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KIERKEGAARD'S EXISTENTIAL PATHOS AND THE SCARLET LETTER

There is no way of proving Hawthorne's intellectual indebtedness to Kierkegaard. However, the fact that the two great minds arrived at similar conclusions at almost exactly the same time makes the hypothesis of influence attractive<sup>1</sup>. To claim that existentialism was "in the air" in the latter half of the nineteenth century would be a gross exaggeration. Although Kierkegaard formulated its ideology in the 1840s and 1850s, existentialism did not become really influential until a century later. The fact remains, however, that Hawthorne thought along the same lines as his Danish contemporary, and the primary aim of this paper is to demonstrate this affinity.

"Subjectivity is truth, subjectivity is reality", says Kierkegaard, and, we may add, subjectivity calls for commitment and brings responsibility with it. Even a cursory reading of *The Scarlet Letter* reveals that these ideas occupy an important place in its narrative. At various points in the book Hester speaks or thinks of her responsibility in connection with Pearl, Dimmesdale, her community, even Chillingworth. She conceives of responsibility and guilt as inseparable. For example, she feels

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<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard was born in 1813 and died in 1855. His most important works saw publication before 1850: *Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling* (both in 1843), *Stages on Life's Way* in 1845 and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* in 1846. Translations into English started appearing only in the twenties of the following century. It must be noted, however, that between 1853 and 1860 Hawthorne spent seven years in Europe: five in England, two in Italy. Although Hawthorne's only direct link with existentialism is his reading of Pascal's *Oeuvres*, there is a thin chance that he became acquainted with Kierkegaard's thought through the sources other than the original texts.

responsible for Chillingworth when she reflects upon the change in the doctor caused by the seven years of his preying on Dimmesdale ("Here was another ruin, the responsibility of which came partly to her"<sup>2</sup>). Earlier in the narrative, she feels compassion for Dimmesdale after his first attempt at public confession ("The Minister's Vigil"), and similarly she assumes responsibility for the minister's mental torment. These convictions are occasioned by Hester's awareness that she is a "law unto herself", an idea that has affinities with Kierkegaard's views on the individual's ethical sovereignty. Any consideration of Kierkegaard's thought at some point will necessitate a discussion of the stages or, as some interpreters of Kierkegaard's philosophy prefer to phrase it, the modes of existence, so I shall elucidate them here.

Kierkegaard posits basically three modes: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious, which are neither temporally successive nor mutually exclusive<sup>3</sup>. In other words, the life of the existing individual may be dominated by one way of life over the others, rather than be characterized by the exclusive presence of one. Kierkegaard associates the aesthetic mode with three figures: Don Juan, Faust, and Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew. In the first illustration he follows the romantic tradition, represented by Mozart's Don Giovanni, and he recognizes both positive and negative aspects of the aesthetic ideal, though he emphasizes its weaknesses. Don Juan incarnates sensuality in both its exuberance and its primitivism. "Naive" sensuality thus conceived posits ignorance of the ethical and religious principles of a higher order. Don Juan embodies the first form of the aesthetic mode of existence, with its tendency to make aesthetic values principal, even exclusive. Such a mode of life is limited by the absence of reflection which could modify sensuous desire, and in this context Kierkegaard paradoxically comments on Don Juan's

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<sup>2</sup> N. Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, Scholastic Book Services, New York 1961, p. 186. Subsequent page references are to this edition.

<sup>3</sup> Kierkegaard uses the term "aesthetic" in his own very special way, and its meaning has no bearing whatsoever upon the common notion of aesthetic that pertains to works of art and our responses to them as art. Since the word will be used exclusively in Kierkegaardian sense, it need not be set in quotation marks.

innocence, which he views as a mark of ignorance bordering on stupidity.

The second form of the aesthetic mode of life is represented by Faust, who substitutes reflection for the direct pursuit of pleasure. At one point Kierkegaard compares Faust to Socrates in that both figures repudiate the claims of society, with the crucial difference between them lying in their respective attitudes to God. Socrates does not break with the divine, whereas in Kierkegaard's version of the Faustian myth authority is furnished by neither God nor Mephistopheles. On the other hand, the element of pride, which Kierkegaard conceives as a moral category prompts Faust to search for preternatural aid in the fulfillment of his life-plan. Hence, he falls victim to superstition and diabolism, maintains Kierkegaard, and launches into a discussion of daimonia, which he distinguishes from ordinary philosophical doubt. A daimonic life is based on the principle of *idée fixe*, and a daimonic person becomes subordinated to his all-encompassing idea to the exclusion of all ordinary relationships with human society. However, Kierkegaard does not convey this form of the aesthetic life in utterly negative terms because, after all, it marks the search for truth, the exploration of the mystery of sin and of the whole range of human possibilities. Yet he asserts that such an exploration may be overcome - though Faust's is not - by faith and a consequent turning to God.

Ahasuerus, or the Wandering Jew, represents the third form of the aesthetic mode of life. Kierkegaard perceives this form with its silent despair and loss of hope in either God or man as the symbol of his age. He then proceeds to elaborate on diverse ways individuals attempt to escape despair. These "exits" have been so often articulated by various existentialists that they function as existentialist categories: diversions, acknowledged by Pascal, the inauthenticity of everyday life, voiced by Heidegger, irony, and the repetition of happy events.

It can be argued that especially the second form of the aesthetic mode of life is exemplified by several characters in Hawthorne's fiction. The tales furnish the earliest examples: Wakefield from the tale with the same title, who heartlessly spies on his wife, Roderick Elliston ("Egotism, or the Bosom Serpent"), who explores the mystery of sin in himself and others,

Aylmer ("The Birthmark"), who relinquishes love and dreams of mastery over Nature, Rappaccini ("Rappaccini's Daughter"), who sacrifices his beloved daughter on the altar of pride and vanity, and Ethan Brand, who embodies the "sin of intellect", which makes him lose hold of the "magnetic chain of humanity". *The Scarlet Letter* features Chillingworth, who represents a synthesis of all these early characters and is, moreover, a clinical exemplification of daimonia. The pursuit and "systematic exercise of revenge", which immediately directs our attention to Kierkegaard's criticism of Hegel's "systems", constitutes his *idée fixe*: "he chose to withdraw his name from the roll of mankind, and, as regarded his former ties and interests, to vanish out of life..." [129]. Since he has neither man nor God to cherish or fear, Chillingworth sucks his life's blood from the torment of another. In Hawthorne's scheme of values, he commits the worst possible sin against a fellow human: the violation "in cold blood" of "the sanctity of a human heart". Consequently, he is conceived in daimonic terms as "the Black Man" (so perceived by Hester and Pearl), a devil ("Roger Chillingworth was a striking evidence of man's faculty of transforming himself into a devil" [186]), and a fiend ("the hatred that has transformed a wise and just man into a fiend" [190]). To Hester's suggestion that he "purge" his guilty emotions and thus recover his humanity Chillingworth responds, "It has all been a dark necessity. Ye that have wronged me are not sinful, save in a kind of typical illusion; neither am I fiendlike, who have snatched a fiend's office from his hands. It is our fate" [191]. Hawthorne's formulation again reflects Kierkegaard's conviction that a Faust is a man caught by a ruse of fate and incapable of reflection upon the moral or religious aspects of existence.

