

## Sex and the City: The Reconstruction of Middle-Class Urban Consciousness in *The Scarlet Letter*

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If there is any message in [Hobson's] book, it is that the search for an alternative prostitution policy will be stymied if reduced to technical and legal procedural strategies. Both short-term remedies and long-term solutions must be tied to general social policies on poverty, nonmarital pregnancy, child support, and women's inferior economic position. Ultimately prostitution politics must confront masculine and feminine constructions of sexuality.

—Barbara Meil Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue* (8)

### DOUBLE DISPLACEMENTS IN “THE CUSTOM HOUSE”

In the latter part of “The Custom-House”—the textual port of entry to seventeenth-century Boston depicted in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850)—the author conjures up “the ghost of Mr. Surveyor Pue [his official predecessor]” and receives a command to write a story about Hester Prynne and her scarlet symbol (147). This little literary conceit concerning the story's origin enables Hawthorne to introduce at once two strategic displacements, one topological and one ancestral. First, invoking Surveyor Pue allows Hawthorne to talk about “a regular history of Salem,” his native town, when in fact the story of *The Scarlet Letter* evolves in and around the town of Puritan Boston. Apparently, Pue spent his time as “a local antiquarian” researching not only in Salem, but also in the provincial capital, and “supplied

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material” for both *The Scarlet Letter* (set in Boston) and “Main Street” (about a Salem thoroughfare) (145). Hawthorne seems almost anxious to make the connection between his birthplace and the New England metropolis, as he inserts the fictional surveyor between himself and the source of the story. He equivocates concerning Hester’s whereabouts when he talks about “her habit . . . to *go about the country* as a kind of voluntary nurse” (146; italics added). He also avoids mentioning Boston as the story’s backdrop, as if to confound the reader. And he even ascribes the story’s “stern and sombre aspect” to “the period of hardly accomplished revolution, and still seething turmoil [i.e., Salem’s political turmoil after Hawthorne was ousted from the Custom House Surveyorship],” thus throwing the careless reader off the scent as to the geographical context of the story (156).

The second displacement involves Surveyor Pue himself. Hawthorne surmises that he “might reasonably regard himself as [Hawthorne’s] official ancestor” (147). Since Hawthorne discusses his biological ancestors earlier in “The Custom-House,” imagining their criticisms about his being “[a] writer of story-books” (127), the command from Pue as his “official ancestor” to “bring [Pue’s] mouldy and moth-eaten lucubrations before the public” (147) would allow Hawthorne a poetic retaliation, even if in a caricature (as the archaic word “lucubrations” suggests), upon his Puritan forefathers. The effect is not just psychological. Hawthorne’s re-creation of his ancestors in the figure of a local antiquarian must be seen as evidence that he is conscious of the buried history of the Puritan past, and particularly how his biological ancestors persecuted the religiously unorthodox, including witches. For the surrogate ancestor’s interest in the past and his command to lay it open (which Hawthorne seems to follow in “Main Street”) bear out this historical conscience. Hawthorne takes a penitent posture when he responds, with mock assiduity, “I will!” (mimicking the answer, “I’ll try, Sir!” said to be given by the Custom House Collector, an aged veteran of the War of 1812). In this caricature, Hawthorne pokes fun at the obsequious government officials who were involved in his dismissal as the surveyor of the Custom House. In so doing, he suggests in an ironic way the precariousness of blind obedience to law (either religious or military).

But the greater question is: What is the meaning of these displacements performed simultaneously by invoking an official predecessor? Why pull off these literary conceits simultaneously? Or, to put it more phenomenologically, what sort of horizon of consciousness forms the backdrop of such double erasures of topological and ancestral dominance? Admittedly, Hawthorne is an inveterate practitioner of such literary displacements. More obvi-

ous cases of geographical and/or chronological displacements are found in his shorter tales of New England history, as in “My Kinsman, Major Molineux,” where the political unrest during the revolutionary era is pushed back in time by about 40 years, or in “The May-Pole of Merry Mount,” where an eccentric priest is transplanted several miles from where he really was. Compared to these, the displacements found in “The Custom-House” are more subtle, but for that very reason more complicated and more impregnated with psychological significance. This essay analyzes the reasons behind Hawthorne’s ancestral/topological displacements as key conceits in *The Scarlet Letter*.

