

## “THE CUSTOM-HOUSE” AS HAWTHORNE’S DRAMATIZATION OF HIS DILEMMA

*Hsiou-ling Lyu\**

“The Custom-House” sketch placed before *The Scarlet Letter* has been discussed from varied perspectives since the 50’s when scholars began to discern parallel themes, symbols, and situations between the sketch and the narrative proper. To some, it sets the moral standard, or the ironical tone to be presented in the narrative.<sup>1</sup> To others, it is Hawthorne’s confession of his secret, or a presentation of his creative process, or a journey to Hades, or a conversion to the idea of literature as self-expression, or a record of his struggle to relocate his creative energies, and so forth.<sup>2</sup> Recently Michael T. Gilmore’s study from the perspective of the marketplace has shed some new light on *The Scarlet Letter*. However, his discus-

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\* Lecturer, English Department, National Central University.

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- 1 Larzer Ziff argues that Hawthorne’s experiences in the Custom-House are more moral than aesthetic and the moral theory set in the sketch is realized in *The Scarlet Letter*. Marshall Van Deusen holds that the ironical tone set up in the “Custom-House” sketch is the key to the ambivalence in the main narrative.
- 2 Gordon Hutner holds that in the “Custom-House” sketch Hawthorne uses strategies to make a confession of his secrets which include an embarrassing political squabble that resulted in his dismissal from the Surveyorship of Salem. Paul John Eakin discerns in the sketch a dramatization of Hawthorne’s experience of the creative process. He holds that Hawthorne “moves inward as it were through a series of concentric circles, from setting to character to author, until he stands at last in the presence of his true subject, himself” (346-47). Carlanda Green stipulates that Hawthorne describes the Custom-House in terms reminiscent of the classical trip to the world of the dead. Nina Baym sees the sketch from the whole context of the shape of Hawthorne’s career and claims that it marks the turning point of the author from his commonsensical writing to romantic writing. And Dan McCall reads the sketch as Hawthorne’s reassimilation of creative energies.

sion of the prefatory sketch appears scanty. The present paper attempts to utilize Gilmore's perspective with some modification and explore Hawthorne's purpose of writing the sketch.

It is widely known that *The Scarlet Letter* was written at a time when Hawthorne was in great financial need and that he intended to write a book which could sell well. Gilmore stipulates that Hawthorne was at that time caught in the conflict between his predilection for being a gentlemanly writer and the necessity to become a professional writer:

Basically Hawthorne had two roles available to him as American man of letters in the mid-nineteenth century. He had the model of his own experience as a writer for a small coterie of admirers, a writer who enjoyed critical esteem as a truth-teller but who felt ashamed of his impoverishment. The alternative course, to follow the pen-and-ink men in appealing to the multitude, would presumably bring him fame and money but might require him to violate the integrity of his art. *The Scarlet Letter* is an attempt to come to terms with these apparently irreconcilable approaches toward writing for the marketplace. (72)

Later on Gilmore says that Hawthorne, temperamentally a shy man, seemed uncomfortable about confronting the scrutiny of an audience and yet realized that "he must try to make a favorable impression on [the public] to succeed as an author" (74-75). Another trait that distinguishes a gentlemanly writer from a professional writer which Gilmore does not mention is that a professional writer needs full dedication and concentration. And Hawthorne appears to have been hesitant about dedicating himself entirely to the vocation. In this context, the "Custom-House" sketch, which was originally written for a volume containing other tales besides *The Scarlet Letter*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Towards the end of the "Custom-House" sketch Hawthorne suggests that he intends to publish, along with *The Scarlet Letter*, several shorter tales and sketches, as he says: "Some of the briefer articles, which contribute to make up the volume, have likewise been written since my involuntary withdrawal from the toils and honors of public life . . ." (36).

appears as Hawthorne's examination and dramatization of his own progress from hesitation to decision, though a forced decision, to take up the vocation. Besides, the sketch also reveals Hawthorne's strategy for presenting himself to the reading public.