It should be pointed out, however, that Hawthorne's and Kierkegaard's views on the daimonic principle differ in some respects. Kierkegaard recognizes the moral danger of what Collins calls "a deliberately fostered concealment"<sup>4</sup>, which parallels Chillingworth's concealment of his real motive in his relationship with Dimmesdale, but at the same time he refutes the

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<sup>4</sup> J. Collins, *The Mind of Kierkegaard*, Henry Regnery Company, Chicago 1965, p. 60.

intrinsic evil of the daimonic principle. Hawthorne, by contrast, attributes the worst evil to persons who embody indifferent theorizing and inhuman probing into the psyche of others. Which is not to say that Hawthorne is utterly unsympathetic to sinners of Chillingworth's type, excepting perhaps Wakefield, whom Hawthorne ridicules mercilessly. But Wakefield, apart from other affronts against humanity, is also characterized by ignorance bordering on stupidity (hence he bears some resemblance to Kierkegaard's first form of the aesthetic mode of life, though obviously with no sexual implications); he remains faithful to his wife because of "a certain sluggishness", is intellectual "but not actively so", plain, cold, selfish, and vain. The masterful venom with which Wakefield is depicted finds its true parallel in Chaucer's characterization of Canterbury pilgrims. But it must be also remembered that Wakefield abandons wife and home, the pleasures of domestic life, of his own volition, and for Hawthorne, nothing compensates for this offence. The sentence Wakefield receives is that he "must never feel the warmth of the one [home] nor the affection of the other [wife]"<sup>5</sup>. By contrast Chillingworth, for all his daimonic traits, manifests a longing for the once cherished and now irrevocably lost happiness of domestic life:

My heart was a habitation large enough for many guests, but lonely and chill, and without a household fire. I longed to kindle one. It seemed not so wild a dream - old as I was, and somber as I was, and misshapen as I was - that the simple bliss, which is scattered far and wide, for all mankind to gather up, might yet be mine. And so, Hester, I drew thee into my heart, into its innermost chamber, and sought to warm thee by the warmth which thy presence made there [81].

The domestic bliss painted in this passage is in fact voiced by several characters in Hawthorne's fiction. Hawthorne critics tend to hold two conflicting views on the subject: Some maintain that Hawthorne valued his family life to such an extent that he posited it as an ideal<sup>6</sup>. Others point to Hawthorne's attrac-

<sup>5</sup> N. Hawthorne, *Selected Tales and Sketches*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York 1970, p. 171. Page references for quotations will be placed in the text after the entry *Tales*.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, E. Dryden's most insightful analysis of the treatment of love in Hawthorne's fiction in: *Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Poetics of Enchantment*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1977, p. 83-107.

tion to the sexual heroine of Hester's type, who is never associated with conjugal love, and they suggest that Hawthorne was compelled to conceal this fascination only because of the traditional clichés regarding womanhood, and the example set by his wife Sophia<sup>7</sup>. Although both arguments are tenable, we have to remember that the allusion to the restorative qualities of domestic life (the hearth) and the wife who kindles the fire appear as early as "Wakefield", published 1835, seven years before he married Sophia.

The problem of conjugal love leads quite naturally to the next mode of existence defined by Kierkegaard because he conceives of the ethical mode primarily in terms of marriage. Most interpreters of Kierkegaard's thought comment on the inconclusiveness of this aspect of the ethical mode. The second part of *Either/Or* introduces Judge William, who is a pseudonymous mouthpiece for the ethical viewpoint. This viewpoint is clarified through juxtaposition with the aesthetic mode, for the concealment of the latter contrasts with the openness of the former. Concealment stems from ambiguity, the ability to deceive and to follow one's personal whim, whereas the ethical mode advocates frankness, openness, and sincerity in dealing with others. In other words, it counsels a moral standard in the life of the existing individual. Viewed in light of this duality, Hawthorne's characters of the Wakefield type may be said to embody concealment whereas Hester is a forerunner of the latter category.

According to Kierkegaard, two elements foster the individual's personal rebirth in the ethical mode: the conquest of selfhood and moral choice based on an awareness of the absolute distinction between good and evil. The awareness of this irreconcilable dichotomy necessitates the admission of sin, which, in turn, brings about repentance. But it must be pointed out that Kierkegaard's understanding of guilt and repentance within the ethical mode of life substantially differs from what he calls the aesthetic view of guilt. The aesthetic view of guilt implies a dialectics with the world rather than with oneself and assumes that

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<sup>7</sup> See H. Fairbanks, *The Lasting Loneliness of Nathaniel Hawthorne. A Study of the Sources of Alienation in Modern Man*, Magi Books, Inc., Albany 1965, p. 139-145.

the only kind of guilt is one which violates the accepted social or legal standards of behavior. Accordingly, as long as the individual acts in harmony with the accepted norms he is not guilty. Consider, for example, Kierkegaard's criticism of bourgeois ethics as "a short summary of police ordinances; for them the most important thing is to be a useful member of the state"<sup>8</sup>. To Kierkegaard, one individual cannot be morally judged by another who "cannot understand him except as a possibility. When therefore any one attempts to judge another, the expression of his impotence is that he merely judges himself"<sup>9</sup>. Similarly, the individual cannot atone for his guilt by publicly acknowledging it in the form of fine or punishment:

One reads in the older works of theology a defence of eternal punishment in hell which affirms that the magnitude of sin requires such a punishment, and that the magnitude of sin is determined in turn by the fact that it is sin against God. The naivete and outwardness of this is that it makes as if it were a law, a tribunal, a third party which deliberates and votes upon the cause which is between the man and God. Thus there is always something naive and outward when a third party talks about that which essentially concerns the individual precisely in his isolation before God. The naivete and outwardness disappear entirely when it is the individual himself who puts the conception of God together with the conception of guilt<sup>10</sup>.

Hawthorne seems to be acutely conscious of this problem when he says of Hester that she was "little accustomed, in her long seclusion from the society, to measure her ideas of right and wrong by any standard external to herself..." [175]. This idea is extended when Dimmesdale intimates that in his interpretation of the Scripture the intended "retribution" does not call for "the disclosure of human thoughts and deeds". And he adds: "That surely, were a shallow view of it" [143]. True repentance, or ethical repentance, does not occur when the individual, conscious

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<sup>8</sup> *The Living Thoughts of Kierkegaard*, ed. W. H. Auden, David McKay Company, Inc., New York 1952, p. 32.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 75.

<sup>10</sup> S. K i e r k e g a a r d, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. from Danish by D. F. Swenson, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1941, p. 472. Page references for quotations will be placed in the text after the entry CUP.

of his guilt, is willing to acknowledge it, and thereby atone for it, but it begins with the recognition of the independent individual - that is, in relation to himself - as absolute. This idea will receive more attention later in this paper.

But what of marriage as the center of ethical life? Here the moral category issues from the fact that man makes the choice only once, but its consequences last throughout his life. Kierkegaard comments on the risk of routine and boredom inherent in marriage but deems it advantageous over the purely aesthetic life insofar as the progress made by the ethical individual is realized in a lifelong attachment rather than in a series of momentary attachments. Moreover, marriage resolves tensions inherent in the aesthetic life, brings security and, while sharing some principles of the aesthetic life, for example, eroticism, it simultaneously puts an end to selfishness and despair. Kierkegaard says:

Marriage I regard as the highest *telos* of the individual human existence, it is so much the highest that the man who goes without it cancels with one stroke the whole of earthly life and retains only eternity and spiritual interests - which at the first glance seems no slight thing but in the long run is very exhausting and also in one way or another is the expression of an unhappy life<sup>11</sup>.

However, we should not be led astray by Kierkegaard's depiction of marriage as "the highest *telos*". It is the highest *telos* only of the ethical life, and as such is not the absolute *telos*. The absolute *telos* is the individual himself and is to be realized in an absolute relation to God. This relationship marks the third, the religious mode of existence, and Kierkegaard gives no clue as to how conjugal love might be incorporated into the religious sphere of life. Conversely, he says that marriage constitutes a self-sufficient and independent sphere and, as such, prevents any/further progress and the full development of the existential dialectic. It is in later existentialists, specifically, Buber and Marcel, that love will be assigned a religious attribute.

The religious mode of existence is realized in man's lonely encounter with God. No norms or standards apply to this unique

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<sup>11</sup> S. Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, trans. from Danish by W. Lowrie, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1944, p. 107.

condition. Progress within this mode is achieved through suffering, the *telos* is striven at, though never attained, in what Kierkegaard terms "fear and trembling". He illustrates this mode of life with the figure of Abraham, who decides to sacrifice his son if that be the demand of God. The biblical story is very simple. Kierkegaard's interpretation of it runs as follows: Abraham is faced with a task that is horrifying from an ethical viewpoint and he could easily yield to the temptation of judging this task hostile to his paternal feelings and morally inconceivable. But recognizing that the word of God is to be respected above all else, Abraham deceives his wife and son and wrestles with his moral scruples in solitude before God. Kierkegaard focuses on two problems. Firstly, Abraham's decisions, though unacceptable from an ethical viewpoint, can be conceived as piety and religious sacrifice. Kierkegaard's line of reasoning is this: If we consider Abraham not a pious man but a murderer in intent, then we must assign to God the role of a wicked tempter. Consequently, Kierkegaard maintains, we attribute divinity to ethics and forbid man to enter into a personal relationship with God. Kierkegaard advances this viewpoint only to dismiss it and to interpret Abraham's decision as the enactment of the famous "leap of faith". Secondly, what does Kierkegaard make of Abraham's plan to conceal his intentions from his wife, his son and his servant? What Kierkegaard thinks of this kind of concealment is very much in keeping with what has been said about his concept of guilt and repentance. The secrets of the heart are inviolable: one's moral state is beyond the judgement of another human being and can be revealed only to God in a personal and lonely encounter. We can thus see the substantial difference in Kierkegaard's scheme between the concealment of the aesthetic mode of life and the concealment resulting from religious choice.