In the following sections, I will argue that these displacements are concerned with a nascent urban, middle-class consciousness emerging out of one of the first cityscapes in the United States. The first of the two axes of these displacements makes it possible for Hawthorne to historicize the reformatory tendencies at work in the nineteenth century, while the other axis paves the way for politicizing the seemingly innocuous construction of middle-class urban space. Together, those displacements open up imaginative space for Hawthorne to engage in historical criticism of middle-class consciousness. I will first discuss how a propensity for middle-class “city reading” became commingled with a strong urban reform disposition in America. I will also delineate an antebellum reform crusade that has special relevance to the story of *The Scarlet Letter*; namely, the female moral reform movement. Moving onto the inner workings of the novel, I will then describe how Hawthorne positions the three main characters, Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale, and Roger Chillingworth, in the public sphere of Puritan Boston. The resolution of the story of the adultery between the minister (Arthur) and his parishioner (Hester), and of their relation with her husband (Roger), I will argue, is deployed as the author’s critical response to the construction of middle-class urban consciousness. Finally, I will return to the preface of the novel and show how Hawthorne’s experience of being dismissed from public office connects to the aforementioned double displacements to create a novelistic form of social criticism.

#### MORAL REFORM IN THE CITY

Hawthorne stayed in Boston for a few days in May 1850, and after “carefully read[ing] over” “The Custom-House” (as it caused such a hubbub in “the respectable community around him”), he decided to publish it anyway. In one of the entries in his notebooks during his stay, he writes, “I take an

interest in all the nooks and crannies and every development of cities.” And certainly, he takes special interest in “an elderly ragamuffin” in front of a “grog-shop” called Parker’s, located on Court Square near Boston’s old City Hall.

He is a man who has been in decent circumstances at some former period of his life, but, falling into decay (perhaps by dint of too frequent visits at Parker’s bar), he now haunts about the place, (as a ghost haunts the spot where he was murdered) to “collect his rents” . . . . The word “ragamuffin,” which I have used above, does not accurately express the man; because there is a sort of shadow or delusion of respectability about him; and a sobriety too, and a kind of decency in his groggy and red-nosed destitution. (*American Notebooks* 496)

Reminiscent of Old Moody in *The Blithedale Romance*, the poor man bears witness to Hawthorne’s penchant for observing people. Hawthorne is conversant in the emergent art of “city reading,” an art practiced, for example, by Charles Dickens on London and Lydia Maria Child on New York City, as Wyn Kelley substantiates in her seminal book, *Melville’s City* (38–59). What makes Hawthorne remarkable, however, is his ability to penetrate the ragtag of society and to zero in on an individual in an empathic way.<sup>1</sup> Compare his passage with a contemporary deprecation of the city’s vices:

Sir, I always enter your city [i.e., Boston] with my mouth open, and I always leave it with my eyes shut; or, to speak without a metaphor, I always enter it with admiration, and come away with tears. So much outward happiness, and so much real misery! There are pale cheeks, sunken eyes, and broken hearts! There is the widow, whom despair has driven to intemperance; and there the harlot, whom seduction has rifled of her charms; there is the poor man, who always must be poor; and there is the disappointed father and the blasted son. (“The Art of Packing” 211)

Evidently, the narrator is overwhelmed by “real misery” in the city and cannot but gape helplessly at the scenes around him. To “enter [the city] with my mouth open” and to “leave it with my eyes shut” sums up nicely the two modes of encounter with urban space in Kelley’s analysis: “panoramic” and “labyrinthine.” According to Kelley, who develops Leo Marx’s classical “American ideology of space,” Dickens exemplifies the male mode of panoramic spectatorship, which anticipates mastery, and Child the female mode of labyrinthine surrender and escape. But when put in a temporal order, I contend, these two modes will tell a story of a typical reformer of the age (personified in the anonymous author of the above article), who enters the city with high hopes of understanding and appreciating human achievement,

and leaves it with helpless disgust at human vice (either to flee from it or to tackle it later).

Hawthorne's approach, on the other hand, might be characterized as "entering the city with eyes open and leaving it with mouth shut"; that is to say, his sympathetic perception of the dissipated conditions of his fellow human beings rejects any panoramic mastery of the cityscape or any labyrinthine dismay over its mob-like crowd, as his objective but insightful account of the "ragamuffin" above reveals. Mastery and escape (and/or surrender), in an encounter with the city, represent two styles of middle-class reformatory discourses, in which the city is either judged according to the master narratives of religious and moral persuasion, or repudiated as hopelessly degenerate. Hawthorne would rather map the history of the ragamuffin's life, which vibrates sympathetically with the town's social and economic history, onto his sketch of the man. By doing so, the author may recognize the reasons behind this man's dissipation, and at the same time penetrate the labyrinthine course of life he was forced to follow, without condemning him. In a sense, Hawthorne narrativizes the city in this man's consciousness, thus bypassing the reformatory urge one might normally feel when encountering the chaos of urban space. By historicizing the cityscape, so to speak, in the figure of a ragamuffin, Hawthorne copes with his encounter with the city in a unique, historical way.