According to Bertha Faust's investigation, before the appearance of *The Scarlet Letter* "Hawthorne was one among a crowd of American writers." His tales were "read with appreciation by an isolated group, and, without any especial appreciation, by the subscribers to the magazines in which his tales appeared" (85). In other words, his excellent reputation lacked the emphasis supplied by popularity. The lack of popularity was partly due to his having published most of his tales anonymously.<sup>4</sup> Now in order to gain popularity he had to present himself to the public. However, his native reserve prevented him from making a straightforward revelation of himself. It is in the midst of this inner conflict that Hawthorne began the "Custom-House" sketch.

In the opening paragraph Hawthorne tries to justify his placing himself under public gaze. He addresses the question of the appropriate distance between the author and his audience. The very fact that he should address such a question attests to his discomfort in exposing himself publicly. His solution appears to be a strategy of revelation and concealment: the true relation with the audience can be maintained, he says, if we "prate of the circumstances that lie around us, and even of ourself, but still keep the inmost Me behind its veil" (7). The nature of this half-revealing and half-concealing autobiographical sketch is suggested in the immediately following paragraph.

He says that this "Custom-House" sketch "has a certain propriety, of a kind always recognized in literature, as explaining how a large portion of the following pages came into my

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<sup>4</sup> For the information about the publication of Hawthorne's earlier works see Faust 7-66.

possession, and as offering proofs of the authenticity of a narrative therein contained' (7). To proclaim that the sketch belongs to a literary tradition is to say expressly that part, if not all, of the sketch will be fictive. The significance of employing fiction in the sketch will be discussed later. It suffices to say at present that Hawthorne is telling the discerning readers that he is using a strategy. The "Custom-House" sketch is in one sense an experiment of this strategy. And while experimenting the strategy he examines the development of his consciousness of the vocation he has found relectant to take up.

The examination can be conveniently divided into four parts. The first part is his evocation of his Puritan ancestors; the second, his life in the Salem Custom-House and a portrait of the officers in it; the third, his fictive discovery of the manuscript left by a certain Surveyor Pue; and the fourth, his reflection upon his life in the Custom-House and his dismissal from the post he held there.

To begin with, in his evocation of his Puritan ancestors he intends to examine the hereditary burden which has a bearing on his choosing fiction writing as a profession. Critics discussing this part of the sketch usually hold that it manifest Hawthorne's dilemma between his Puritan conscience and predilection for imaginative literature.<sup>5</sup> Indeed Hawthorne is also concerned about the Puritan tradition of detesting imaginative literature, as he imagines his stern and black-browed ancestors grumbling about his work: "What is he?" "A writer of story-books! What kind of a business in life – what mode of glorifying God, or being serviceable to mankind in his day and generation, – may that be? Why, the degenerate fellow might as well have been a fiddler!" (12) But what is involved more specifically in this part is Hawthorne's dilemma to be either a gentlemanly writer or a professional writer. The matter of

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<sup>5</sup> For unambivalent reading of this part see Eakin 350-51 and Baym, "The Romantic *Malgré Lui*" 282. For ironical or ambivalent reading see Deusen 265.

profession is in his mind when he recalls the hereditary vocation of the Hawthorne family. Except for the first two American ancestors, both being legislators in the colonial days, in each generation of the family there was a ship-master:

From father to son, for above a hundred years, they followed the sea; a gray-headed ship-master, in each generation, retiring from the quarter-deck to the homestead, while a boy of fourteen took the hereditary place before the mast, confronting the salt spray and the gale, which had blustered against his sire and grandsire. The boy, also, in due time, passed from the fore-castle to the cabin, spent a tempestuous manhood, and returned from his world-wanderings, to grow old, and die, and mingle his dust with the natal earth. (12)

It must be a matter of course that Hawthorne was expected to take up the hereditary place. In any case, there would have been no problem if he could have remained in a government post and written as a gentlemanly author. In effect, during the three years in the Salem Custom-House, he did write some short pieces.<sup>6</sup> But to take up a writer's profession was certainly a rebellious action. In the sketch he expresses his strong will to keep up his writing: "Let [my ancestors] scorn me as they will, strong traits of their nature have intertwined themselves with mine" (12). However, his feeling of unbreakable connection with Salem, his "strange, indolent, unjoyous attachment" (13) for his native town that brought him to take up the post in the Custom-House, betrays him. He is telling the discerning readers: "I simply could not make up my mind!"