Hawthorne's tale "Roger Malvin's Burial" bears a close resemblance to Abraham's story. In it, however, concealment takes place prior to the climactic event of the latter part of the tale. It concerns Reuben's decision to abandon a dying friend, a decision that Hawthorne conceives in ethical terms, as evidenced by the passage: "[...] concealment had imparted to a justifiable act much of the secret effect of guilt; and Reuben, while reason told him that he had done right, experienced in no

small degree the mental horrors which punish the perpetrator of undiscovered crime" (*Tales*, p. 57). The iconography of this tale is familiar and resembles Elliston's hallucination of a "serpent gnawing into his heart". Another parallel with Elliston is in the apparent transformation Reuben undergoes:

[...] Reuben's secret thoughts and insulated emotions had gradually made him a selfish man, and he could no longer love except where he saw or imagined some reflection or likeness of his own mind (*Tales*, p. 58).

Here, however, the analogies with the aesthetic mode end and what follows is directly parallel to Abraham's story. Consider these passages, from Kierkegaard's and Hawthorne's versions respectively:

It was early morning; everything was ready for the journey in Abraham's house. He bade farewell to Sara[...] Sara kissed Isaac, who[...] was her pride, her hope in all posterity. So they rode in silence along the road and Abraham's gaze was fixed upon the ground<sup>12</sup>.

It was early in the month of May that the little family snapped asunder whatever tendrils of affections had clung to inanimate objects, and bade farewell to[...] their friends. Reuben, a moody man, and misanthropic because unhappy, strode onward with his usual stern brow and downcast eye[...] Dorcas[...] felt that the inhabitants of her inmost heart moved on with her (*Tales*, p. 59).

Besides the details of these two descriptions, Hawthorne's direct commentary as to the significance of the tale points to its parallels with Kierkegaard's text. Reuben is discerned as "the father of a race, the patriarch of a people, the founder of a mighty nation yet to be" (*Tales*, p. 60).

Finally, both Kierkegaard's and Hawthorne's versions conclude with the "leap of faith". The Kierkegaardian "leap" projects man into an entirely new mode of being. To convey this idea Kierkegaard resorts to a comparison from the concretely physical realm. He contrasts a leap "into the air from the standing position" (*CUP*, p. 94) with a leap taken from some distance. The latter is the leap of faith and, tropically taken, Abraham's decision parallels such a leap. The significance of

<sup>12</sup> *The Living Thoughts...*, p. 104-105.

this decision, which gives a new meaning to Abraham's life, finds a clear echo in Hawthorne's conclusion of "Roger Malvin's Burial":

Then Reuben's heart was stricken, and the tears gushed out like water from a rock. The vow that the wounded youth had made the blighted man had come to redeem. His sin was expiated, the curse was gone from him; and in the hour when he had shed blood dearer to him than his own, a prayer, the first for years, went up to Heaven from the lips of Reuben Bourne (*Tales*, p. 68).

Yet this passage also reveals Hawthorne's conviction that sin should be confessed or otherwise expiated in order that man recover his lost psychological equilibrium. This credo partly explains why Hawthorne showed a bias toward Catholicism and for a while was attracted to the dogma and rites of a nineteenth-century American communitarian sect known as the Shakers or the Millennial Church to whom confession was an important element of ritual. Hawthorne's Catholic bias, though fully explored in his last finished romance, already manifests itself in *The Scarlett Letter*, where, in the initial pillory scene, he contrasts the moral severity of Puritanism with what he imagines a Catholic would perceive in the figure cut by Hester and her baby: "the image of Divine Maternity [...] of sinless motherhood, whose infant was to redeem the world" [61].

As many critics argue and as his fiction testifies, Hawthorne did not support any form of institutionalized religion<sup>13</sup>. He was as strongly opposed to what Kierkegaard termed "objective Christianity" as his Danish contemporary. They both believed that religion concerned the most private sphere of individual life. But they differed in their respective approaches to what may be called the outward manifestation of sin. Hawthorne deemed such tangible proof necessary; it will suffice to remember that Hooper ("The Minister's Black Veil") assumes the veil, Hester wears the scarlet letter, Dimmesdale makes an involuntary gesture of putting his hand on his heart, Elliston clutches at his throat, and so on. Conversely, Kierkegaard believed that a

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, L. J. Fick, *The Light Beyond. A Study of Hawthorne's Theology*, The Folcroft Press, Inc., Folcroft 1955, p. 155.

human being cannot communicate to another the uniqueness of his personal condition. Thus, by extension, to confess one's sin to another is not the same as to confess it to God in a personal and lonely encounter. Kierkegaard makes this point clear when he speaks about Abraham's concealment, noting that it is ethics, and not religion, that demands manifestation. Thus ethics condemns Abraham because of his silence. Had he spoken, he would have been the tragic (ethical) hero who is thus defined by Kierkegaard:

The tragic hero sacrifices himself and everything he possesses for the universal. Everything he does, all his emotions belong to the universal; he is made manifest and in this manifestation he is the well-beloved son of ethics. But this does not fit the case of Abraham, who does nothing for the universal and remains concealed<sup>14</sup>.

These themes, which Hawthorne explored so masterfully in the tales, find their richest synthesis in *The Scarlet Letter*.

Since the narrative of *The Scarlet Letter* is conceived in the form of a movement or progress toward a realization of a single task, it can be argued that the novel's contents fit the pattern of existential pathos. That pathos in turn can be defined, in Kierkegaardian terms, as consisting of several way stations, i.e., resignation (or renunciation), suffering, guilt, repentance, and faith. Since each of these notions can be used in other than the existentialist meaning, it is necessary to explain what they mean to Kierkegaard. This analysis will deal with each notion separately.

Emmanuel Mounier uses the term "renunciation" to denote a special faculty resulting from choice<sup>15</sup>. Renunciation is of two kinds: it may be renunciation of diversion, which was also counseled by Pascal (he elaborates at length on "divertissement" in the *Pensées*), and also of consolation, which results from communal involvement. One has to be cautious when accounting for these issues because there is a very thin line dividing the two

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<sup>14</sup> *The Living Thoughts...*, p. 107.

<sup>15</sup> E. M o u n i e r, *Existentialist Philosophies. An Introduction*, trans. from French by E. Blow, Rockliff, London 1948, p. 155.

kinds of renunciation from the individual's relation to what John Elrod terms the "relative matrix of relations"<sup>16</sup>. Isolation is necessary for the concentration of thought, in a crowd one's absolute relation to the absolute telos cannot be attained. Since the absolute telos is the individual himself, to relate oneself to the absolute telos means the same as to confront oneself as a task. This is to be done in resignation because only in renouncing the attitude of absolute relation to relative ends, that is, the elements that constitute one's daily life, can the existing individual relate himself to the absolute telos. But while Kierkegaard advocates this essential solitude in performing one's task, he maintains that in the process one must be relatively related to everything else that does not constitute the absolute telos. The first pages of *The Scarlett Letter* reveal that these notions had a special meaning for Hawthorne. From the very beginning he characterizes the "desperate recklessness" of Hester's mood which took her "out of the ordinary relations with humanity", and enclosed her "in a sphere by herself".

