

*A Note Absolute:***Stereotypes and Synecdoches of The Past, in the Four-Lane Narrative****Highway of Hawthorne, James, Morrison and Mukherjee**

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**Key words:** Hawthorne, James, Morrison, Mukherjee, Stereotypes, *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Ambassadors*, *Beloved*, *The Holder of The World*.

**Palabras Clave:** Hawthorne, James, Morrison, Mukherjee, Estereotipos, *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Ambassadors*, *Beloved*, *The Holder of The World*.

A vivid scarlet-red thread extends from Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) through James' *The Ambassadors* (1903), Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Mukherjee's *The Holder of The World* (1993). The scarlet A, Hester Prynne's oppressive synecdochal sign of the past that becomes a multivalent and pluralist symbol, is retraced in James' formulation of a "note absolute",<sup>i</sup> Morrison's development of *Beloved* to the point where her "footprints" fit anyone's feet,<sup>ii</sup> and Mukherjee's emphasis on the "four-lane highway" that passes through Hannah's life.<sup>iii</sup> The influence of Hawthorne on James is observed by critics and James himself, Mukherjee's rewriting of *The Scarlet Letter* has been discussed by Judie Newman in "Spaces In-Between: Hester Prynne as the Salem Bibi", and the connection between Hawthorne and Morrison is gestured at by Avery Gordon in *Ghostly Matters* and extended by Emily Budick in *Engendering the Romance*. But there has been no critical exploration of how Hawthorne's attitude towards the past and its representation, as expressed through his scarlet A, is taken up and restitched into

comparable philosophies of history by these particular literary descendants. In fact the three twentieth century novels form, together with their master text, a “four-lane highway” (to borrow Mukherjee’s image) that runs toward something resembling the “great head” of Melville’s whale that assumes “different aspects, according to your point of view”.<sup>iv</sup>

The first and central aspect is of course Hawthorne’s, and the four-lane novelistic philosophy of history is built outwards from his central artery. This artery, the red thread, runs out of a prison: opening *The Scarlet Letter* and standing on the “threshold of our narrative” we encounter a prison door, and in its “ponderous” rusty iron-work we notice a pre-figuration of Hester’s scarlet letter.<sup>v</sup> Decoratively shaped like the letter and similarly colored, the ironwork on the door that opens into the novel proper raises the question of whether the scarlet of the letter is to be associated with rust as well as red roses, and so with decay and imprisonment. Indeed, Hester’s scarlet letter is perhaps a scar from her oppressive marriage to the ancient Chillingworth as well as a mark of sin from her union with Dimmesdale: Chillingworth notes that he “betrayed” Hester’s “budding youth into a false and unnatural relation with [his] decay” (p.53), and the contrast between her “youth” and his “decay” echoes the “rust on the ponderous iron-work [that] looked more antique than anything in the new world” and “seemed never to have know a youthful era” (p.36). We know too that Hester’s “false and unnatural relation with... decay” extends beyond her marriage to Chillingworth, for she is unable to borrow anything from the future to “help her through the present grief” (p.55) and knows that “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... with the same burden”. She is trapped in the past, her

existence a prison-door branded by “decay” and its own “ponderous” rusty ironwork: the scarlet token.

Hester’s imprisonment by the past is perhaps also of her own making, as the particular design of the scarlet token of course is. When she stands upon the scaffold her memory of early life seems a blessed escape from the present moment but this compulsive remembering is actually part of a displacement-of-the-present process: she doesn’t feel her torture and so must feel instead “the pang that rankles after it” (p.40). Her memory is so violently powerful that it even seems to conjure reality in an oppressive *Macbeth*-like manner: she remembers the man with the left shoulder higher than the other and then spots him (pp.43-4)! And so she sets herself up to be tortured by the past in the future, for in embracing memory and the distant past at this moment on the scaffold when a confrontation with the present would begin a movement onto the next few letters of the alphabet, so to speak, and deny the branding of the scarlet A, Hester lets the A stand for adulteress and so is trapped for the past. True to this displacement-of-the-present process, she then chooses to not make a new life in a different town or country, instead haunting the place where a “great and marked event has given color to [her] lifetime” (p.56): the words “marked” and “color” remind us of the scarlet color in her life that has marked her an outcast.

Her eventual attempt to leave the past behind comes too late. In the forest she has a brief sense that “the past is gone” and undoes the “clasp that fastened the scarlet letter” in an attempt to also “undo it all, and make it as it had never been” (p.137), but this is immediately undermined by the narrator’s mention of her beauty that floods back “from what men call the irrevocable *past*” (p.138, my emphasis). Like the river choked by

branches and leaves (p.127), the onward movement of time has been stopped by the presence of the past that blocks its free flow, and so “the melancholy brook would add this other tale to the mystery with which its little heart was already overburdened, and whereof it still kept up a murmuring babble, with not a whit more cheerfulness of tone than for ages heretofore” (p.145). The symbolism of the tree on which Hester and Dimmesdale sit in is unmistakable: it was overthrown by a blast long ago and is covered in moss, and they, ghosts, each “awe-stricken at the other ghost” (p.129), ruined by the blast of their sin and Hester’s punishment, also have “earth’s heaviest burden on them” (p.145), ‘earth’ meaning both ‘the world’ and ‘dirt and moss’. She must return the scarlet badge to her breast because she has allowed the past, represented by the badge, to be her whole identity. “Giving up her individuality” (p.55) she allowed “all the light and graceful foliage of her character” to be “withered up by this red-hot brand” so that it “had long ago fallen away, leaving a bare, harsh outline” (p.112) and cannot, even in the midst of the golden and green graceful foliage of the forest, be restored. She must remain “the general symbol at which the preacher and moralist might point... the figure, the body, the reality of sin”, her “only monument” in death “the infamy that she must carry” (pp.55-56). She is nothing more than her past and the scarlet letter.