The portrait of the officers in the Custom-House has usually been regarded as a satire on the indolent and lifeless way of living of the civil servant. In effect, it is a strange combination of satire and admiration, of humorous disapproval

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<sup>6</sup> During the years in Salem Custom-House he wrote, besides "The Old Manse," only four pieces including "The Snow-Image," "Main-street," "The Great Stone Face," and "Ethan Brand." See Baym, *The Shape of Hawthorne's Career* 116.

and informative insight. Hawthorne's feeling on coming to the Custom-House is also a mixture of ambivalence. To come back to Salem was a "doom" on him (13), but it was also a chance arranged by Providence for him to "exercise other faculties of [his] nature" (23) than those drilled into him by his dreamy brethren of Brook Farm such as Emerson, Thoreau, Ellery Channing and George Stillman Hillard. The officers in the Custom-House were a patriarchal body of veterans. The caricature of the aged men in the department under his charge represents the lethargic atmosphere in the Custom-House. Most of the daily work of these old sea-captains was creeping about the wharves and loitering up and down the Custom-House steps. They also spent a good deal of time "asleep in their accustomed corners, with their chairs tilted back against the wall . . ." (15). Two or three of their numbers were gouty and rheumatic and never made appearance at the Custom-House during a large part of the year. But after their hibernation, they "could creep out into the warm sunshine of May or June, go lazily about what they termed duty, and, at their own leisure and convenience, betake themselves to bed again" (14). This is clearly a satirical representation of the lethargic life in the Custom-House. However, Hawthorne's description of the three characters he singles out from the officers appears to add a new meaning to his life as a surveyor. The old Inspector, the Collector and the Man of Business together offer him a sort of insight into his own situation at that time.

Most critics hold that the description of these three persons is meant to be a contrast to the following fictive episode of the discovery of Surveyor Pue's manuscript.<sup>7</sup> It is generally stipulated that Hawthorne deliberately presents these three men as wearisome eccentrics. I agree with Stouck in repudiating this commonly held view. But I do not agree that Haw-

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<sup>7</sup> Except for Stouck, all the other critics mentioned in Notes 1 and 2 hold this view.

thorne perceives in the three officers a "natural harmony" (Stouck 74). In effect, the three persons, each in his own way, informed Hawthorne of the secret of life he needed urgently at that moment, and the secret was devotion or concentration. Since each one's way of showing the secret is different from the two others, Hawthorne employs three different methods of presenting them.

For the Inspector, Hawthorne's approach is satirical because what characterizes the old man are the lowest and basic instincts of the human being. The old Inspector had attained a "rare perfection" of animal nature (17). He possessed only a few common-place instincts and a barely enough measure of intellect and spiritual ingredients to keep himself "from walking on all-fours" (17). He was tremendously robust and had survived three wives and most of his twenty childrens. The old man's advantage over the other animals is satirically said to be his ability to recollect the good dinners which had contributed to no small portion of the happiness of his life: "It was marvelous to observe how the ghosts of bygone meals were continually rising up before him; not in anger or retribution, but as if grateful for his former appreciation, and seeking to reduplicate an endless series of enjoyment, at once shadowy and sensual" (18). Hawthorne concludes that the old gentleman "had no soul, no heart, no mind; nothing . . . but instincts; and yet, withal, so cunningly had the few materials of his character been put together, that there was no painful perception of deficiency, but, on my part, an entire contentment with what I found in him" (17). My reading of this section is different from Stouck's opinion that Hawthorne "seems to envy the old man's spontaneity and easy acceptance of life" (274). I would rather argue that what Hawthorne envies is the old Inspector's remarkable capacity to concentrate on those few instincts to the exclusion of any other element of life be it good or evil. His final comment on the old man, though an ironical one, shows his amused admiration: "Most persons, owing to causes which I may not have space to hint at, suffer moral detriment from this peculiar mode of life. The old Inspector was incapa-

ble of it, and, were he to continue in office to the end of time, would be just as good as he was then, and sit down to dinner with just as good an appetite" (18).