Two chapters especially illuminating as regards the progress of existential pathos are: Chapter 3, "The Recognition" and Chapter 13, "Another View of Hester". The title of Chapter 3 may signify, of course, Hester's recognition of Chillingworth in the crowd of the Puritan witnesses of her miserable spectacle at the scaffolding. But it can be argued that the title has a more profound meaning. In the focal scene of the chapter Dimmesdale is requested to persuade Hester to break her concealment and reveal her partner in sin. The words spoken by Dimmesdale establish the ethical context of the book: "What can thy silence do for him, except it tempt him - yea, compel him, as it were - to add hypocrisy to sin?" [73] But Hester will not reveal her secret, arguing "[...] my child must seek a heavenly Father; she shall never know an earthly one" [74]. Her words introduce the religious dimension, one that is germane to what has been said in reference to Abraham's concealment. Hester will not speak because she is asked to reveal objective facts rather than her personal subjective motives. Even had she been asked to reveal the

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<sup>16</sup> J. W. Elrod, *Being and Existence in Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Works*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1975, p. 148.

latter, she would not have been able to communicate them because they can be expressed only to God. It can be thus perceived that Dimmesdale is locked in the ethical mode, or perhaps more accurately, poised between the aesthetic and the ethical. Interestingly, he resembles the last phase of the aesthetic mode, with its despair and utter absence of hope, symbolized, in Kierkegaard's scheme, by Ahasuerus, the biblical king of Persia. In the "Book of Esther" of the *Old Testament*, and Hester is but a variant of the biblical name, we find these illuminating facts: Esther was a foster-daughter of a Jew named Mardocheus. She was a beautiful Jewess, and the Greek translation of the books of the *Old Testament* indicates that Mardocheus took beautiful Esther under his roof for the express purpose of eventually marrying her. This plan never materialized because Ahasuerus (apparently with Mardocheus' blessing) made Esther his wife and a queen of Persia. Conceivably, Hawthorne incorporated this theme in his first romance which, apart from the name allusion, manifests itself, for example, in Hester's "rich, voluptuous, oriental characteristic", which finds its only outlet in her artful practise of embroidery.

Towards the end of the chapter, after Dimmesdale's plea that Hester reveal her fellow-sinner, Rev. Wilson adds a new element to the argument. He announces that if Hester manifests her repentfulness, the letter "A" will be removed from her bosom, a consolation of sorts that elicits Hester's passionate response of, "Never! It is too deeply branded. Ye cannot take it off" [74]. As has already been noted in earlier sections of this paper, Kierkegaard stated that internalization should not be made manifest by what he calls "a foreign mode of dress". Man should be "incognito, but his incognito consists in having an appearance entirely like others" (*CUP*, p. 367). Hester, for all the modest grays of her daily garb, is far from being "incognito" due to the flamboyance of the letter she is sentenced to wear. Much is made by Hawthorne of the luxurious embroidery that decorates the letter:

On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold threads, appeared the letter A. It was so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous

luxuriance of fancy, that it had all the effect of a last and fitting decoration to the apparel she wore; and which was of splendor in accordance with the taste of the age, but greatly beyond what was allowed by the sumptuary regulations of the colony [57].

Three questions suggest themselves at this point: Firstly, why would she put so much effort into the embroidery of a token of sin and shame? Secondly, why should she insist on wearing it despite outright statements made later in the narrative that she relinquish it? And, finally, how does the whole matter relate to Kierkegaard's ideas about the manifestation of sin?

Admittedly, Hester's burden is not self-imposed. The situation here is different from that in "The Minister's Black Veil", even though, at the same time, there is a remarkable affinity between the romance and the tale where Hooper assumes the veil of his own volition. Thus, while the letter is initially imposed on Hester by society, its meaning undergoes a transformation, most importantly in Hester's own perception of it. Hester insists on wearing the red letter because it functions as the symbol of her *telos*. This recognition of her *telos* constitutes the essential meaning of Chapter 3 and accounts for its heading "Recognition". Hereafter, her recognition and her choice to pursue her *telos* cause her to be relatively related to her actuality (Kierkegaard calls it "immediacy", Hawthorne "daily custom"), and absolutely related to the absolute *telos*. Let us look from this perspective at how Hawthorne formulates her predicament in Chapter 5:

By now, with this unattended walk from her prison door, began the daily custom; [...] Tomorrow would bring its own trial with it; so would the next day, and so would the next - each its own trial, and yet the very same burden for her to take up, and bear along with her, but never to fling down; for the accumulating days, and added years, would pile up their misery upon the heap of shame [85].

This tragic acceptance of a burden faintly recalls Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* and can be summarized in Camus' words, "[...] his fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing[...]The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart"<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> A. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. from French by J. O'Brien, Vintage Books, New York 1955, p. 91.

In both cases the externally imposed burden is transformed into a symbol of victory, not narrowly understood as victory over those who imposed it but rather as victory over the self. In both examples, the burden constitutes the reality of the subject; for Sisyphus, "Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world". Similarly, for Hester, "[...] the infant and the shame were real. Yes! - these were her realities - all else had vanished" [64]. While the religious dimension is absent from Camus' existential thought because he preferred to depict the hopelessness and absurdity of man and his world, there is at least one important aspect of his presentation of Sisyphus' task which intersects with Kierkegaard's views, and Hawthorne's as well. Which is to say that Camus' version of the myth focuses on the process of becoming. Thus, the individual is never in a fixed state, but, rather, strives to become what he is not. Sisyphus' unceasing effort conveys this idea but it also must be remembered that Camus draws from his example of Sisyphus a more general idea - namely, that the task which originally came from the gods is to be approached in human terms and "settled among men". Conversely, for Kierkegaard, man's whole relationship to the absolute *telos* necessarily must be realized in the God-relationship: "One who distinguishes absolutely has a relationship to the absolute *telos*, and *ipso facto* also a relationship to God". God does not call upon the individual to understand Him, but He calls upon man to understand himself in the process of becoming. Thus the God-relationship comes into being in the process of the individual's struggle with himself as the absolute *telos*. The process entails suffering, whose essence lies in the individual's separation from his happiness, i.e., his *telos*, brought about by his inability to extricate himself successfully from an absolute relation to relative ends. To emphasize Kierkegaard's central principle, the ideal task may be realized only in one's absolute relation to the absolute *telos*, while at the same time one must be only relatively related to relative ends. This idea may be traced to the philosophy of Pascal, who was the first to realize explicitly that a degree of conformity was mandatory in civilized life. To say that he advocated conformity would be a gross exaggeration. Like his Danish successor, Kierkegaard, he was aware of

the fact that the individual's encounter with God is a solitary venture, but he also perceived the danger of excessive inwardness, what Kierkegaard referred to as "abstraction" or "cloister". Consequently, Pascal recommended "mediocrity" in social relations:

Too quick an intelligence, like the total lack of it, is generally held to be close to madness. Nothing is good but mediocrity[...] If we leave the middle way, we part company with humanity. The greatness of the human mind lies in knowing how to hold to that middle way<sup>18</sup>.

Of course, "mediocrity" has a pejorative connotation in English that Pascal's usage lacks. The "mediocrity" he advocates may rather be analogized with Aristotle's Golden Mean.

According to Kierkegaard, the individual faces a three-fold task. First, he must choose himself as the absolute *telos* by renouncing the absoluteness of his ties with relative ends, i.e. the routine of everyday life. Second, he must express his *telos* existentially, and we will see subsequently what this signifies. And third, in his movement toward the goal he must not entirely abandon the finite, but rather, must live in relative relation to it:

In so far as, after having acquired the absolute relation toward the absolute *telos*, the individual does not pass out of the world[...] it is his task to express it existentially that he certainly maintain the absolute direction toward the absolute *telos*. He must express it existentially for the pathos of words is aesthetic pathos. He must express it existentially, and yet there must be no distinctive outwardness as its direct expression, for then we have either the cloister or meditation. He will then live like other men, but resignation will make its inspection early and late, to see how he preserves the lofty solemnity with which he first acquired the absolute direction toward the absolute *telos*. (CUP, p. 364)

This is the essence of existential pathos, and we shall see now how it applies to Hawthorne's first romance.