It is interesting that the leaves in the forest turn golden as Hester, believing herself to be free of the past, throws away the scarlet letter, for the trees’ golden “leaves” are thus connected to the golden “leaf after leaf” of the book of life in ‘The Custom-House’. The narrator of ‘The Custom-House’ has a “home-feeling with the past” (p.9) but knows that human nature does not “flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations in the same worn-out soil” (p.10), and

observes that the men in the custom-house “ought to have given place to younger men” who wouldn’t tell the “several thousandth repetition of old sea-stories” (p.12). He wishes he had written about the present instead of the past, for “leaf after leaf” in the real world was “*presenting* itself to me” (p.29, my emphasis). If he could have written down “the reality of the flitting hour” the “letters would turn to gold upon the page”, and these gold letters of the “present” of course contrast the scarlet letter, which itself signifies the rusty and imprisoning past and imposes a determinacy that blocks all view of the present and future and halts the “flitting hour”. Instead of the golden present hour the narrator turns to the “worn-out soil” of the past and the “heavy burden” of earth and soil that buries Hester and Dimmesdale, and their blasted tree.

So the scarlet letter as symbol of past event chokes the present, but it also distracts from the past itself. The narrator discovers the embroidered red badge and cannot look away: “My eyes fastened themselves upon the old scarlet letter, and would not be turned aside. Certainly there was some deep meaning in it, most worthy of interpretation, and which, as it were, streamed forth from the mystic symbol, subtly communicating itself to my sensibilities, but evading the analysis of my mind.” (pp.24-5). Thus distracted he ignores the papers that would solve the mystery: “In the absorbing contemplation of the scarlet letter, I had hitherto neglected to examine a small roll of dingy paper, around which it had been twisted” (p.29). He neglects the ‘usable past’ because of a distracting and shallow representation of the past: the letter is an historical red herring in a library archive. This moment is the equivalent of Hester’s glance in the mirror where she sees a distorted version of herself behind a scarlet letter “represented in exaggerated and gigantic proportions, so as to be greatly the most prominent feature of her appearance”,

so that “she seemed absolutely hidden behind it” (p.73): again we are reminded that sign reduces signifier so that all of Hester’s identity is represented by her synecdochal badge and she is “hidden behind” nothing more than a “bare, harsh outline” (p.112).

The connection between ‘The Custom-House’ and the novel proper is made again in chapter two when the scarlet letter is described (“fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes”), before anything of Hester’s appearance is noted (“The young woman was tall... [etc]”). The letter is “the point which drew all eyes” (p.48), and, thus focused, the gaze of the reader is directed away from the real ‘scarlet letter’ and signifier, the baby. It is chapter six before this is remedied (“We have as yet hardly spoken of the infant”, p.81). With gaze fixed on the scarlet letter, the crowd misses the glance that passes between Hester and Dimmesdale (she looked “into the deep and troubled eyes of the younger clergyman”, p.61), and the gesture of Dimmesdale when Hester refuses to reveal the name of the baby’s father (he falls back from the balcony with his hand on his heart), that might have revealed the secret of the scarlet token, just as the narrator nearly misses the “small roll of dingy paper” in ‘The Custom-House’. Again, the scarlet letter is a red herring. It stands for a whole situation, event, conviction and punishment, and as synecdoche reduces, distracts and conceals. All of Hester is apparently represented by the scarlet A, and so much of her is lost to view. She is a symbol, “the figure, the body, the reality of sin”, and so the whole truth of the past cannot be seen by the townsfolk.

The scarlet letter ceases to be synecdoche and red herring at the end of the novel when, instead of one part standing for a whole, many parts complicate any suggestion of a coherent whole. The scarlet A had been “fixed... in very undesirable distinctness” and

its “deep print” must now be “erase[d]” (p.174), observes the narrator. The “red stigmata” (p.172) on Dimmesdale’s breast, the “great red letter in the sky” that is interpreted to mean “Angel” (p.109), and the eel-grass letter A fashioned by Pearl (p.121) are three more letters, and so a multiplicity of sorts appears. Indeed, the letter in the sky has “no such shape as... imagination gave it”, “so little definiteness, that another’s guilt might have seen another symbol in it” (p.107): it assumes Melvillian “different aspects, according to your point of view”. Eventually the original scarlet letter is no longer a token of sin but of Hester’s “many good deeds” (p.111), and “many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification”, saying instead that “it meant Able” (p.110). There is even a hint in the penultimate paragraph that it might stand for “angel” or “apostle” (p.177).