While the Inspector is depicted satirically, the Collector, General Miller, is presented in an imaginative way. Hawthorne felt an imaginative sympathy with the old gentleman. He saw something profound and remarkable hidden under the old man's mild, kindly and unperturbed face. The old gentleman could sit gazing at the figures that came and went and his inner sphere of contemplation was slightly disturbed. But he was not dead inside, for "if his notice was sought, an expression of courtesy and interest gleamed out upon his features; proving that there was light within him . . ." (19). Without the slightest hint of irony, Hawthorne utters his respect and admiration for the old General: "Looking at the old warrior with affection . . . I could discern the main points of his portrait. It was marked with the noble and heroic qualities which showed it to be not by a mere accident, but of good right, that he had won a distinguished name" (19-20). Though the old gentleman lived mainly in his contemplation, Hawthorne felt that "he lived a more real life within his thoughts, than amid the inappropriate environment of the Collector's office" (21). The old general's inner world, as Hawthorne imagined it, consisted of recollections of his enterprises, moments of his past valor. Hawthorne perceived an unflagging energy to fight for a course under the old man's appearance of repose, of "weight, solidity, firmness" (20). He particularly mentioned one thing that much aided him in recreating the stalwart soldier, "the man of true and simple energy":

It was the recollection of those memorable words of his, —  
 "I'll try sir!" — spoken on the very verge of a desperate and heroic enterprise, and breathing the soul and spirit of New England hardihood, comprehending all perils, and encountering all.  
 (21)

To try, to fight for his own course is perhaps what Hawthorne felt he needed most at the moment when he was con-



templating the old general.

Like the old general, the Man of Business also dedicated himself to his work with energy. The depiction of the Man is the closest to realistic presentation among the three portraits, probably because what struck Hawthorne was the officer's practical talent. He was "prompt, acute, clear-minded" and in effect "the Custom-House in himself" (22). He drew to himself and could solve the difficulties which everybody met with. Hawthorne says that the man's "integrity was perfect; it was a law of nature with him, rather than a choice or a principle; nor can it be otherwise than the main condition of an intellect so remarkably clear and accurate as his, to be honest and regular in the administration of affairs" (22). If Hawthorne intends to criticize the practicality of the man, the qualifications he uses in the description betray him. Instead of condemning him, Hawthorne seems to marvel at the man's thorough adaptation to his situation.

Although he was impressed by these three officers, it does not mean that Hawthorne admired each one's way of life. He rather admired the energy, concentration and devotion shown in each case. And it is very likely that Hawthorne simply projected his obsession with the problem of devotion and dedication on the three characters. Partly owing to their own qualities, but more likely because of Hawthorne's own imagination, the three persons revealed to him three examples of concentration.

Though the Custom-House could be a place perfect for these three characters, it was an inadequate place for Hawthorne to do the kind of work to which he intended to devote himself. He presents his dissatisfaction in a fictive way. Hawthorne's retreat to the second story of the Custom-House is generally regarded as a retreat to romantic imagination from the worldly affairs of his environment. In the context of Hawthorne's pressing consciousness of his vocation as professional writer, the discovery of Surveyor Pue's manuscript is certainly a pivotal moment. From that moment on Hawthorne found his life in the Custom-House unbearable, wear-

some and meaningless, and his role as a gentlemanly writer unsatisfactory.