Hester's position in the above context is established when Hawthorne reports, in Chapter 5, on her "new birth" and further

<sup>18</sup> In: *The Essential Pascal*, ed. R. W. Gleason, trans. from French by G. F. Pullen, The New American Library, New York 1966, p. 75-76.

explains that "the scarlet letter had endowed her with a new sense" [94]. He then confirms Hester's position as an existential seeker when he notes, "In all her intercourse with society [...] there was nothing that made her feel as if she belonged to it" [91]. She voluntarily accepts suffering, which Hawthorne conveys by such words as "anguish", repeated obsessively in reference to Hester, Dimmesdale and Pearl, "daily torture", as a way of atoning to God for her sin, and "the torture of her daily shame". Her suffering results from her inability to extricate herself from relative ends. For example, she still relies on the opinion of others and her mental torment is caused, at least partly, by social ostracism. But she also realizes that she should not subject herself to the ethical judgment of others, that she should stand "apart from moral interests". This division in the structure of her self occasions more suffering:

But sometimes, once in many days, or perchance in many months, she felt an eye - a human eye - upon the ignominious brand, that seemed to give a momentary relief, as if half of her agony were shared. The next instant, back it all rushed again, with still a deeper throb of pain; for, in that brief interval, she had sinned anew [93].

This passage underlies two problems relevant to Hawthorne's conception of sin; firstly, the individual's sin-consciousness makes him instinctively conscious of his fellow-sinners; and secondly, to base one's self-consciousness on the opinion of another is tantamount to abandoning self-reflection and, consequently, one's freedom. Related to the latter problem is Hawthorne's conviction that excessive preoccupation with sin may result in rationalization or morbid despair, both of which are also critically viewed by Kierkegaard.

The idea of the brotherhood of sinners, which is intimated in the above passage, harks back to several tales. In "Young Goodman Brown" Hawthorne speaks about the "communion" of sinners. Father Hooper's implied sin gave him "power over souls who were in agony for sin" (*Tales*, p. 194), and he, on his death-bed, detected evil in the faces of those who came to mourn him ("lo! on every visage a Black Veil!"). Roderick Elliston believes that "there is poisonous staff in any man's heart sufficient to generate a brood of serpents" (*Tales*, p. 262). The same idea is

conveyed in *The Scarlet Letter* when Hawthorne says that Hester's sin "gave her a sympathetic knowledge of the hidden sin in other hearts", and that, if the truth were to triumph, "a scarlet letter would blaze forth on many a bosom besides Hester Prynne's" [94]. But Hawthorne also warns his reader that such a preoccupation with sin is "ever one of the saddest results of sin", and may conduce, as it does Goodman Brown, to a loss of faith.

Hawthorne's comments about Hester's practise of embroidery convey the same idea. They first suggest that, prior to the narrated events, Hester cherished a passion for the "gorgeously beautiful". In her subsequent solitude as a social outcast, shunned by adults and children alike, her craft of needlework offers her the only possible means for expressing her exuberant nature and finding peace and consolation. Yet even this possibility she "rejected as sin". Therefore:

This morbid meddling of conscience with an immaterial matter betokened, it is to be feared, no genuine and steadfast penitence, but something doubtful, something that might be deeply wrong, beneath [91].

For both Kierkegaard and Hawthorne, sin-consciousness is the *conditio sine qua non* in the individual's process of becoming. Sin separates the individual from God, but sin-consciousness heals this breach in search of a reconciliation. And such a reconciliation can only be found in faith which is rooted in what Elrod calls "a prior ethico-religious understanding of the nature and purpose of human existence"<sup>19</sup>.

Hawthorne criticism has traditionally identified Pearl as the embodiment or symbol of sin, and thus, by extension, of the scarlett letter. Indeed, to locate Pearl in the symbolic scheme of the romance is essential for a fuller grasp of Hawthorne's vision, but does her major function reside in her symbolic representation simply of sin? The very first paragraph of the chapter bearing her name depicts Pearl, in fact, as "a lovely and immortal flower", attributes that focus our attention on the atemporal significance of Hester's child. Pearl's symbolic nature may be deduced from the following details, which Hawthorne care-

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<sup>19</sup> Elrod, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

fully introduces at various junctures of the narrative. First of all, while Pearl's attitude to Chillingworth is consistently negative, she considers herself invulnerable to Chillingworth's power. She warns her mother, "Come away, or yonder Black Man will catch you. He hath got hold of the minister already[...] But he cannot catch little Pearl" [147]. In Hawthorne's initial characterization of Pearl, the reader learns that "the child could not be made amenable to rules. In giving her existence, a great law had been broken; and the result was a being whose elements were perhaps beautiful and brilliant but all in disorder; or with an order peculiar to themselves[...]" [98]. Hawthorne underscores this characteristic through repetition, as in Chillingworth's perception of Pearl: "There is no law, no reverence for authority, no regard for human ordinances or opinions, right or wrong mixed up with that child's composition" [146]. Furthermore, Pearl's reclusive nature points to her symbolic role in the novel. As Hawthorne observes, she is a "born outcast of the infantile world", endowed with an instinct that enables her to "comprehend her loneliness". Hester intuitively perceives Pearl's unique nature, and with the passage of time becomes increasingly aware of Pearl's function in decoding the meaning of the scarlet letter "[...] as if the only thing for which she had been sent into the world was to make out its hidden import" [195].

Finally, Pearl's symbolic significance emerges during her three encounters with Dimmesdale. First, in the governor's house, upon the suggestion that the child be taken from her, Hester passionately explodes:

God give me the child! - cried she - He gave her in requital of all things else which he had taken from me. She is my happiness! - she is my torture, none the less! Pearl keeps me here in life! Pearl punishes me too! See ye not, she is the scarlet letter...? [122-123].

The key words here are "torture" and "happiness", and it might be recalled that, to Kierkegaard, suffering and happiness were the mutually conditioning elements of man's struggle toward the absolute *telos* or the truly authentic relationship. The second encounter, depicted in Chapter 12, narrates Dimmesdale's first attempt at public confession. The minister invites Hester and Pearl to join him on the scaffold, takes the child by the

hand, and feels "what seemed a tumultuous rush of new life, other life than his own, pouring like a torrent into his heart and hurrying through all his veins" [167]. The scene takes place in the middle of the night, and Pearl wants to know whether the full light of day could witness their reunion. When Dimmesdale answers negatively ("the daylight of this world shall not see our meeting"), Pearl attempts to withdraw her hand with the words, "[...] - thou wast not true". The whole scene may serve as a parable of existentialism, with Pearl as the agent of authenticity. This is the primary meaning of the letter "A", and Pearl's function is to communicate the crucial nature of authenticity to Dimmesdale. Thus in the final pillory scene, which constitutes Pearl's third encounter with Dimmesdale, she kisses the minister, thus breaking the spell of falsehood that bound his former life. It is also the first time that Pearl responds to a situation in human terms:

[...] and as her tears fell upon her father's cheek, they were the pledge that she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow, nor forever do battle with the world but be a woman in it. Toward her mother, too, Pearl's errand as a messenger of anguish was all fulfilled [282].

The key word "anguish" marks a mid-way stage en route to "authenticity", both being central notions of existentialism. While authenticity denotes the goal of existence, anguish is the process of arriving at it.

Anguish and authenticity likewise play a key role in Hester's and Dimmesdale's process of becoming. Chillingworth is dealt with peripherally in this analysis because, as indicated earlier, he is locked in the aesthetic mode of existence, and thus the above notions do not apply to his development in the narrative. Meanwhile, having established as a working hypothesis that Dimmesdale is poised between the aesthetic and the ethical modes of life, while Hester enacts the genuine process of becoming, we may now turn to Kierkegaard's thought for further elucidation of existential pathos.

The religious, maintains Kierkegaard, preserves the ethical within itself. In other words, the religious must pass through the ethical. The religious poet, in Kierkegaard's example, but we may also add, the religious preacher, is in a peculiar situ-

ation because he attempts to relate himself to the religious through the imagination. He thus establishes only "an aesthetic relationship to something aesthetic" (CUP, p. 348). Roy Male claims that in *The Scarlet Letter*, "significant expression is achieved in art: Hester's needlework, Chillingworth's psychiatric alchemy, and Dimmesdale's Election Sermon"<sup>20</sup>. He further argues that Hester finds grace and grasps the truth only through her art. This interpretation, however, fails to acknowledge that Hawthorne has indicated Hester's ambivalent attitude to her art. While its flamboyance reflects her passionate nature, Hawthorne indicates that, to Hester, it provides primarily a source of support ("She possessed an art that sufficed[...] to supply food for her thriving infant and herself"), and a means of charity:

Except for that small expenditure in the decoration of her infant, Hester bestowed all her superfluous means in charity, on wretches less miserable than herself, and who not unfrequently insulted the hand that fed them [90].

