draws on the same well of natural revelation that sustains Democratic values. His walk to the church is characterized in similar terms: "[H]is strength seemed not of the body. It might be spiritual, and imparted to him by angelic ministrations" (238).

The election-day sermon is a work of Democratic Party oratory, and the election day itself is, of course, a democratic event, "the day on which the new Governor was to receive his office at the hands of the people" (226). Hawthorne characterizes the market place as a site of contention between popular passions and moral government in a way that echoes the contemporary cultural battles between Democrats and Whigs that often came down to conflicts between immigrant holiday customs, such as public beer drinking, and Protestant Sabbatarianism. On election day, most entertainments are outlawed, and when an illegal entertainment breaks out, "much to the disappointment of the crowd, . . . the town beadle, who had no idea of permitting the majesty of the law to be violated by such an abuse of one of its consecrated places" interposes (232).

Dimmesdale's sermon both evokes Democratic ideals and produces democratic effects. He speaks democratically "to the great heart

of mankind," and he speaks to everyone equally: "Like all other music, it breathed passion and pathos, and emotions high or tender, in a tongue native to the human heart, wherever educated" (243). This egalitarian ideal, while crucial to Democrats' vision of America's unique destiny among nations, contradicts Whig assumptions regarding the necessary segregation of the respectable from the reprobate. Hawthorne implicitly denies such distinctions when he notes how the sermon provokes a democratic reaction:

This [shout] . . . was felt to be an irrepressible outburst of the enthusiasm kindled in the auditors by that high strain of eloquence which was yet reverberating in their ears. Each felt the impulse in himself, and, in the same breath, caught it from his neighbor. . . . [E]ven that mighty well of many voices, blended into one great voice by the universal impulse which makes likewise one vast heart out of the many. (250)

The ideal of equality is the principle that both Bancroft and O'Sullivan foreground as the source of America's uniqueness. In "The Great Nation of Futurity," O'Sullivan uses the word "destiny" to describe the country's identification with equality, and Hawthorne assigns to Dimmesdale O'Sullivan's word, as well as the idea with which it is associated: "[A]s he drew towards the close, a spirit as of prophecy had come upon him . . . [I]t was his mission to foretell a high and glorious destiny for the newly gathered people of the Lord" (249). Dimmesdale's sermon is characterized as being almost a direct expression of divinity ("spirit of prophesy"). And it gives rise to a pre-civil sound that is akin to unmediated nature speaking. For Democrats, such expressions of nature always have an element of divine sanction to them. According to Andrew Jackson, in his first Inaugural Address (1828), when "the people" spoke, God spoke (qtd. in McLoughlin 139).

But if Dimmesdale is aligned with Democratic values and especially with the idea of revealed divinity in nature, how should we read his final act of confession? It has been interpreted as an act of abdication and of compromise with the Puritan moral authorities. But given the ethos of the election sermon, it would be inconsistent for Dimmesdale, who has just inspired so strong a sense of democratic egalitarianism in his audience, to embrace the inegalitarian ideology of Whig moral government. It would be more in keeping with Hawthorne's argument up to this point for his confession to

represent a rejection of the distinction between the holy and the reprobate.

I have suggested that the contest between theocratic Whigs and anti-clerical Democrats hinged on the question of whether an elite of moral guardians had the right to supervise the morality of others. Yankees, one Democrat argued, referring to New England Whigs, felt "they had a presumptive right to impose their politics, their habits, manners, and dogmas on the sister states" (Kelley, *Portrait* 79). They did so because they believed divinity was not present in nature and not accessible, as liberal theology claimed, to human striving. Mark Noll, in *America's God*, notes that liberal theology "amounted to an open invitation for others to postulate an autonomy of action for the faculty of the will. . . . Against this rising tide of rights talk, the Calvinists were trying to stand firm" (284). Because the neo-Calvinists held that divinity was distant from human life, they felt moral government by churchmen was necessary to assist people towards "regeneration."¹⁰ Regarding this neo-Puritan theological position, historian Bruce Kuklick writes, "[T]he New England Theologians assumed a great divide between God and man, and between the realms of nature and grace. Both distinctions were reflected in the persistent exploration of human responsibility for sin and God's sovereignty over grace" (44).