That Hawthorne should present a pivotal moment in his life in a dramatic way is imaginable. Dramatization bestows importance on the moment as such. Since this moment is closely related to the story he is sending to the market, such a dramatization will arouse the reader's interest in the story. At any rate, the way of dramatization in the "Custom-House" sketch has its own tradition in literature and was likely intended to serve a special purpose. The tradition of proclaiming that one's story is not one's own creation but comes or is borrowed from a manuscript one discovered under certain circumstances dates back to Defoe and older times. But this ploy is especially found in Gothic novels, which were prevalent in Hawthorne's times. According to Jane Lundblad, the two great popular branches of literature in New England in the early nineteenth century were the almanacs and the Gothic novel (*European Literary Tradition* 24-25). In another of her books the same author lists twelve principal traits of the Gothic novel, the first of which is as follows:

1. The Manuscript

The author of the novels of terror and wonder have a great predilection for the trick of telling a story at second hand. One of the characters of an introductory story gives an account of his experiences, or, better still, produces an old manuscript, where the happenings are written down. By supposing parts of the manuscript to be unreadable, the author may evade difficult or unexplicable passages in his tale as is the case in Mathurin's *Melmoth*; he may even pass off the whole of his work as a translation of an old document, as Walpole did when he first brought out *The Castle of Otranto*. (*Tradition of Gothic Romance* 17).

The two Gothic novels mentioned here, according to Lundblad were among the best-sellers in the early half of the nineteenth century. According to Baym, in his adolescence Hawthorne was "captivated by fiction of the previous century, especially gothic" (*The Shape of Hawthorne's Career* 16). The

motivation of using a Gothic tradition in the sketch thus seems quite clear. Although it is possible that by describing the material details of the discovered papers Hawthorne "is mocking the easy belief that a historian can penetrate truth by a simple disposition of his little hoard of 'facts'" (Deusen 64), it is also likely that Hawthorne likes the Gothic tradition and finds it appealing to the readers; he uses it as an stratagem to mystify the story he is going to present with the hope that it will bring popularity for his book. The general tone of the sketch is humorous. But to say that Hawthorne is intentionally ironical seems to have forgotten that the readers in the early nineteenth century were not so sophisticated as the readers in the post-modern Western world.

More importantly, this is also Hawthorne's strategy of self-disguise. By claiming to be a mere "editor" of his story, Hawthorne expects that the readers will not identify himself with his characters. The relationship between Hawthorne and his three characters in *The Scarlet Letter* has been generally acknowledged and much discussed by scholars. Gilmore singles out the theme of gazing and being gazed at as the common ground establishing the relationship between the author and his characters (Chapter 4). Here in the "Custom-House" sketch this concern of being gazed at seems to be an important reason for Hawthorne to employ a fictive episode to account in an oblique way for a great moment of his life. The climax of this episode occurs when Hawthorne took up the ragged letter "A" and inadvertently placed it on his breast. At that moment, it seemed to him that he "experienced a sensation not altogether physical, yet almost so, as of burning heat; and as if the letter were not of red cloth, but red-hot iron" (28).

The significance of this incident is certainly given special scrutiny by scholars. For Nina Baym the letter "A" symbolizes "Art" to Hawthorne. She argues: "Like Hester's letter, Hawthorne's is the rebellious beautifying of a socially inadmissible, and therefore sinful, impulse" ("*The Romantic Malgré Lui*" 280). I would like to stipulate that 'A' may also sym-

bolize "Ardor" to Hawthorne. Just as Hester's passion is against the Puritan law, Hawthorne's ardor to become not only a fiction writer but a devoted professional writer is against his Puritan conscience. The placing of the letter with its magic power on his breast was a symbolic ritual and like a Gothic character, Hawthorne was thereafter haunted, as he relates it:

On Hester Prynne's story, therefore, I bestowed much thought. It was the subject of my meditations for many an hour, while pacing to and fro across my room, or traversing, with a hundredfold repetition, the long extent from the front-door of the Custom-House to the side-entrance, and back again. (29)

He thus began to become aware of the tediousness and triviality of the Custom-House work. At first he felt that he had lost his imaginative power because of his receiving the commission in the Custom-House. In the moonlit parlour passage Hawthorne dramatized his loss of imagination. He pictures an atmosphere most conducive for a romance-writer to the activity of his imagination:

Moonlight, in a familiar room, falling so white upon the carpet, and showing all its figures so distinctly, — making every object so minutely visible, yet so unlike a morning or noontide visibility, — is a medium the most suitable for a romance-writer to get acquainted with his illusive guests. (30)

He says later on that under the moonlight "the floor of our familiar room has become a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other" (31).