The scarlet letter begins as a “note absolute”, an oppressive synecdoche of the past and Hester’s being, but becomes a symbol of pluralism and imagination. This is the note of the ‘Conclusion’, where a sudden new style of history, composed of many perspectives is introduced and the reader is offered “more than one account”, “various explanations”, and asked to “choose among these theories” (p.174-5). We are asked to write our own history, to move beyond the given letter, from A to the rest of the alphabet perhaps! Imagination becomes important, for the place where the two worlds of past and present might come together is “somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet and... ghosts may enter... without affrighting us” (p.28). Somewhere between limited public and official representation of their beings and inner multiplicity is a comfortable place for ghosts like Hester and Beloved, a place we might discover “a form, beloved but gone hence” (p.28). Ghosts become fairies, fantasy

and imagination, and the past and present co-exist harmoniously, when we break with determinism and the providential style of history that was the reigning mode of Hawthorne's day (Bancroft, Parkman, etc). Warned that we mustn't linger too long in any one place (p.11), like the fatherless, a-historical Pearl we must put down roots in fresh soil.

James explores the difference between the scarlet letter as synecdochal prison-chain to the past and as pluralist symbol of multiple connotation and possibility in *The Ambassadors*, his novel of "notes absolute". The scene with little Bilham in Gloriani's garden is, according to James, the "whole case, in fine" of *The Ambassadors* (*Preface*, p.1). It is the "germ" of the "whole" (p.2); the "independent particle" that explains the "mass" (p.1). The observation upon which the scene was based "contained part of the 'note'", James writes, "that I was to recognize on the spot as to my purpose – had contained in fact the greater part; the rest was in the place and the time and the scene they sketched: these constituents clustered and combined to give me further support, to give me what I call the note absolute" (p.2). The novel takes up this idea of 'note absolute', and proceeds through a device of synecdoche, sounding as it frequently does the 'note', rather than the whole tune, of things. Indeed it is when faced with a "tune" (p.288), and the idea that "everything has come as a sort of indistinguishable part of everything else" (p.279), that Mrs Pocock brings the situation to a crisis. The "note absolute" creates types and synecdochal representations of whole complex characters, in the manner of Hester's scarlet badge.

Strether often feels set apart from reality by his own self-imposed 'notes absolute' and attention to types, as Hester does by her scarlet letter. The narrative of *The Scarlet*



*Letter* begins after the main events of love-affair, sex, pregnancy, arrest, and birth, and so Hawthorne's novel feels almost like an anti-history: it tells of the gray area of history, the aftermath of important occurrences. Mukherjee, whose narrator is a historian living through the past (and actually in the past for a few moments), and Morrison, whose characters live with a ghost in the shadow of a great event in the past, are sensitive to the anti-historical nature of Hawthorne's novel, and James also takes up this theme by having Lambert Strether exist on the outskirts of the drama. He is the man behind the scenes of the drama of others just as Hester is the woman in the shadow of her own past drama. His "life... for other people" (p.160) echoes Hester Prynne's life for her past and the "spot where some great and marked event has given the color to [her] lifetime" (*The Scarlet Letter*, p.56). He has, like Hester, an "empty present" but a "crowded past" (p.61), but when he meets Miss Gostrey feels himself "launched in something of which the sense would be quite disconnected from the sense of his past" (p.20). She will "cost" him his "past – in one great lump" (p.40), and instead of living on memories like Hester, he lives through others.

He observes others' "scenes of doings" (p.82) rather than a procession of the past. The ultimate novel-reader and historian, he has "a little supersensual hour in the vicarious freedom of another" (*Notebook entry*, p.376), observing to Miss Barrace: "he thinks, you know, that *I've* a life of my own. And I haven't... I seem to have a life only for other people" (p.160), which makes his thoughts about the new Chad farcical: "You could deal with a man as himself – you couldn't deal with him as somebody else" (p.90). Miss Barrace even abandons "the stage itself, that she might stand a minute behind the scenes with Strether" (p.264). We are reminded of James' line in *French Poets and*

*Novelists* on the “the success of a work of art”, which can be measured by “the degree to which it produces a certain illusion; that illusion makes it appear to us for the time that we have lived another life - that we have had a miraculous enlargement of experience” (p. 242). Strether lives “another life” through the artifice and drama created by Chad and Madame de Vionnet, and Miss Barrace can only be indulging his wishful thinking when she insists he is “the hero of the drama” (p.267) (the narrator’s immediately preceding reference to “poor Strether” perhaps establishes the irony of Miss Barrace’s statement).

Just as Hester’s identity is reduced by synecdoche and becomes the scarlet letter, similarly Strether is distinguished by “the green cover” (p.55) of the *Review*. His name upon it becomes his “one presentable little scrap of an identity” (p.51): “he was Lambert Strether because he was on the cover, whereas it should have been... that he was on the cover because he was Lambert Strether” (p.62). At another point he holds his identity before him, his “personal pasteboard a little stiffly retained between forefinger and thumb” (p.22), the represented self of Strether. But he is not the only character in the novel whose identity is sometimes reduced to a representation or type, and this is where James extends Hawthorne’s scarlet thread even further. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne is the only character whose whole is represented by a part (the scarlet badge), but the society in *The Ambassadors*, as might be expected from the title (an ambassador being a synecdochal representation of a country) is rife with partial representations – with scarlet letters, so to speak. James takes up Hawthorne’s theme of a letter, symbol, sign or “note” signifying a full reality, of a person and their past, and expands it out so that it relates to a whole society (that “draught of Europe” p.18), and even the structure of the novel itself, as is evident by his elaboration on the “note absolute” in the Preface, and by