In terms of history, the *city* of Boston did not have much to narrate then, since it was not even incorporated as a city until 1822. And a mere year after its birth, the city's second mayor, Josiah Quincy (the first of that name, later dubbed the "Great Mayor") launched a campaign against "the Hill," the center of vice in the West End of Boston. There "brothels, dance halls, and gambling houses . . . enjoyed a lively business, seven days a week." Exercising his mayoral power without reservation, Quincy "appointed a marshal of the city to oversee the police and public health, [and] supervised a rigorous streetcleaning campaign" (Kennedy 48, 47). The fact that the belated establishment of a city government in Boston coincided with such a strong reformatory crusade is a good indication of how urban space is constructed by middle-class ideology in the United States. From 1822 to 1823, moreover, the city funded the construction of a workhouse (the House of Industry) at Boston Neck, and later a prison (the House of Correction) near the new courthouse, strengthening its power to discipline those who "refused to live by middle-class codes of hard work, chastity, and sobriety" (Hobson 19). The development of Boston as a model city was thus fraught with middle-class inhibitions about sexuality. "Boston of the town house, park and city place,"

as Charles “the Great Selectman” Bullfinch envisioned it, “became the ideal” for the moneyed bourgeoisie (Kennedy 40, 27). And in the process, the city is literally discovered when people living in it suddenly feel the need to control sexual transgressions committed in their neighborhood.

The City upon a Hill, however, continued its struggle to subdue its unseemly side, seemingly to no avail. In 1820, the estimated number of prostitutes in Boston, both full-time and part-time, was 2,000, which was hardly less than that in New York.<sup>2</sup> And, as a historian sums it up, “[n]either raids ordered by Mayor Josiah Quincy in 1823 nor a grand jury investigation launched by Judge Peter Thacher’s municipal court in 1831 nor the new police department’s sweep through the city’s disorderly houses in the early 1840s had more than a temporary effect.” In fact, “the city’s red light district scarcely changed in the years between 1820 and 1850—except to grow in size” (Pease 150). In one of the Ann Street “descents,” or raids, in 1851, for example, ninety women were arrested as prostitutes in one night (Lane 65). A deluge of immigration, especially from famine-devastated Ireland, did not help improve the situation.

It is not surprising, therefore, that many moral reform societies cropped up around New England in the 1830s and 1840s. The New York Moral Reform Society, the brainchild of the notorious John R. McDowall, was formed in 1834; and a year later Boston saw the organization of its own Female Moral Reform Society. According to Daniel S. Wright, what distinguished the Boston Society from its sister society in New York was that it “never gave up the hope of reclaiming prostitutes” (24). It continued its “rescue missions” long after New York’s moral reformers had lost faith in the effectiveness of reclamation (i.e., rescuing prostitutes from brothels) and shifted their focus to prevention (instructing children in sexual purity). The Boston group even boasted in 1841 that it had rescued “twenty-five fallen women” (Wright 25). Boston’s legacy of combating socially unacceptable behaviors died hard. The sisters in the Boston Female Moral Reform Society not only held fast to middle-class domestic ideology, but also believed in enforcing this ideal onto the city in general, always trying to reclaim their fallen sisters back into the “proper” woman’s sphere.

Ironically, the Boston Female Moral Reform Society enjoyed relative independence from male supervision. Unlike its sister society in New York, it operated without any major overseeing organization, either clerical or reformatory, which allowed its members a rare autonomy. This, however, exacerbated an ideological contradiction that nags at the base of all female moral reform societies: they claimed for themselves a public sphere where only

women can be effective, thus overstepping the bounds of the restrictive ideology of "True Womanhood," while at the same time they embraced this restrictive ideology in trying to "protect" the woman's sphere.<sup>3</sup> In their encounter with urban space, woman reformers tried to gain mastery over the public sphere by admitting their susceptibility to the middle-class ideology of women's (a)sexuality. And by subscribing to the discourse of victimization in combating sexual immorality, they strengthened the restrictive hold of gender "difference" that they wished to overcome. Here, a variation of the mastery/surrender dichotomy in the urban encounter, which we have discussed above in conjunction with Kelley's analysis, again becomes apparent. Storming down on inner-city vices with police force is equivalent to the panoramic style of Dickens, whereas reclaiming fallen women from amidst urban debauchery corresponds to Child's vertiginous concept of the metropolitan labyrinth. If these two styles of encountering urban space construct middle-class consciousness in regard to the city, then reformatory impulses are the stuff of which the city is made.