As pointed out earlier, Hester repudiates any other significance of her art as sin. Such a distinction reveals Hester's transcendence over the aesthetic mode; whatever ties she had earlier with this mode she left behind the prison door.

Conversely, Dimmesdale's attachment to the aesthetic mode is quite substantial, as attested by the evocative epithets used to characterize him. He is "morbidly self-contemplative" and egotistic (like Elliston), a "subtle, but remorseful hypocrite" who is "trammelled" by the "regulations", "principles" and even "prejudices" of his society (like Wakefield). Even his awareness of his condition, which gives him an edge over Elliston and Wakefield and implies what can be called his higher consciousness, only adds to his miserable predicament. He is an "excommunicated ethical man"<sup>21</sup> who, at the same time, has transcended the li-

<sup>20</sup> R. R. Male, *Hawthorne's Tragic Vision*, The Norton Library, New York 1957, p. 102-103.

<sup>21</sup> The term, is borrowed from M. K r i e g e r, *The Tragic Vision. The Confrontation of Extremity*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1973, p. 14. The entire passage deserves quotation: "[...] our excommunicated ethical man, realizing the complete futility of human existence, cannot find a relationship with anything beyond it. His permanent forsaking of the universal seems to forbid it. This, the essence of the tragic vision, is the "sickness unto death", despair. It is the stage induced by shock; the stage which beyond the "aesthetic" and the ethical, yet falls short of Kierkegaard's

mits of the aesthetic mode. This is the essence of his tragic vision, and the source of his despair. Were he an atheist, he would find strength to confront nothingness and its empty consequences. He, however, is a believer, but, in Kierkegaard's terms, "faith is not faith" for him but "a kind of knowledge"<sup>22</sup>. His despair prompts him to assume another persona, but his despair also derives from the fact that he appears to be what he is not. Now, it seems appropriate to account for this phenomenon in Pascalian terms. Pascal distinguishes two kinds of "being" ("être") somewhat reminiscent of Kierkegaard's modes of existence: "être véritable" and "être imaginaire". The former is our real, i.e., authentic being, which is realized in the process of our opting for God, that is, in the process of our becoming. The latter is the imaginary self or one's narcissistic illusion of oneself. "Être imaginaire" is created by self-love ("amour propre") which is characterized by hypocrisy ("dèguisement") and vanity ("vanité").

In the forest episode, where Hester reveals to Dimmesdale Chillingworth's true nature and motive, the minister's reaction is prompted by self-love:

O Hester Prynne, thou little, little knowest all the horror of this thing. And the shame! - The indelicacy! - the horrible ugliness of this exposure of a sick and guilty heart to the very eye that would gloat over it! Woman, woman, thou art accountable for this! I cannot forgive thee! [214]

These words rather bluntly reveal Dimmesdale's vanity, hypocrisy and instability of character. He looks up to Hester, whom he deems strong, for the solution of his dilemma, and their conversation unfailingly demonstrates Dimmesdale's fear that Chillingworth will reveal his sin. However, his appeal brings Hester's passionate response:

Leave this wreck and ruin here where it hath happened[...] Begin all

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version of the Christian[...]If one can attain a break-through - a bravely irrational one unmediated by universals - he can reach the glories of transcendence; if he fails, he must live in the contemplation of nothingness".

<sup>22</sup> Søren Kierkegaard's *Journals and Papers*, trans. from Danish by H. V. Hong, E. H. Hong, I vol., Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1967-1970, p. 10.

anew! [...] Exchange this false life of thine for a true one [...] Preach! Write! Act! Do anything save to lie down and die! Give up this name of Arthur Dimmesdale and make thyself another, and a high one, such as thou canst wear without fear or shame [218].

Following the promptings of her heart, Hester here proposes that Dimmesdale replace one falsehood with another. In the forest episode their long-forgotten emotions are stirred, and Hester yearns for communion with her lover. Thus, for a moment, perhaps unfortunately only for a moment, a new subject is hinted at - namely, a possibility of becoming through true communion with another human being. However, Pearl appears on the other side of the brook, and she puts things back and together again. During the last pillory scene, Hester will evoke the episode, but then she will deem it "a delusion".

Nevertheless, Dimmesdale attains a breakthrough through shock, and what follows testifies to his transcendence of the aesthetic mode. A moment witnesses his enchantment with Hester's bright vision of the future, but it vanishes even as "hope" and "joy" shine out of his face. Chapter 20 relates Dimmesdale's peculiar state, which, to use the existentialists' vocabulary, may be interpreted as "frenzy". This term may signify anything from "mild physical giddiness" to "madness". Kierkegaard elides the meanings of frenzy and anguish, which term is frequently used in *The Scarlet Letter*, and interprets anguish as "the syncope of freedom". Mounier argues that frenzy conveys something more profound than mere anguish, "it does not exactly represent languor so much as a sort of accelerated exhilaration as opposed to the dialectic slowing-down of energy on the solid ground of synthesis"<sup>23</sup>. Feeling as though Hester has "lent him unaccustomed physical energy", Dimmesdale experiences the following:

Before Mr. Dimmesdale reached home, his inner man gave him other evidences of a revolution in the sphere of thought and feeling. In truth, nothing short of a total change of dynasty and moral code, in that interior kingdom, was adequate to account for the impulses now communicated to the unfortunate and startled minister. At every step he was incited to do some strange, wild,

<sup>23</sup> The three terms: "frenzy", "anguish" and "the syncope of freedom" are dealt with extensively in: Mounier, *op. cit.*, p. 31-35.

wicked thing or other, with a sense that it would be at once involuntary and intentional; in spite of himself, yet growing out of a profounder self than that which opposed the impulse [239-240].

As the chapter closes, however, the minister regains tranquillity and gets ready for his last sermon.

The sermon condenses an entire series of familiar notions: "anguish", "pathos", and "suffering humanity", followed by the final pillory scene when Dimmesdale climbs on the scaffold and invites Hester and Pearl to join him. This episode of course parallels the initial pillory scene, likewise conducted in daylight with Hester as the main focus, and members of the community convened as spectators. The ethical significance of Dimmesdale's gesture on the scaffold is obvious. What is not obvious, however, is why Hawthorne makes Dimmesdale die the moment he passes into the ethical mode. The only possible answer, if one accepts the present interpretation, is that Dimmesdale's death is symbolic in the sense that the ethical he has attained reveals to him its impossibly paradoxical nature. This idea suggests itself in Dimmesdale's answer to Hester appeal:

"Hester", said the clergyman, "farewell!"

"Shall we not meet again?" whispered she, bending her face down close to his. "Shall we not spend our immortal life together? Surely, surely, we have ransomed one another with all this woe! Thou lookest far into eternity with those bright dying eyes! Then tell me what thou seest?"

"Hush, Hester, hush!" said he, with tremulous solemnity. "The law we broke! - the sin here so awfully revealed! - let these alone be in thy thoughts! I fear! I fear! It may be that when we forgot our God, when we violated our reverence each for the other's soul, it was thenceforth vain to hope that we could meet hereafter in an everlasting and pure reunion [282-283].

Dimmesdale gives an ethical answer to Hester's question, whereas Hester performs here the leap of faith. She transcends the ethical, and her question is her passport to the religious. One is tempted to compare this scene with the concluding episode of Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, where the boy Ilusha has just died, and Kolya Krassotkin asks Alyosha Karamazov, "Can it be true, as they teach in church, that we shall rise again from the dead and shall live and see each other again, all, Ilusha, too?"

To which Alyosha answers, "half laughing, half enthusiastic", that indeed it will be so. Even while he laughs, he tells the truth as he believes it. Had he not believed it, he would have dismissed the question, or would have given a casual answer. He says instead, "Certainly, we shall rise again, certainly we shall see each other and shall tell each other with joy and gladness all that has happened"<sup>24</sup>.