in the novel's opening, which is the whole of the work in miniature, and so a 'note absolute': the delays of the first chapter – where he postpones meeting Waymarsh, then has a moment's delay in placing Miss Gostrey (“for a moment they stood confronted; then the moment placed her”, p.18) and doesn't realize “until after he had spoken... how much there had been in him of response” (p.19) - all anticipate the ultimate delay in his realization of the true state of affairs between Chad and Madame de Vionnet. Similarly his “double consciousness” (p.18) in the opening few paragraphs, and his strong memory of himself walking the same streets at the age of twenty-five, can be extrapolated out to anticipate his observations of Chad and Madame de Vionnet, that are so full but also so blinkered, as though two different people, one intelligent and subtle, and the other blind and slow, live in the figure of Lambert Strether.

The narrator and characters are aware of the power of 'notes' to represent the whole tune: Strether doesn't want Waymarsh to be the “first 'note' of Europe” (p.17); Strether and Maria talk about the possibility of a 'false note', with reference to the article produced at Woollett (p.48); the “predominant note” (p.29) of Waymarsh is that he is “almost willfully uncomfortable”; Miss Barrace has “the note of a 'trap'” (p.77); Mrs Pocock sounds the “note of home”, and Jim is the “note of home” (p.247); Strether knows, after meeting Chad in Paris for the first time, that “the note has been so strongly struck during that first half-hour that everything happening since was comparatively a minor development” (p.89).<sup>vi</sup> In fact, part of Strether's education in Paris is to learn how to recognize types (how to attach a scarlet letter to each individual), for “in the light of Paris one sees what things resemble” (p.126) – what things might be, or should be, or can be in representation, but not necessarily what they are. The action in which he is engaged

is repeatedly described as a drama, a stage-play – a “world of types.... in which the figures and faces in the stalls were interchangeable with those on the stage” (p.43), and his teacher is Miss Gostrey, the “general guide” (p.26) and “friend” to the “reader”, as James puts it in the Preface (p.12), who knows “everything” (p.41), picks up all the “dropped threads” (p.36) and is obsessed with peoples’ types – here James puns on “type”: “she pigeon-holed her fellow mortals with a hand as free as that of a compositor scattering type” (p.21), to the degree that the whole of America is “composed” only “of the men and women individually on her shoulders” (p.26).

From Miss Gostrey Strether learns a “hollow trick, one of the specious arts of make-believe” (p.196), so that it becomes “the way of nine tenths of his current impressions to act as recalls of things imagined” (p.174) and populate the novel with types, most notably the “charming young widow” with the five-year old daughter (p.116). Similarly, Mrs. Newsome has imagined the evil woman-of-the-streets with whom Chad is supposedly in love, just as the community around Hester Prynne sketch her as the whore of Babylon and Pearl as an evil sprite, and is disturbed when the complex Madame de Vionnet doesn’t “‘suit’ her book” (p.301). In addition, the business to which she wants Chad to return, is “*un monde*” (p.341), a whole world of representation, scarlet symbols, and ‘notes absolute’, and Mrs. Newsome is herself rather like this “great new force” of advertising (p.341), that represents but is not itself the article produced. Indeed, she is a major example of synecdoche in the novel, for James intended her to be “no less intensely than circuitously present through the whole thing, should be no less felt as to be reckoned with than the most direct exhibition” (*Preface*, pp.9-10). She is present through her daughter, or the other characters’ ever-present awareness of her desires, or even

through her handwriting, which, with its “sharp downstrokes... stood for a probable absoluteness in any decree of the writer”, so that Strether looks at the address on the envelope “as if he had been looking hard into [Mrs Newsome’s] face”, and “it was in a manner as if [she] were... in the room” (p.248). She is as hidden behind these partial representations of herself as Madame de Vionnet is by the fantasies the other characters weave around her and as Hester is by the scarlet letter.

Eventually when, for example, the important conversation between Sarah and Strether is only represented and not shown in full (we are told that “however it at last got itself named, and when once that had happened they were quite at the center of their situation”, p.277, the irony being that ‘it’ is not named within the text), we realize that synecdochal representation, ‘notes absolute’, types and “general symbol[s]” (*The Scarlet Letter*, p.55), are as limited in *The Ambassadors* as in *The Scarlet Letter*. The novel traces a process of learning to discriminate and select representative details, but at the crucial moment the details of this climactic conversation, and so the details that matter, are omitted. In the Preface James notes that “the actual man’s note, from the first of our seeing it struck, is the note of discrimination, just as his drama is to become, under stress, the drama of discrimination” (p.7), and accordingly, at Gloriani’s home, Strether has “the sense of names in the air, of ghosts at the windows, of signs and tokens, a whole range of expression, all about him, too thick for prompt discrimination” (p.120). We see that his challenge in Paris was to discriminate and select, see signs, tokens and scarlet letters, read the names “in the air” and notice ghosts trapped by the past, like Hester, Dimmesdale or Beloved. He does all of this (albeit not ‘promptly’), only to discover that he missed – as he misses the play at the Francais (“he couldn’t when the curtain fell have

given the slightest account of what had happened”, p.91) – the real action, so raising the question of the value of such “discrimination”.