In one of the recent influential studies on *The Scarlet Letter* that have placed Hawthorne more rigorously into contemporary social contexts, Leland S. Person points to "an Africanist 'presence'" (quoting Toni Morrison) in Hester's character (38), and concurs with Jay Grossman, who argued for the novel's involvement with "antebellum discourses of miscegenation" (37). But Hester's self-ordination as "a Sister of Mercy" (257) figures more as representing the plight of middle-class female reformers themselves, rather than those whom these reformers set themselves to save, such as working-class women and slave women. Her situation might better be understood as linked to the impasse into which those female reformers were put. Her daily rounds into "the household that was darkened by trouble" (256), and the loss of some attribute, "the permanence of which had been essential to keep her a woman" (259), are subtle markers of Hester's social placement as a moral reformer. And when Hester repeatedly asks "the same dark question . . . with reference to the whole race of womanhood," wondering if "existence [was] worth accepting, even to the happiest among them" (260), Hawthorne shows his profound understanding of the troubles that women reformers were facing. The public nature of urban space did not sit well with nineteenth-century ideas of womanhood. A woman was considered to have "a body that she could not master on her own" (Isenberg 43), incapacitating her to enter the public space of rationality and accountability. Female reformers, trying to open a crack in the male-dominated public sphere, were usually "portrayed derisively as harlots, miscegenationists, or spinsters shamelessly shopping

for husbands,” as Isenberg summarizes. To be a “public woman” meant both to speak in “promiscuous audiences” and to be a prostitute. Those white women consorting with black men and women on stage during public speeches were condemned as forcing “their prostitution” on the public (46). A female moral reformer ran the risk of being seen as entering public space with her uncontrollable body and prostituting it to the public, thus becoming herself one of those whom she had stepped out of her sphere to help.

What Person cautiously calls Hester’s “ambiguous racial markings” could also be seen as marking this double-sided perception of female reformers: i.e., their status of occupying the place of the reformer and the reformed at the same time. Her independence from society and freedom of speculation, her seeming loss of womanly affection, and her wandering “without a clew in the dark labyrinth of mind” (261), all suggest that she has become someone with circumstances similar to that of an antebellum prostitute. Hawthorne, we may conclude, models Hester after the figure of a female reformer, in that both are forced to stand in the position of the very person they are trying to help. The speculation that Hester dared to pursue “the most boldly,” not unlike Barbara Hobson’s feminist program quoted above as an epigraph, reveals the agonies of female reformers of all ages:

As a first step, the whole system of society is to be torn down, and built up anew. Then, the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit, which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified, before woman can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position. Finally, all other difficulties being obviated, woman cannot take advantage of these preliminary reforms, until she herself shall have undergone a still mightier change; in which, perhaps, the ethereal essence, wherein she has her truest life, will be found to have evaporated. (260)

Hawthorne’s profound understanding of middle-class ideology is shown in the final stage of this proposed reformatory revolution. In envisioning the radical subversion of the middle-class self, Hester’s reformatory speculation is shown to be constructed fundamentally on a desire to reform herself. The reason for the conflation of the reformer and the reformed, as exemplified in the female moral reform movement, is that, though women reformers might have been pejoratively labeled by the dominant press as sexually immoral, it is also the case that, in order to take up a “fair and suitable position” in society, they need to stand in the place of the fallen woman so as to reform themselves.

This is a classic case of middle-class “correction by interiority,” as Richard

Brodhead has aptly called it (29). Wright's study reveals an interesting motive behind such self-reformation. According to him, the moral reform movement was strong in those towns where women experienced a radical decrease in the number of children they bore during their lifetime. This shows that when the right to control reproduction shifts into the hands of women, the psychological corollary is that they then see the need to reform sexual morality. Just as the middle-class discourses of panoramic/labyrinthine encounters with urban space "discovered" the city in its reformatory impulse, the female moral reform movement, which was precipitated by such a discovery, resulted from the middle-class desire to discipline itself, against the backdrop of the plethora of sexual misbehaviors in the city.