Much of Hawthorne's argumentative labour in the latter part of the novel is occupied with dispelling this notion. His most significant move in this argument is his depiction of Dimmesdale as being able to achieve atonement on his own, without assistance or direction from his church. God, rather than be a distant being, appears instead, in the forest scene, as a spirit in nature who is available to human striving. And Hester, after rejecting the Whig ideal of moral government and of restrictive moral laws that would seek to imprint morality on her from without, finds in her own nature and in her own natural labours a more substantial morality.¹¹ The most striking move in this part of Hawthorne's fictional argument is Dimmesdale's revelation of his own "sinfulness." It suggests that, if the holy are no higher than the reprobates, the justification for moral government both in the seventeenth and in the nineteenth centuries loses force. The holy cannot govern the reprobates, Hawthorne argues, because they are all equally natural, passionate and "sinful." Hawthorne has prepared such a reading in the course of the novel by noting of Dimmesdale, for example, that he feels "sympathies so intimate with the sinful brotherhood of mankind;

so that his heart vibrated in unison with theirs" (142). The point is made more polemically in Hester's characterization:

Sometimes, the red infamy upon her breast would give a sympathetic throb, as she passed near a venerable minister or magistrate, the model of piety and justice, to whom that age of antique reverence looked up, as to a moral man in fellowship with angels. 'What evil thing is at hand?' would Hester say to herself. (87)

Dimmesdale's gesture in the market place suggests the possibility of spontaneous, self-achieved, and unguided atonement outside the jurisdiction of moral government. Hawthorne's reference to "Christian nurture" in the novel links his thinking to that of the revisionist theologian Horace Bushnell, whose book of that title (*Views of Christian Nurture*) appeared in 1847.¹² Bushnell's major work, *God in Christ*, appeared in the spring of 1849, and it seems clear that Hawthorne read it and was aware of the controversy it generated.¹³ *The Scarlet Letter* is the only one of his works in which he makes repeated references to typology ("hieroglyph," "figure," "symbol"), and Bushnell's book is famous for its first chapter, a "Preliminary Dissertation on Language," that contains a lengthy discussion of Christian typology.¹⁴ Moreover, while orthodox theologians believed that a sense of one's own sinfulness was necessary for salvation, Bushnell contended that the sense of having sinned impedes rather than assists redemption. He was critical of the "self-accusing spirit of sin," which he felt inspired unhealthy self-punishment in the form of "vigils . . . tortures . . . to ease the guilt of the mind" (*God in Christ* 212-3). It is a conception that Hawthorne seems to evoke in his portrait of Dimmesdale as someone who is "conscious that the poison of one morbid spot was infecting his heart's entire substance" (140). He characterizes the scarlet letter as having a similar effect on Hester: "This morbid meddling of conscience with an immaterial matter betokened . . . something doubtful, something that might be deeply wrong, beneath" (84) In typically Democratic fashion, Hawthorne assigns "wrong" to what moral government does to people ("morbid meddling") rather than to the natural acts that moral government brands as sinful.

Dimmesdale finally sheds his self-punitive sense of sinfulness and begins moving toward a public act of atonement when Hester pledges her love for him in the forest. When Bushnell describes atonement in *God in Christ*, he does so in terms that resonate with

the forest scene and with crucial words such as “joy” and “sacred love” in the novel’s conclusion. Bushnell argues that a “sinner” cannot attain atonement alone:

[T]o remove this disability, God needs to be manifested as Love. The Divine Object rejected by sin and practically annihilated as a spiritual conception, needs to be imported into sense. Then when God appears in His beauty, loving and lovely, the good, the glory, the sunlight of soul, the affections, previously dead, wake into life and joyful play. (Bushnell 212)

Hester’s avowal of love for Dimmesdale allows him to imagine freeing himself from the power of moral government. And the ensuing burst of sunshine would seem, in Bushnell’s understanding of the divine character of sunlight, to add divine sanction to the event—“All at once, as with a sudden smile of heaven, forth burst the sunshine . . .” (203).