James’ discussion in the preface to *The Spoils of Poynton* of life as “all inclusion and confusion”, and art as “all *discrimination* and selection” (my emphasis), reminds us that novels and history are selective representations – “germs” - of the whole, but we also know that James’ famous interest in presenting an “air of reality”, his preference for ambiguity and uncertainty, for the “vague historic dusk” (*Italian Hours*, p.346) complicates this dichotomy. A writer who appreciated Stonehenge for the sense it gave him of “the pathless vaults beneath the vaults of history”, for the suggestion that one cannot “soon get to the bottom of things” (*English Hours*, p.72), is likely critical of Strether’s attempt to get to “the bottom of things”. Strether discriminates but knows nothing, for “there were too many clues then that [he] still lacked... he had grown used by this time to reminders, especially from his own lips, of what he didn’t know” (p.102). Busy discriminating and selecting, “there were ‘movements’ he was too late for... There were sequences he had missed and great gaps in the procession” (p.64).

His and our knowledge grows (and “his productive power faltered in proportion as his knowledge grew”, p.84), but not enough to make him see the true relationship between Chad and Madame de Vionnet or let us hear his conversation with Sarah. Initially his discrimination reminds us of T.B. Macaulay’s statement that: “no history can present us with the whole truth... He who is deficient in the art of selection may, by showing nothing but the truth, produce all the effect of the grossest falsehood... An outline scrawled with a pen, which seizes the marked features of a countenance, will give a much stronger idea of it than a bad painting in oils”.<sup>vii</sup> Strether learns to recognize

“marked features” but in his case this is also a recognition of type and not real human dynamics, and so he scrawls a “note absolute”, an outline less positive than Macaulay’s and more like the “bare, harsh outline” (*The Scarlet Letter*, p.112) that destroys the multiple shades and possibilities of Hester’s life, including her counterfactual existence as Ann Hutchinson (p.113).

Madame de Vionnet’s suggestion that others might “know” about Paris but they “know perhaps different things” (p.220), and the acknowledgement of “great gaps in the procession” put together by Strether (p.64), are the closest the novel comes to forming an alternative to “the note absolute”, and so to a Hawthornian shift away from deterministic scarlet synecdoche towards a pluralist symbol. James notices the shift, imitates and criticizes the “note absolute” of the scarlet badge and Strether’s “drama of discrimination”, but only hints in this novel at the multiplicity behind the “general symbol” (*The Scarlet Letter*, p.55) and the “pigeon-hole” (*The Ambassadors*, p.21). His lane in the “four-lane highway” takes Hawthorne’s scarlet thread further in the direction of absolutist synecdochal representation, but Morrison’s lane balances this out by moving in the other direction, firmly towards multi-valence with an emphasis on the “great gaps in the procession” and the knowledge of “different things” (*The Ambassadors*, pp.64, 220). Beloved’s monologue, with its missing punctuation and spaces between words, is the representation and result of Strether’s impulse to romanticize, Miss Gostrey’s ability to pigeon-hole people, and the reduction of Hester Prynne to a scarlet symbol, for Beloved has come from a timeless place, the foggy Hester-land of symbol and romance, and Denver is only able to “hold” her, with her hair like fishes, in a net of stories about the past: the gaps in the netting that are not large enough for captured fish to slip through

may represent, amongst other things, an insufficient (gappy) narrative that is yet pervasive enough to trap the past in the present.

But *Beloved*'s gappy monologue is also a deliberate fragmentation in resistance to such "notes absolute" and foggy romantic histories of slavery. In writing *Beloved* Morrison's project was perhaps an extension to that of *The Black Book* (1974), through which she countered the romanticization of black history by the Black Power movement and corrected sentimental interpretations of slave history. Certainly the novel's ironic depiction of Edward Bodwin, the abolitionist, is a dig at the revisionist histories of white abolitionists, and interviews with Morrison about the novel shortly after its publication also reveal her historiographical agenda: in one interview she described America as "the land where the past is always erased", a country with an "innocent future", where "immigrants can come and start over, where the slate is clean", then noting of the American historical imagination that "the past is absent or it is romanticized. The culture doesn't encourage dwelling on, let alone coming to terms with, the truth about the past". In revising history herself, with *Beloved*, she grappled with this cultural impulse and offered a serious alternative: a patchwork history with the emphasis on multiple parts rather than a part as the whole. The novel gives voice to the unspoken, the secret hopes for how things might have been different. It listens "for the holes – the things the fugitives did not say; the questions they did not ask...for the unnamed, unmentioned people left behind" (pp.92-3): the marginalized stories and the might-have-beens behind the all-encompassing scarlet master narratives.

It offers in *Beloved* a multivalent scarlet letter. Avery Gordon points out that "all of the characters in the novel weave their pleasures, pains, losses and desires into the



embellished crevices of Beloved's words and unspeakable biography",<sup>viii</sup> and we see that by the end of her novel, though her empty dress left hanging is a mere outline its owner, empty and without substance, like the types created by the ignorant Strether and the "bare, harsh outline" of Hester (*The Scarlet Letter*, p.112), Beloved's footprints also remain. These mini-outlines of her are all things to all people, like the letter in the sky and the metamorphosed scarlet badge on Hester's breast: "Her footprints come and go, come and go. They are so familiar. Should a child, an adult, place his feet in them, they will fit. Take them out and they will disappear again as though nobody ever walked there" (p.275). Everyone's feet fit her footprints, and in her the revisionist historian finds the feet that disappeared into the crevices of 'official' history. Like Hester, Sethe suffers when "past errors tak[e] possession of the present" (p.56), and like Hester she is eventually set free: the scarlet A limits Hester's identity to 'adulteress' and the inscription on Beloved's headstone represents and traps her identity as murdered 'beloved' baby for a long time, but Beloved becomes, like the scarlet letter, a great pluralist symbol.