Kierkegaard states that the only way the existing individual can live authentically in the world is as a free man. This freedom is to be achieved only through the awareness of the absolute task. So far, I have argued that the absolute task in Hawthorne's first romance is figuratively represented by the scarlet letter. Hawthorne communicates Hester's awareness of the relationship between the ideal task and freedom in the reflection that "the tendency of her fate and fortune had been to set her free. The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread" [220]. Hester herself perceives the letter as "the symbol of her calling". These passages invite two interpretations. Firstly, they can be read in conjunction with the book's feminist theme, and several other passages support such an interpretation. At one point, for instance, Hester reflects upon "the whole race of womanhood", and asks, "Was existence worth accepting, even to the happiest among them?" [181]. She considers herself unfit for the role of a redeeming woman, though she adds that she might once have been a "prophetess". Pertinent to such a reading is Hawthorne's brief fascination with the Shakers, or the Millennial Church, who believed in the bi-sexuality of God, thus paving the way, it can be argued, for the women's liberation movement. Jesus, the son of a Jewish carpenter, was the male manifestation of Christ and the first Christian Church, whereas Mother Ann (Ann Lees), daughter of an English blacksmith and foundress of the sect, was the female manifestation of Christ and the second Christian Church. In the two the promises of the Second Coming were fulfilled. This is the essence of the Shakers' insistence on sexual equality and partnership between man and woman. Hawthorne touches on these

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<sup>24</sup> F. Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamasov*, trans. from Russian by C. Garnett, New American Library, New York 1957, p. 700.

notions in *The Scarlet Letter* without exploring them fully. Yet the subject is raised at the end of the book, thereby receiving additional emphasis through its placement, as in the following passage:

[...] at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven's own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness [289-290].

Secondly, the section, in which Hester relates freedom to the absolute *telos*, necessitates a commentary on how this symbiosis is to be attained. Kierkegaard suggests that the process of arriving at the absolute *telos* is complicated by several obstacles which constitute the structure, as it were, of the process of becoming. Thus, first of all, the existing individual chooses himself as the absolute *telos*. He subsequently renounces the relative matrix of his life (i.e., daily routine). But it should be kept in mind that a difficulty inheres in the act of renouncing because the individual's ties with relative ends are still substantial. In the meanwhile, time has elapsed, and it is no longer feasible to make a choice. Thus, a new beginning must be made. At this juncture the individual realizes the impossibility of unifying himself with his *telos* and becomes guilty. A possibility remains, however, that he will break through time into eternity and find God in the eternal moment. This, roughly speaking, is the structure of Hester's development in the narrative.

Chapters 3, 13, 18, 19, 21, 23 and 24 reveal the structure of Hester's existential pathos. In Chapter 3, she recognizes her *telos* and makes her choice. In Chapter 13, which he, significantly, entitled "Another View of Hester", Hawthorne focuses on Hester's transformation. He first indicates the society's altered perception of Hester; where she inspired awe and hostility in the past, she has now earned "reverence and affection". The community would now gladly welcome her as a neighbor but, as the chapter unfolds, Hawthorne stresses Hester's utter reclusiveness. For instance, she dismisses any attempt by her neighbors to communicate:

Meeting them in the street, she never raised her head to receive their greeting. If they were resolute to accost her, she laid her finger on the scarlet letter and passed on [177].

Hawthorne further registers the change in her physical appearance, "Even the attractiveness of her person had undergone[...] a change[...] Some attribute had departed from her, the permanence of which had been essential to keep her a woman" [179]. The departed attribute is later associated with "passion and feeling", and Hawthorne comments on her "marble coldness". Passion is replaced with thought or "freedom of speculation" which, as Hawthorne says, "sufficed" Hester "without investing itself in the flesh and blood of action". We again find direct parallels in Kierkegaard's ideas, specifically his theory that in human action "passion" must enter as the "over and above" principle. Hester's attitude reminds one of the often encountered warning of existentialists against excessive introspection or inwardization which likewise harks back to Kierkegaard:

The more abstract the individual is, the less he is related to an eternal happiness, and the more remote he is from guilt; for abstraction assumes the indifference of existence, but guilt is the expression for the strongest self-assertion of existence, and after all it is an "exister" who is to relate himself to an eternal happiness. (CUP, p. 470)

Kierkegaard's text aids in clarifying why Hester views "her own individual existence[...] in the negative", why Hawthorne indicates that she should undergo "a still mightier change", why he says that "her heart had lost its regular and healthy throb", and, finally, why he asserts that "the scarlet letter had done its office". These thoughts are occasioned by Hester's reconsideration of her double concealment: of Dimmesdale's partnership in adultery and of Chillingworth's real nature and motive. She considers both concealments in ethical terms and they now seem to her to have been "a defect of truth, courage and loyalty" [183]. The choice she made in prison, though "she had climbed her way, since then, to a higher point", was "the more wretched alternative", and rendered Hester guilty. Her guilt results from her inability to renounce the appeal made by the universal or ethical principle. In other words, having made her choice (in Chapter 3), she renounces the daily matrix of relations, but falls vic-

tim to excessive introspection and the demands made by the universal (ethical) principle.

The same structure is revealed in Chapter 18, again significantly entitled - "A Flood of Sunshine". It begins with the above quoted statement of Hester's freedom but, as the chapter unfolds, we see her passionate response to the call of the aesthetic. As she removes the letter and the cap, the symbolic transformation summoned by Hester's gesture is accompanied by a change of weather:

All at once, as with a sudden smile of heaven, forth burst the sunshine pouring a very flood into the obscure forest, gladdening each green leaf, transmuting the yellow fallen ones to gold and gleaming down on the gray trunks of the solemn trees. The objects that had made a shadow hitherto embodied the brightness now. The course of the little brook might be traced by its merry gleam afar into the wood's heart of mystery, which had become a mystery of joy [224].

The optimism of this chapter has always vexed Hawthorne's readers. Again, Kierkegaard's thought offers the most satisfying explanation of the initial optimism that immediately cedes to the total pessimism of the chapter. According to Kierkegaard, suffering by definition encourages the sufferer to seek a way out of his condition. This release may be found, for example, in poetic production or the poetic premonition of a happier and less flawed state of things. Such a respite from suffering within the aesthetic mode is reflected in *The Scarlet Letter* in Hester's fantastic plans for the future and in the "exquisite relief" she experiences upon the removal of the letter and the cap. However, Kierkegaard contends that the hope and the optimism of the aesthetic mode precede total pessimism. In this sequence resides the essence of repentance, for Kierkegaard, which entails the existential relinquishment of all hope in realizing one's absolute telos exclusively through freedom. Moreover, the final act of freedom is the existential assertion of its nothingness, which accounts for the desperate pessimism voiced in this passage:

[...] there was a sense of inevitable doom upon her as she thus received back this deadly symbol from the hand of fate [...] here again was the scarlet misery, glittering on the old spot [...] Hester next gathered up the heavy tres-

ses of her hair and confided them beneath her cap. As if there were a withering spell in the sad letter, her beauty, the warmth and richness of her womanhood, departed like fading sunshine, and a gray shadow seemed to fall across her [233].

The woman we see again in Chapter 21, in Hawthorne's words, sooner resembles a "statue" than a living human being:

Her face, so long familiar to the townspeople, showed the marble quietude which they were accustomed to behold there. It was like a mask, or rather like the frozen calmness of a dead woman's features; owing this dreary resemblance to the fact that Hester was actually dead, in respect to any claim of sympathy, and had departed out of the world with which she still seemed to mingle [249-250].

It should be noted that between Chapter 19, where Hester replaces the letter and the cap, and Chapter 21, which depicts her as wearing a "mask", Hawthorne excludes her from the narrative. The preceding chapter focuses on Dimmesdale's peculiar state and concludes with Chillingworth's appearance. Therefore, Hester's transformation results not from her knowledge of Chillingworth's Machiavellian plot to thwart their plans of escape, but rather from her own resolve to continue her movement toward the absolute *telos*.