"Let the condemnation of the guilty of our sex remain entire; but let not the most guilty of the two—the deliberate destroyer of female innocence—be afforded even an 'apron of fig leaves,' to conceal the blackness of his crimes" (Hill 66), the female reformers cried, demanding accountability from the other sex. By putting a similar discourse into the mouth of Arthur Dimmesdale to milk the name out of Hester, Hawthorne is reiterating the same kind of self-disciplinary proclivity: "What can thy silence do for him, except it tempt him—yea, compel him, as it were—to add hypocrisy to sin? Heaven hath granted thee an open ignominy . . . . Take heed how thou deniest to him—who, perchance, hath not the courage to grasp it for himself—the bitter, but wholesome, cup that is now presented to thy lips!" (175). Here, Hawthorne does more than merely parody the reform movements of the time. He is historicizing the reformatory discourse that constructed middle-class consciousness in its encounter with urban space. By depicting Hester's struggles as both the reformer and the reformed in Puritan Boston, Hawthorne shows the historical background of this middle-class culture of self-discipline, just as he did in the case of the "ragamuffin" in the streets of Boston.

#### REVELATION OF A HIDDEN CHARACTER

At the height of her social discipline on the scaffold, Hester's view is overwhelmed by her memory, which "kept bringing up other scenes than this roughly hewn street of a little town, on the edge of the Western wilderness." She first remembers her native village in England, where "a decayed house of gray stone, a poverty-stricken aspect," her paternal home, stands; then comes the picture of "the intricate and narrow thoroughfares, the tall, gray houses, the huge cathedrals, and the public edifices, ancient in date and quaint in architecture, of a Continental city" (167–68), which is apparently Amsterdam.

Hawthorne thus slides away from a New England colonial hamlet to an Old England small town and then to a Continental city; in this way, he thematizes the progressive construction of urban space and places it in this scene of public opprobrium, just as he has done in the novel's introductory essay. It is natural for anyone to flee a scene of public shame, if only in imagination, but the transatlantic displacements Hawthorne employs at this juncture force the reader to visualize the historical development of urban space. The labyrinthine passages in the Continental city, moreover, embody the mechanism of the repression of metropolitan transgressions through which sexual immorality is hidden from the public eye. In Hester's imagination, Hawthorne represents several different developmental stages of urban space as the various aspects of middle-class consciousness that together construct the city space.

The images of the places Hester sees on the scaffold correspond to three men who, historically, had the power to control a woman's life: her father, her husband, and her pastor/lover. Her father's poverty in the old country indicates, at least partially, the reason why she had to accept a proposal from an old hermit. The picture of a Continental city is a crystallization of Roger's mind, in which his learning—suggested by cathedrals and public edifices, all antiquated and quaint—is intricately convoluted. And the town of Boston, in contrast, stands in a precarious position between civilization and the wilderness, signifying its closeness to, and its struggles with, the untamed, as indicative of Arthur's inner strife. These can also be read as illuminating the modes of female encounters with public space. The decay and economic difficulties of the father may illustrate the reasons why women workers came out to the city, and these in turn figuratively suggest the reasons why immigrants from the old world flocked to the shores of the new world cities. The intricacies of the Dutch city could represent the dangers—usually sexual—and oppression that women encounter in urban spaces. It also denotes the psychological maneuvers employed to conceal male desires in urban settings. The “roughly hewn street” of the colonial town anticipates the hardships and contradictions women faced in their participation in the construction of middle-class urbanity in the New World. Without reducing these male characters to allegorical absurdity, Hawthorne is presenting Hester's life, or, “the entire track along which she had been treading, since her happy infancy” (167), as a series of encounters with different aspects of gendered public space in western communities, as represented by the men she comes across.

Hester's decision to stay in Boston instead of “return[ing] to her birthplace, or to any other European land” (186) is therefore a good indication that the New England town has become symbolic of her lover's mind. Hovering

around the edge of the town, where “[a] clump of scrubby trees . . . did not so much conceal [her] cottage from view, as seem to denote that here was some object which would fain have been, or at least ought to be, concealed” (187), Hester’s dwelling makes tangible the connection between Arthur’s suppression of their affair and the town’s oppression of her presence. The geographical position of the cottage relative to the town (“It stood on the shore, looking across a basin of the sea at the forest-covered hills, towards the west”) [187], moreover, would have reminded the contemporary reader of the location of the notorious West End.<sup>4</sup> On top of that, the reference to Hester as “a scarlet woman, and a worthy type of her of Babylon” (212) places her figuratively in the place of the prostitute in the modern city. Hence the physical layout of the town of Boston re-creates the configuration of Arthur’s psychological landscape.