These footprints that fit anyone, and the suggestion that historical evidence and the past can mean different things to different people, relate to Morrison's representation of multivocal history. She carries out this kind of history, the history of a different footprint for every person, through the inclusion of multiple voices and perspectives within the novel, and plays out the search for alternatives to the "note absolute" and master narrative in the novel's plot. Sethe's attack on Edward Bodwin is the living out of the revisionist counterfactual in order to put the past in the past, and is similar to Dimmesdale's embrace of a counterfactual when he confesses on the scaffold after failing to do just that when given the chance at the beginning of the novel: a counterfactual

second-chance that Hester only experiences when her scarlet badge comes to have other meanings than ‘Adulteress’. History is apparently repeating itself in *Beloved*, for the novel repeats the lines from Sethe’s memory of the first time she thought the slaveholders were arriving to take her ‘best thing’: pages 163 and 262 have an exact repetition of the lines about ‘wings’ and ‘hummingbirds’. And yet Sethe behaves differently this time. Instead of trying to kill Beloved again, she attacks the enemy: Paul D’s sense of counterfactuals, his insistence that “there must have been another way”, had clashed with Sethe’s “it is my job to know what is” (p.165), but is now played out. It is as though Time had been traumatized and had stopped, now starting again, indicating a faith in the multiple possibilities of outcome and the ability to escape the scarlet letter in one’s past.

The traumatization of time, the result of the Sethe’s murder of Beloved or of slavery more generally, is the cause of the fragmentation of reality apparent throughout the novel and communicated through its narrative style. Morrison insists upon an alternative vision of history and so the novel resists Western progressive narrative. It offers an interrupted, dislocated narrative that echoes in its form the interruption of the crawling already? baby’s life by slavery and the interruption of real spiritual and rational American progress by the same. This locates the novel alongside *Macbeth* and also Martin Amis’ *Time’s Arrow*, as well as *The Scarlet Letter*, for all four explore related disruptions of the progress of time by atrocity or trauma. As in *Macbeth* a murderous past haunts the characters – in this sense Beloved in Toni Morrison’s Banquo! – and destroys linear time. There is instead a movement of repetition with variation throughout the novel: Sethe experiences, then experiences the memory, then the rememory, and repeats ‘Me? Me’ at the close of the novel, so ending it on a repetition. It is worth noting that

'Bluestone Road' can be read as 'Blues Tone', so suggesting the repeating riff of Blues. Equally important to note is that '124' has a gap: it is a patchwork of related numbers and not wholly linear (moving from 1 to 4 but missing out 3, the third child, Beloved), and so, though Paul D. yearns for the "right order" (p.273) and discusses the difference between "tomorrow" and "yesterday", he ends up wanting to put his story "next to [Sethe's]" and create juxtaposition and patchwork rather than linearity or arc.

The politics of Morrison's non-linear form is to point out that history cannot be a story if there can be no cause and effect, no understanding of how and why. Slavery has no how and why, no justification, and cannot be narrated in a linear way. To unite all the different stories would be to give it a narrative and make it reasonable. There is a harmony to narrative, and an implication of continuity between past and present. Hester's story was more intricate than a simple tale of adultery, deserving of a "curiously" embroidered badge rather than a "rag of... rheumatic flannel" (p.40), intricate enough that the complicated "foliage of her character" is withered by the letter into a "bare, harsh outline" (p.112) (no cherry blossom on her chokecherry tree!) Hester must wear but also reinterpret her badge, and she embroiders it just as Morrison's townsfolk embroider Beloved with "tales, shaped and decorated", and as Sethe aestheticizes her memories of Sweet Home and her scarred back with trees, for the latter's story must also be expressed in an intricate way. The double-meaning in the word 'pass' confirms that the story of Beloved and of slavery must be told, but in a different way each time, unique to every teller and hearer, for Beloved ("my sister", "my daughter", "mine") means something different to everyone, and, though she must not be passed by, she cannot be passed onto others in any coherent form: "It was not a story to pass on... It was not a story to pass

on... This is not a story to pass on". (pp.274-5), can be read as 'It is not a story to pass onto others but also 'It is not a story to pass by'. Denver's childhood deafness and then the return of her hearing because of the sound of the baby ghost show both the dangerous power of the past, about which she fears to hear, and its healing potential.

Morrison's non-linear form allows her characters to lose their place in Time. Like the "ghost-like" Hester (*The Scarlet Letter*, p.56), Sethe is "wrapped in a timeless present" (p.184), wondering "how she could hurry time along and get to the no-time waiting for her" at home (p.191), and preferring time to "stay put" (p.272). Beloved traps them all in the 'now' of the past, because for her "all of it is now it is always now there will never be a time when I am not crouching" (p.210). It is as though Sethe, whose milk and source of continuity for her babies was stolen, now faces the consequences of that theft: Beloved is starved, wants more and more of her mother, as though never properly nourished. The loss of her milk, symbolizing the worst of slavery for Sethe, broke the linear progression of mother to child. The ink that was also taken from Sethe symbolizes, as the theft of her milk does, the lack of possibility for self-narration and linear history. She makes the ink that writes the book that discusses her animal qualities, and this discussion forces the process of human evolution backwards.