At this juncture in the narrative, then, Hawthorne attempts a psychological justification of Hester's departure "out of the world", attributing it, significantly, to an "inconsistency" in Hester's nature and to a "feeling of regret" that derives from her inability "to win her freedom from pain which had been thus deeply incorporated with her being" [250]. The reader cannot mistake this "pain[...] incorporated with her being" as anything other than the most basic existentialist category of anguish or Angst, which accompanies the existing individual at every moment. Wishing to avoid this anguish, the individual attempts to cast off his identity and assume a role or, in Hawthorne's vocabulary a "mask". Or, alternatively, he may try to sidestep the anguish by "lighting out", in Huck Finn's fashion, for new territories. However, as the existentialists tell us, every attempt at avoiding the anguish only further aggravates the condition because the individual's *telos* consists not of avoiding, but rather of

choosing himself. That choice cannot be achieved through a single act. On the contrary one must regain this ground over and over again in passionate living. This existentialist paradigm is precisely what structures the last chapter of *The Scarlett Letter* and offers an interpretive framework for the book's conclusion.

Hester and Pearl "light out" as they depart for England, but Hester returns to New England to resume her *telos*, the cyclical nature of which Hawthorne conveys one last time by these words, "Here had been her sin; here, her sorrow; and here, was yet to be her penitence" [289]. To understand fully the final paragraphs of the book, we must once again refer to Kierkegaard's philosophy, and specifically, to his concept of an "apostle". Since Kierkegaard couples this concept with that of a "genius", it seems appropriate to examine both terms together. The genius is an individual who arrives at truth *sub specie aeterni*, as Kierkegaard has it, objectively in the manner of a scientist, or a philosopher. Chillingworth, in fact, perfectly fits this image, for he combines both roles. His speculative meditations, his methodical discovery of Dimmesdale's secret and his subsequent manipulation of the minister's psyche clearly indicate his kinship with Kierkegaard's "genius". Kierkegaard's "apostle" is the one to whom a certain message is communicated, but his task does not consist of "pondering over" this message. As Kierkegaard says, "it is not given him for his own sake, he is, on the contrary, on a mission and has to proclaim the message and use authority"<sup>25</sup>. Thus, inherent in the notion of an apostle are two faculties, those of hearing or listening to the message and of telling or passing the message onto somebody else. Such is essentially Hester's image upon her return to Salem:

And, as Hester Prynne had no selfish ends, nor lived in any measure for her own profit and enjoyment, people brought all their sorrows and perplexities, and besought her counsel, as one who had herself gone through a mighty trouble. Women, more especially - in the continually recurring trials of wounded, wasted, wronged, misplaced, or erring and sinful passion, or with the

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<sup>25</sup> S. Kierkegaard, *The Present Age and of the Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle*, trans. from Danish by A. Dru, Harper and Row, New York 1962, p. 105-106.

dreary burden of a heart unyielded, because unvalued and unsought - came to Hester's cottage, demanding why they were so wretched and what the remedy! Hester comforted and counseled them as best she might [289].

The book does not conclude with these words, however. We still have the ambiguous passage where Hawthorne defines "the angel and apostle of the coming revelation", who will be a woman:

[...] lofty, pure, and beautiful; and wise moreover, not through dusky grief, but the ethereal medium of joy; and showing how sacred love should make us happy, by the truest test of a life successful to such an end! [290]

Preceding both is an even more puzzling appeal from Hawthorne: "Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!" [285]. One could easily attribute the significance of such *crisis de coeur* to Hawthorne's desire to remain faithful to history, specifically to Puritan times which his first romance depicts. Critics who do so frequently acknowledge Hawthorne's critical attitude toward the values attested by his historical sources<sup>26</sup>. Conversely, Agnes McNeill Donohue, in her recent book on Hawthorne, suggests that Hawthorne assimilated his native Calvinism, but his inability to confront this fact results in the ironic quality of his inherently pessimistic, damnatory vision. In her opinion, Dimmesdale and Hester, "as nineteenth-century Adam and Eve, are able to escape the pain of postlapsarian existence only by death and damnation", and the ending of the book testifies that Hawthorne dreamt "vainly" of innocence<sup>27</sup>. This interpretation is persuasive as far as it goes. However, a look ahead to Hawthorne's later heroines reveals that the woman as "angel and apostle" enters his subsequent romances, specifically, Phoebe in *The House of the Seven Gables* and Hilda in *The Marble Faun*, both books which, significantly, end with marriage. We can thus assume that the idea voiced in the final sections of *The Scarlet Letter* anticipates the concept that several contemporary existentialists

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, E. W. Baughman, *Public Confession and »The Scarlet Letter«*, [in:] "The New England Quarterly", Vol. XL, No. 4, December 1967, p. 532-550.

<sup>27</sup> A. McNeill Donohue, *Hawthorne. Calvin's Ironic Stepchild*, The Kent State University Press, Kent 1985, p. 67.

have termed "intersubjectivity". In fact, some Hawthorne critics have recognized the fact that his romances close with this idea but so far have not discussed its religious dimension<sup>28</sup>. This problem, so crucial for Hawthorne, lies beyond the scope of this paper<sup>29</sup>.

Hawthorne had no doubt as to the essential loneliness of individuals. All of his major characters, without a single exception, are fundamentally isolated. But the pessimism of Hawthorne's conviction is counterbalanced by the assertion of a possibility that two lonely persons, a man and a woman, can discover each other and out of the existential solitude they can create a new world.

*The Scarlet Letter* ends with the heraldic symbol "ON A FIELD, SABLE, THE LETTER A, GULES" as an inscription on Hester and Dimmesdale's collective grave. This final touch is reminiscent of Kierkegaard's statement that on his tombstone he would prefer to have engraved only one word - THE INDIVIDUAL. And although Hawthorne makes it very clear that the future belongs to another woman, Hester remains in the reader's memory precisely that - THE INDIVIDUAL.

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<sup>28</sup> Dryden (*op. cit.*, p. 83-107) distinguishes between "the enchantment of distance", where the relationship with an other is Sartrean and is characterized by conflict and "the enchantment of love", where the relationship is of an I-Thou nature. The religious dimension which Dryden sees in Hawthorne is that "his fictional characters[...] often see the person they love as gods and goddesses and attribute to them divine powers". Thus, even though he, in fact, borrows Martin Buber's attribute (I-Thou), his study of the theme of love in Hawthorne's fiction is not prompted by Buber's idea that God can be reached through communion with another person, providing we approach her/him as a Thou and not an It.

<sup>29</sup> I discuss this problem in a book *Plight in Common: Hawthorne and Percy*, Peter Lang, New York 1993.

## Elżbieta Oleksy

## PATOS EGZYSTENCJI KIERKEGAARDA I SZKARŁATNA LITERA HAWTHORNE'A

Choć nie można dowodzić bezpośredniego wpływu Kierkegaarda na Hawthorne'a, wizja indywidualnej, ludzkiej egzystencji w ujęciu tych dwóch, mniej więcej współczesnych sobie pisarzy wykazuje zaskakujące zbieżności. Kierkegaardowskie kategorie egzystencji stanowią układ odniesienia, w którym mieszczą się losy bohaterów pierwszej powieści Hawthorne'a. Zastosowanie kategorii Kierkegaarda do analizy *Szkarłatnej litery* oświetla relacje między postaciami powieści i pozwala lepiej zrozumieć ich indywidualną ewolucję.

Rola Pearl względem pozostałych postaci, zwłaszcza względem Dimmesdale'a i Hester jest przede wszystkim symboliczna. Pearl prowadzi swoich rodziców, szczególnie Hester, poprzez cierpienie i ból do autentycznej egzystencji. Rozwój Chillingwótha nie wykracza poza stadium estetyczne. Natomiast Dimmesdale przechodzi od poziomu estetycznego do etycznego, chociaż nie wchodzi w stadium religijne, ponieważ nie dokonuje się w nim Kierkegaardowski "skok wiary". Przyjmując odpowiedzialność i osiągając autentyczność umiera w rozpacz. Najdalej w swoim rozwoju idzie Hester przechodząc wszystkie stadia egzystencji i osiągając nie tylko pełnię indywidualności, ale i oparty na wierze, transcendentny wymiar egzystencji.