The clash between Arthur and Roger may then be read as the story of an American city struggling with the inner-city vice that it apparently inherited from its European counterpart. In one of the showdowns between the minister and “the leech,” Roger, whose sphere is said to be “in great cities [of Europe]” (221), the latter talks about grave-yard weeds, which, according to him, “grew out of his heart, and typify, it may be, some hideous secret that was buried with him, and which he had done better to confess during his lifetime” (231). Roger’s concern, and the measures he would take to rectify it, are characteristic of urban reformatory discourse. He prescribes a confession “to make manifest an unspoken crime,” because it is what “all the powers of nature call so earnestly for” (231). The physician is saying in essence that an open community of intelligent beings must be established as the supreme court of rationality presiding over the whole of creation, to receive confessions and to condemn and/or pardon the confessed wrongdoings. He promotes the rationality of the bourgeois public sphere, which historically “emerg[ed] from an expanding commercial culture and organiz[ed] itself on the model of free trade between equal parties” (Henkin 9).<sup>5</sup> It is embodied, as it were, in urban reform movements as part of the Enlightenment project, which endeavored to eradicate metropolitan vice, just as Roger did in dealing with his patient, Arthur.

With the repressed presence of Hester as the symbol of “fallen women” at the edge of the town, and with the aggressive reformatory discourse developed by Roger as the guardian of “the health of the good town of Boston” (220), Arthur’s Boston is enticed to move forward in time into the discourse of middle-class urbanity prevalent in Hawthorne’s era. However, Arthur counters Roger’s discourse of urbanity with an older view of the public

sphere, in which those who are responsible for the maintenance of the peace of the flock can selectively conceal facts about society in order to manipulate it. He argues that the guilty men with “a zeal for God’s glory and man’s welfare” “shrink from displaying themselves black and filthy in the view of men; because, thenceforward, no good can be achieved by them” (232). Roger’s individualistic modernity echoes the penitentiary discourse of the nineteenth-century prison reform movement: “If they would serve their fellow-men, let them do it by making manifest the power and reality of conscience, in constraining them to penitential self-abasement!” (232). Arthur, in contrast, refuses to make open the innermost vacillations of the human heart. He would rather acknowledge that something must always be withdrawn from the rational consciousness of the public so that the public sphere may be established. This acknowledgement opens up a space for the archaeology of the public sphere by pointing to the power relations that make the public sphere possible. Arthur’s seemingly premodern discourse of the archaeology of the soul, therefore, conceals Hawthorne’s anti-reformatory awareness of the ideological construction of middle-class urban space.

The embryonic urban consciousness, which Hawthorne hypothesizes in the figure of Arthur Dimmesdale, is therefore forced to choose between two tough options: either he must follow the path of the feminist moral reform movement (as epitomized by Hester) which, often at variance with its own middle-class inhibition, would eventually lead to a revolutionary overthrow of the pre-existing sexual order; or, he is obliged to develop an urban consciousness that represses sexual desire behind a thin veneer of respectability, to “create [urban] landscapes of self-representation that could display and legitimize their [middle- and upper-class] status” (Domosh 156). Towards the end of the story this choice becomes most apparent in the two escape paths presented by Hester as theirs to follow. “Deeper it goes, and deeper, into the wilderness, less plainly to be seen at every step,” she points to the west, “until, some few miles hence, the yellow leaves will show no vestige of the white man’s tread.” And then again, the other option: “there is the broad pathway of the sea!” She envisions a life together with Arthur “[i]n our native land, whether in some remote rural village or in vast London—or, surely, in Germany, in France, in pleasant Italy” (288). Agonized by the presence in his psyche of what he deems as grave sin, Arthur had no choice but to embark on a self-disciplinary reform program, but which should it be? The famous “citadel” metaphor—the word etymologically designating urban space—would bespeak the historical junction where a premodern communal consciousness in shards, as represented by “the ruined wall” (291), had to come

to terms with its new-found middle-class sexuality in one way or another.

The “revolution in the sphere of thought and feeling,” experienced by Arthur after their decision to flee the New World back to “the Old World, with its crowds and cities” (303), can be summarily understood as the experience of a premodern community metamorphosing into a modern city, a process that the industrialized parts of antebellum American society were undergoing.<sup>6</sup> A variety of questions he inwardly faces—the meaning of “the communion-supper,” the question concerning “the immortality of the human soul,” the possibility of sexual temptation and verbal blasphemy, and the existence of evil in the figure of Satan—are all signs of the premodern religious sphere that previously controlled the civic order. The minister is tempted by the modernity of the public sphere, which would lead first to the nineteenth-century middle-class self-legitimization in urban space, and eventually to its urban cleanup campaigns and moral reform movements.