In attempting to define Sethe by a list of qualities, whether human or animal, Schoolteacher's book also limits her identity in the manner of the scarlet letter: it implies that she is nothing more than the content of the list, just as Hester is nothing more than her badge. In addition, the ink is perhaps connected in some way to the newspaper article about Sethe's murder of her baby and the newspapers that observe and interpret throughout, stacked as they are in the shed where the 'crawling already? baby' is killed

and *Beloved* and Paul D. have sex. Indeed, both Schoolteacher's book and the newspapers are 'official history', master narratives after the fashion of the scarlet symbol on Hester's breast, and are without "power... to explain" (p.161): as unsatisfactory as the scarlet letter before it is reinterpreted by the townsfolk. And just as there is a counternarrative in Hawthorne's novel, consisting of reinterpretations of the reductive representation of Hester and her past, and of multiple 'A's, one of them green, another on the breast of someone else, a third interpreted to mean 'Angel', so *Beloved* offers a counternarrative to this official history. It offers, as well as shapeshifting footprints, "unspeakable thoughts, unspoken" (p.199): the four chapters that begin at page 200 are the "thoughts of the women of 124", the counternarrative to accompany the eventual playing out of the counterfactual.

So the novel is a collection of different counternarratives and "tobacco tins". A multivocal spiral history, Bakhtin's polyphonic idea, has replaced the linear monologue. Less important than a unified plot is the representation of many voices and stories and accordingly there is throughout a theme of parts versus the whole: Sethe's wedding dress is made by joining different pieces of cloth in a patchwork, Baby Suggs bathes Sethe part by part in order to heal her, and later Sethe wonders if Paul D. will "bathe her in sections" (p.272). Baby Suggs' speech in the clearing, calling on the people to love various of their body parts and dismembering their bodies with her speech in order to reveal the beauty of the individual parts (pp.88-89), is another suggestion that strength to be found through an attention to parts rather than the whole: through the rejection of previous simplified and teleological attempts to narrate the slave past. In addition, Sethe sees her children as "all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful" (p.163), Sixo knows that the

Thirty-Mile Woman gathers up “the pieces I am” (p.272), and, most importantly, *Beloved* herself has problems staying whole. She knows that she belongs in pieces: “It is difficult keeping her head on her neck, her legs attached to her hips when she is by herself... she could wake up any day and find herself in pieces” (p.133); and we read later “I am going to be in pieces... break into pieces” (p.212). Eventually she “erupts into her separate parts” (p.274) and everyone claims their own part, fits their feet into her footprints.

Official slave history, Schoolteacher’s book and the newspaper article, has gaps and so Morrison writes what it ignores. But she also creates jumps and gaps of her own between the different parts of her narrative, “holes” for “the things the fugitives did not say” (p.92), so that the past can flow through and not stagnate. Her narrative is the antithesis of Schoolteacher’s project of documentation and anthropology that reduces humanity to points on a list. These two examples of historical styles echo the Hawthornian shift from synecdoche to multi-valence, and prefigure the different styles of Mukherjee’s two historians in *The Holder of the World*, a novel that, as the fourth lane in the “four-lane highway”, also runs toward something like the “great head” of Melville’s whale that assumes “different aspects, according to your point of view”, toward pluralism and simultaneous counterfactualism, though it seems at first however that the two historians pull Hawthorne’s red-thread in different directions. Venn is focused on the accumulation of data, the “inclusion and confusion” of James’ preface to *The Spoils of Poynton* of life, and glimpses historic India as an sweeping, inclusive, generic picture-postcard scene. He worries that “the past presents itself to us, always, somehow simplified” and “wants to avoid that fatal unclutteredness” (p.6). Beigh, who from isolated miniatures (the ultimate “note absolute”!) and a collection of artifacts and

documents constructs an imaginative and personalized history, practices the “discrimination and selection” mentioned in James’ preface. But their combined effort brings about the opposite of James’ “note absolute”, and an echo of *Beloved*’s footprints that change to fit all feet and Hawthorne’s letter in the sky that has “no such shape as... imagination gave it”, “so little definiteness, that another’s guilt might have seen another symbol in it” (p.107): Beigh is able to choose her entrance into historic India, and receive a personalized narrative rather than a postcard scene or another random faucet-demonstration from amongst the “thousand variables” (p.7), because “every time-traveler will create a different reality... no two travelers will be able to retrieve the same reality” (p.6).

The sense of multiple and equally valid parallel universes, or simultaneous counterfactualism, is present throughout the novel, in part because of Mukherjee’s explicit rewriting of the “real story of the brave Salem mother and her illegitimate daughter” (p.284). *The Holder of the World* is an example of counterfactual narrative, another version of Hawthorne’s story. The names in the novel echo *The Scarlet Letter*’s symbolic aesthetic: Hannah *Easton* goes East, Rebecca *Walker* walks away from her child and her previous life, and both seem initially marked in their names by these single actions, as Hester Prynne is by the scarlet letter. There are numerous parallels between *The Scarlet Letter*’s Hester Prynne and Hannah Easton: for example, both stitch skilful and sensuous embroidery, and experience the vanishing and sudden return from the dead of their husbands. Similarly, Chillingworth might be reborn in Cephus Prynne and Dimmesdale in Hubert.