In the final scaffold scene, Dimmesdale brings the natural principle of the forest to the very place that is most associated with moral government’s disciplinary practice of shame. He embraces the natural family that his sense of sinfulness had obliged him to abandon. That family has been made to suffer at the hands of a moral government that would put formal rules before natural principles. The distinction is registered in the difference between the natural, if doctrinally “sinful,” family of Dimmesdale, Hester and Pearl and the “unnatural,” if doctrinally correct, one of Hester and Chillingworth. In the scaffold scene, Dimmesdale affirms the pre-eminence of the natural to the doctrinal, of the spontaneous principles of natural spirituality to the theological doctrines of the church. Natural principles are also given primacy over formal doctrine in the revelation of Dimmesdale’s spontaneously generated “A.” The gesture of revealing the letter constitutes a rejection of the emotional economy of sin that would stigmatize natural passion and make it an occasion for shame. By publicly assuming responsibility for his actions, Dimmesdale rejects the imposition by moral government of shame, falseness and self-concealment on people who are made to feel guilt regarding natural impulses. He is finally “true,” to use Pearl’s term. Having achieved atonement through his own striving and through contact with divinity in nature, he bears proof, appropriately generated spontaneously on his natural body, that the ideology of moral government is flawed. By depicting atonement as attainable through free will and human

striving, Hawthorne sides with the liberal position in the religious debates of the period.

Hawthorne proposes, then rejects, a Whig interpretation of Dimmesdale's death: "It was to teach [the people], that the holiest among us has but attained so far above his fellows as to discern more clearly the Mercy which looks down, and repudiate more utterly the phantom of human merit, which would look aspiringly upward" (259). In few other places in the novel does Hawthorne so clearly describe the hierarchical theological assumption of Whig moral government. God is a distant being, and people cannot atone and achieve salvation on their own. They should instead submit to their governors. Hawthorne immediately questions this interpretation and calls it "stubborn." It is contradicted, he writes, by "proofs, clear as the mid-day sunshine on the scarlet letter, [that] establish [Dimmesdale] a false and sin-stained creature of the dust" (259). This characterization of Dimmesdale as being no holier than anyone else suggests an equality comparable to that inspired by his sermon and seems more consistent with Hawthorne's argument so far than does the suggestion that Dimmesdale compromises in the end with the Puritan authorities and with Calvinist theological assumptions. Hawthorne's point would seem to be, rather, that even moral governors are creatures of passion, and they, as a result, cannot claim a right to supervise the moral lives of others. Indeed, the point of the final chapter would seem to be that true moral worth exists apart entirely from the institution of the church, whose instrument of moral government—the scarlet letter—eventually becomes an ironic sign of moral virtue rather than of shame.

A similar irony governs the novel's entire argument. The truly virtuous are shamed and punished, while the emblems of Whig intrusiveness in others' moral lives are honoured. The emblem of moral government is compared to the devil, while the innocent child, whose criminal and lawless nature he would dissect, is compared to divinity itself. The irony pointed to by Democratic arguments at the time was that moral government was itself immoral, while the sins such government sought to criminalize were natural passions that, because they were natural, were imbued with divinity. In the context of this Democratic framework, the moral wrong in the novel is thus not that someone committed adultery. Indeed, at the time, Democrats were active, as in Michigan in 1843, in efforts to decriminalize the practice. Rather, the moral

wrong is the stigmatizing of natural passion by both seventeenth and nineteenth century Puritanism that betrays natural divinity and obliges people to be false about feelings that, because they are natural, are spiritual. In this light of this argument, it is noticeable that the narrator's final injunction—"Be true!"—is not a call to avoid such "sins" as adultery. It is, rather, a call not to be false about one's passionate nature. For Democrats of the time, like Hawthorne, the true immorality in the novel would not have been the "sin" of adultery but rather the imposition of moral laws that treat passion as a crime rather than a manifestation of "spiritual nature."

Notes

- 1 Several scholars have commented on religion in Hawthorne's work, although always in regard to religious themes rather than to the contemporary debates; see, most recently, Denis Donohue; Agnes McNeill Donohue; also Fick; Warren; Simonson. Harvey Gable discusses overlaps between the work of Horace Bushnell and Hawthorne, but he is concerned primarily with language and typology, not politics or theology.
- 2 See Bodo; Cole; Griffin; Bushman; Marty; Handy; Welch; Hammond; Kuklick; Stavely; Hatch; Noll.
- 3 See Kelley, *Transatlantic*; McCormick; Benson; Formisano, *Birth*; Kelley, *Cultural Pattern*; Howe, *Political Culture*; Formisano, *Transformation*; Holt.
- 4 Historian Louise Stevenson characterizes the Whigs as economic and social modernizers:

Whiggery stood for the triumph of the cosmopolitan and national over the provincial and local, of rational order over irrational spontaneity, of school-based learning over traditional folkways and customs, and of self-control over self-expression. Whigs believed that every person had the potential to become moral or good if family, school, and community nurtured the seed of goodness in his moral nature. (6)
- 5 See also, Welter 92, 88. Welter notes that Democratic economic theory "owed more to 'nature' understood as morality" than to laissez-faire theory. "Unlike the Whigs, they were committed to an economy of principle rather than an economy of consumption. . . . [They were] convinced that moral laws governed the economy."
- 6 Hawthorne would have had ample contact with Whig culture and with neo-Puritanism growing up in Salem, which, along with Newburyport, was a centre of Federalist and Whig power in the state of Massachusetts; see Hartford 1-64.

7 For an account of “common sense” realism, see Charvat 36–9; Martin 91, 151–65. Hawthorne mocks such “common sense” in “The Snow Angel.”

8 Kelley writes,

Parishioners were drilled in the specifics of doctrine, not let to apply them to the ills of the world. “Instruction in the Catechism,” Charles A. Briggs of Union Theological Seminary in New York City later observed, “was almost universal. . . .” The reigning mode of Biblical interpretation was sternly fundamentalist. (*Transatlantic Persuasion* 313)

9 This was a dimension of Whig moral government that even some Whigs criticized: “In the solemn affairs of religion, moreover, instead of looking into our own sins, we are striving to look into the hearts of others.” (qtd. in Kohl 32). In contrast, democracy, O’Sullivan suggests, “respects the human soul” (“Introduction” 11).

10 On regeneration, see Beecher.

11 Rather than be seen in the end as an emblem of compromise, Hester should be read as resisting moral government by withdrawing from its control, pursuing a life of “Christian-style simplicity,” and creating a more authentic religious community of her own. Marty describes contemporary left-wing Christianity in this way: “These idol-smashers found a target in the alliance between evangelicals and other defenders of the political or economic existing order . . . They criticized the ties between clergy and men of wealth or of middle-class aspirations, in the interest of primitive Christian-style simplicity or authentic human community” (113).

12 The following passage seems to prefigure Hawthorne’s description of how Pearl inherits Hester’s “unquiet elements”:

[I]f we examine the relation of parent and child, we shall not fail to discover something like a law of organic connection, as regards character, subsisting between them. Such a connection as makes it easy to believe, and natural to expect that the faith of the one will be propagated in the other. Perhaps I should rather say, such a connection as induces the conviction that the character of one is actually included in that of the other, as a seed is formed in the capsule . . . And the parental life will be flowing into him all that time. (Bushnell, *Views* 109)

For an account of Bushnell’s work, see Barnes.

13 Published in April of 1849, by mid-May, *God in Christ* was already generating discussion in the *Boston Daily Advertiser*. Moreover, stories in the orthodox press suggest that Bushnell had become an object of much lively discussion in the spring and summer of 1849. In the 30 March issue of the *Boston Recorder*, an anonymous reviewer writes that

"Dr. Bushnell has gone mad with panic and is for killing all the harmless and useful dogmas which venture to show themselves in the street without their muzzles on." A writer in the *Puritan Recorder* of 8 November 1849 writes that Bushnell "has become a kind of 'chartered libertine'" who

has acquired the right to do as he likes with impunity. . . . Still, it is a most solemn consideration that *somebody* must be responsible for all the disturbance of the peace of the churches, this distraction of the minds and Christians from the quiet work of saving men, and the agitation and unsettlement of the faith of many in the great concerns of redemption.

- 14 Bushnell advocates a figural conception of language and of the world: "There is a logos in the form of things, by which they are prepared to serve as types or images of what is inmost in our souls" (*God in Christ* 23). Bushnell's influence on Hawthorne would explain the expression of spirit in physical characteristics, such as Chillingworth's deformity or Dimmesdale's letter. Those events seem to exemplify Bushnell's ideas concerning the relation between physical form and spirit: "For the body is living logos, added to the soul, to be its form, and play it forth into social understanding. . . . [S]ubjective truths often find objective representations" (*God in Christ* 23, 250); see Gura 156; Roger.

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