How, then, can the minister resist this temptation, if indeed he does resist it? Hawthorne develops his own narrative of an alternate history as social criticism in his work. After returning from the forest, Arthur talks to his now suspected friend about “the free air which [he has] breathed” (311)—the expression carries an ironic echo of what Arthur formerly felt about Roger’s presence in his residence, which is described as introducing “a freer atmosphere into the close and stifled study” (223). This is ironic because it insinuates that the urban discourse represented by Roger has some similarities with the female reformatory discourse represented by Hester. The “freedom” these discourses promise, either from urban vice or from sexual oppression, in fact obscures the regulatory function that middle-class ideologies performed against working-class women and immigrants.

As Roger exclaims, Arthur is “he whose body is the closest conjoined, and imbued, and identified, so to speak, with the spirit whereof it is the instrument” (235); in other words, his psychosomatic connection can expand to the community he pastors. When he preaches the election sermon his voice therefore generates a sympathetic vibration in the audience, just when “a new man is beginning to rule over them,” as Hester darkly remarks (316). Arthur’s role as delegate from God sanctioning the powers that be, and his sympathy with the audience (his election sermon unites the whole community in expectancy of “a high and glorious destiny for the newly gathered people of the Lord” [332–33]), set up the psychosomatic condition that places him as a figure of premodern society on the verge of establishing urban space, assailed by the tides of modernization. Arthur’s answer to them is to expose the stigma of the letter A on his chest. He shows, that is, a sign of his suffering

through the years after his adulterous intercourse with Hester—beneath the minister’s voice was “the whisper, or the shriek, as it might be conceived, of suffering humanity” (328). Arthur stands in front of the public, not as a reformer (one who covers social evils with deeds), but as someone who has physical traits to be interpreted, someone who has his own history to be divined in spite of its opacity.

The undeterminable nature of the symbol in itself calls for an act of decipherment. This opacity is exactly what the symbol on Arthur’s chest signifies: it points to the existence of an untold history, which is the fact of an incipient defeat on the part of the men who seduce women; it testifies, that is to say, to what middle-class urban consciousness represses in order to establish itself. The urban self-legitimization by the middle class through the construction of the public sphere in the city conceals behind it the susceptibility on the part of man to “irrational” female influences; female reform discourse masks the self-disciplinary drive that is instigated by man’s sense of failure to control his sexuality. Arthur’s symbol shows the profound critique in which Hawthorne engages to offset these urban discourses prevalent at the time. His final moral—“Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!” (341)—though seemingly out of place in the story of an adulterous relationship, is in fact very appropriate: the story teaches the existence of a “history” behind what seems historically constant, like a seemingly pre-existing gender alignment or urban vice. By delving into the background of the reformatory enthusiasm and urban cleanup campaign, Hawthorne is saying, one can at least find the possibility of establishing better psychohistorical accountability in the public spaces of America.

#### OUT OF CITY SPACE THROUGH THE CUSTOM HOUSE

After Hawthorne was ousted from public office at the Salem Custom Office in June 1849, he wrote a public letter in response to a Whig editorial, which was most likely written by Charles Upham—Hawthorne’s political archenemy in Salem. This former minister was responsible (or at least so believed the Hawthornes) for his removal from the lucrative position. Charging the author of the editorial, Hawthorne says “the slanders of private animosity and the distorting medium of party prejudice may have deceived him” (*Letters* 282). His detailed response to the accusations is obviously meant to bring forward the private and prejudiced nature of the accusations leveled at him. According to Stephen Nissenbaum, Zachary Taylor’s promise in 1848 to

retain eligible Democratic appointees was a campaign tactic attacking the Jacksonian spoils system. It was in essence a reactionary policy to control further inroads of “the radical party,” as Edward Everett called the Democrats, into the American political system (Nissenbaum 65). The firing of Hawthorne, apparently contradicting this policy, in fact revealed how the Whigs aimed at controlling city politics. Upham had to remove Hawthorne to protect party emolument out of the Custom House Office, so as to secure his political ambitions. Upham’s reformatory zeal, as evidenced by his antislavery activities, represented exactly the type of middle-class Whig smugness that Hawthorne attacked in the figures of his Puritan ancestors. Hawthorne’s antipathy to such political machinations can be recognized in his later caricature of Upham as Judge Pyncheon in *The House of the Seven Gables*. Through the character of Pyncheon, Hawthorne demonstrates that Puritan self-righteousness may hide many personal axes to grind. During this period of political tumult, therefore, Hawthorne experienced a public humiliation not unlike what Arthur Dimmesdale undergoes. And through that experience, he discovered the bourgeois ideology at work organizing urban space in America. The experience confirmed his understanding of the “social mechanisms that individuate members of society and also discipline them,” as Hoffman summarizes (203).