But counterfactualism trumps easy paralleling and any dependence on Hawthorne's model, for there are two characters named Hester within the novel, and connections made also between Hester Prynne and Rebecca: both are married to aged scholars, and are faced with separation from their daughters (although only Rebecca concedes), and escape into the forest with their lovers (in the case of Hester Prynne only briefly). If we are to read Rebecca as Hawthorne's Hester then we might also read Hannah as his Pearl – for she is 'precious-as-pearl', and, like Hawthorne's Pearl, escapes to England. A further complication of the otherwise simple comparison of novels is that Dimmesdale might also be located in Jadav Singh, who eventually offers Hannah the equivalent of that which Dimmesdale gives Hester Prynne: a space in his vicinity (a room in the palace, reminiscent of Hester's lonely house on the outskirts of town) but no intimacy or relationship.

An important counterfactual twist on Hawthorne's novel is the rewriting of the celebrated forest scene. In *The Holder of the World* Hannah walks through a similar setting, also surrounded by dead branches and moss, and, like Hester, loses her bonnet (pp.64-65). The loss of Hannah's bonnet even echoes the movement of the scarlet letter when it is thrown aside by Hester Prynne: both articles land by the water, but catch on clumps of weeds and so are not swept away. The scene that then follows in Mukherjee's novel can therefore be read as a counterfactual version of Hawthorne's scene: Hannah sees Hester's dead body, and we are reminded that Hester Prynne, in those moments with Dimmesdale in the forest, experienced both the death of her recent, oppressed self and so a liberation and healing, but also, when forced to reattach the scarlet letter, a strange death of her being. In reminding us, through this echoing device, of the small deaths that



Hester Prynne experiences in the forest, the novel asks who is left ‘after Hester’, and we realize that within *Hannah* is ‘Ann’: might the altered version of the forest scene, so that the dead body of a Hester takes center-stage, point us towards the emergence of a different type of woman – Ann Hutchinson - from Hawthorne’s forest, and, finally, a multiple identity for Hester Prynne to match her pluralistic scarlet badge?

The presence of multiple Hesters and Pearls in Mukherjee’s novel suggests that there are many different versions of one story: no “note absolute”, only shapeshifting footprints. The image of a ‘four-lane highway’ is another way of representing this type of historicism. Beigh notes that Hannah “was one of those extraordinary lives through which history runs a four-lane highway” (p.189), and this means firstly that she was important, and secondly that that her life was not an end and destination in of itself, but a connection of two other points, perhaps of past and future: indeed life eventually becomes meaningful when she feels no “consequence” and no “previous histories” (p.230) and breaks from the past so that she is not be connected to it by the highway of history. Thirdly, and most importantly however, it means that history runs in several parallel lanes through her life, so that several versions of the truth can be told, as it can by the four-lane narrative highway, or “four-part harmony” (*Beloved*, p.89), of Hawthorne, James, Morrison and Mukherjee.

This last novel is the only explicit rewriting of *The Scarlet Letter* but Hawthorne’s ghostly and familiar footprints are all over *The Ambassadors* and *Beloved* too. All four authors either anticipate or echo the warning of Pirandello’s character The Father, in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, who knows that: “it would be a dreadful injustice of other people to judge us only by this one action, as we dangle there, hanging in chains,

fixed for all eternity, as if the whole of one's personality were summed up in that single, interrupted action" (Act 1), a single action such as Hester's adultery, summed up by her scarlet letter, or Sethe's infanticide, summed up by the short newspaper article, both actions fixed for all eternity by the "note absolute" in something like Venn's freeze-framing of time: "frozen" like the unearthed "redworm" at the end of *Absalom, Absalom!*,<sup>ix</sup> a living story made dead myth through exposure. The warning is duly noted: Hawthorne's red-thread is woven with "fantastic flourishes of gold thread" (p.39), the gold of the "flitting hour", and when drawn through the needle of other writers it takes on "different aspects, according to your point of view" (*Moby-Dick*, p.265), weaving not one synecdochal action or characteristic but "a commonwealth":<sup>x</sup> a multilane highway of meaning.

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<sup>i</sup> Henry James, *The Ambassadors* (Norton Critical, 1994), p.2. All page references given in the text refer to this edition.

<sup>ii</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York, 1987), p. 275. All page references given in the text refer to this edition.

<sup>iii</sup> Bharati Mukherjee, *The Holder of the World* (New York, 1993), p.189. All page references given in the text refer to this edition.

<sup>iv</sup> Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (Norton Critical), p.265.

<sup>v</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (Norton Critical, 1961), p.35. All page references will be given in the text and refer to this edition.

<sup>vi</sup> 'Notes' recur again on pages 39, 104, 130, 131, 135, 174, 185, 221, 256, 261, 264, and 291.

<sup>vii</sup> T.B. Macaulay, *Critical and Historical Essays*, 1900, I, 244-5.

<sup>viii</sup> Avery F., Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis, 1997), p.140.

<sup>ix</sup> William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York, 1990), p.302.

<sup>x</sup> *Absalom, Absalom!*, p.7.

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