The minister’s struggle with his base sexuality therefore marks the shape of the political pressure under which Hawthorne was put. He locates the disciplinary impulses, found both in Hester (representing the female reformers) and in Roger (as the figure of urban moral control), in terms of middle-class reformatory social control. And he situates Arthur as divided between the struggle to control his own sexuality and the civil policing imposed from outside. Arthur’s self-revelatory tactics, namely, his confession of sin and the revelation of the letter A on his breast as a case of interiorized moral correction, in the end question the legitimacy of such middle-class reform programs and radically criticize the ideological groundlessness of their morality. By initiating a historical re-examination of social discipline in the psychological travails of Arthur Dimmesdale, Hawthorne establishes a critical archaeology of middle-class consciousness.

The replacement of his native town with the New England metropole on the one hand, and of his local ancestors with someone who came from that city on the other, as discussed in the first part of this essay, indicate Hawthorne’s awareness of the precariousness not only of urban political life, but also of the urban public sphere in America. The displacement of Salem with the Puritan town suggests that the social control exercised in a Puritan theoc-

racy (as exemplified by the town of Boston in *The Scarlet Letter*) is hardly superseded by the ideological policing in the contemporary city (as experienced by Hawthorne in Salem's political commotion). The displacement of his Puritan ancestors with Surveyor Pue, however, indicates Hawthorne's acknowledgement that such social control can only be laid bare by historically narrativizing its genesis and development. In such a historicized narrative, his Salem ancestor's involvement with the witchcraft trials is shown as an instance of the ultimate form of social control.

In this context, the character of Arthur Dimmesdale embodies the double displacements Hawthorne pulls off in "The Custom-House." Arthur's divided position between Hester and Roger connects the political embarrassment Hawthorne experienced in Salem and the urban reformatory discourse prevalent in Boston; his confession at the end typifies the historical narration of what lies behind the middle-class desire to discipline. By sliding away from his own personal experience of public humiliation in Salem to the larger problem of social discipline as exemplified by the various reform movements in Boston, Hawthorne discovers a necessary locus from which to talk about the engendering of middle-class disciplinary consciousness. The double displacements therefore enable Hawthorne to open up the "neutral ground" (as Hawthorne privileges the space of his historical romance) where Arthur's struggles with the figures of the female reform movement and of urban disciplinary control may be viewed in a historical perspective.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Dana Brandt's classic analysis of the nineteenth-century American authors (including Hawthorne), from which Kelley departs, applies Walter Benjamin's idea of the "flaneur" to their city romances. According to Brandt, the function of the flaneur is "to assure a literate bourgeois audience that urban crowds were not as illegible as they appeared to be, that social life was not as incoherent as it appeared to be, and that the masses were not as politically threatening as they appeared to be" (6). It must be noted, however, that Hawthorne's "reading" of the ragamuffin emphasizes the city's unpredictable nature, both economic and social, and therefore functions to aggravate anxiety about urban space, rather than to reassure a bourgeois audience. What must be remembered is that American authors were aware of the strong reformatory atmosphere present in their society.

<sup>2</sup> Marilyn Wood Hill, using William Sanger's extensive study published in 1858, calculates the number of prostitutes in New York in 1830 to be 2,127, and that in 1850 to be 5,413 (32). Pease estimates the number of prostitutes in Boston in 1820 to be around 2,000 (150).

<sup>3</sup> Though the Boston Female Moral Reform Society was one of the first stages from which Angelina Grimké declared that "this reform [of women's rights] was to begin in *ourselves*," spearheading the radical feminist movement, the constituents of Moral Reform Societies around New England were composed predominantly of the wives of conservative artisans, according to a meticulous study by Daniel S. Wright. He concludes that "by providing a counter-

balance, the ideology of female character and of gendered spheres, however expanded by moral reformers, served to enable market participation by middle class women and men" (147).

<sup>4</sup> Hobson marks the location of "the Hill" district (West End) on the map of Boston in the mid-century, which is on the shore of the Charles River basin, facing westward across the water toward the town of Cambridgeport (Hobson 77). Hawthorne worked at the Boston Custom House from 1839 to 1840, and knew the city inside out.

<sup>5</sup> David M. Henkin argues, perhaps correctly, that in America (and probably in other parts of the world, too) the public sphere was not destroyed with the coming of consumer culture during the nineteenth century (as Jürgen Habermas contends), but was rather reinforced to become "a broader-based, more boisterous, and more populous public centered in the streets" (Henkin 13) by the act of what he calls "city reading."

<sup>6</sup> Larry J. Reynolds has already shown that the "revolutionary form" that the relationship between Hester and Arthur assumes evidences the anxiety caused by European revolutions. My argument takes the idea of revolution as more social than political, in the context of the urban development of America.

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