Since Hawthorne himself often says that he is a romance writer, this passage is often taken as his first definition of romance, which will be followed by further definitions in the prefaces to *The House of Seven Gables* and *The Blithedale Romance*. In *The House of Seven Gables* preface, for instance, he distinguishes the romance from the novel. However, here in the "Custom-House" sketch he simply envisions a territory

common to all imaginative literature, for the combination of the Actual and the Imaginary is the trait of any mode of imaginative literature. Hawthorne in this sketch, in effect, does not define the kind of romance he thinks he is writing. Besides, according to Nina Baym, in novel criticism of the era around the publication of *The Scarlet Letter* the term "romance" "was used so broadly and inconsistently that in any given instance of trying to fix its meaning the critic (then and now) was evidently indulging in a creative rather than a descriptive activity" (*Novels, Readers, and Reviewers* 226). And in effect, the terms of "romance" and "novel" were used interchangeably in all the journals throughout the period" (228). Accordingly, it seems reasonable to say that Hawthorne in this moonlit parlour passage simply pictures the world of imaginative literature and the work of imagination. His main purpose is to show the loss of his imaginative power, as he says finally:

"But, for myself, during the whole of my Custom-House experience, moonlight and sunshine, and the glow of fire-light, were just alike in my regard; and neither of them was of one whit more avail than the twinkle of a tallow-candle. An entire class of susceptibilities, and a gift connected with them, — of no great richness or value, but the best I had, — was gone from me.  
(31)

After the awareness of the loss of his imaginative power, his criticism on the life in the Custom-House becomes severe. He proclaims that "Uncle Sam's gold" has "a quality of enchantment like that of the Devil's wages," for whoever touches it will lose, "if not his soul, yet many of its better attributes; its sturdy force, its courage and constancy, its truth, its self-reliance, and all that gives the emphasis to manly character" (33).

Nevertheless it is an open question whether Hawthorne would leave the Custom-House by his own will. Before he could make any decision he was dismissed from office for political reasons. The dismissal exempted him from the difficulty of resolving his dilemma of being a gentlemanly writer or a

professional writer. Though in reality he strove to regain his post, in this sketch he says he "saw much reason to congratulate [himself] that [he] was on the losing side, rather than the triumphant one" in the political power struggle (35). He was, in a word, forced to take up the profession at a time perhaps earlier than when he wanted to make his decision.

In this recreation and examination of his dilemma in regard to his career, as has been said, Hawthorne deliberately uses the strategy of revelation and concealment. The result is a dramatization or a fictionalizing of his mental autobiography that is a mixture of the Actual and the Imaginary. Hawthorne himself predicted in a letter to Bridge that the reader would prefer the sketch to the main narrative.<sup>8</sup> *The Scarlet Letter* turned out to be a commercial success. But as to whether the successful sale was at least partly due to the strategy he used in the "Custom-House" sketch remains an enigma.

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<sup>8</sup> In a letter to Bridge Hawthorne wrote: "There is an introduction to this book giving a sketch of my custom-house life, with an imaginative touch here and there, which may, perhaps, be more widely attractive than the main narrative." For the letter see Faust 72.

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## 「海關」——霍桑兩難的戲劇化

呂秀玲

### 摘要

本文試圖從市場觀點出發來解說霍桑寫作紅字之序「海關」的動機和目的。紅字寫作之時，霍桑正陷於一兩難之情況中：秉性上他希望做個為少數同好而創作的紳士作家，然而實際需要上他必須成為暴露在讀者面前的職業作家。為達到促銷作品但是又不必全然暴露的目的，他在「海關」中採取一種半啟半掩的策略。此外，由於其家族之清教徒背景，他也怯於以寫作純文學為職志。然而透過他對三個海關官員的觀察，他開始領悟到生活的秘密在對於自己所熱愛的事專心一致，全力以赴。而他的徹底覺悟則是以純虛構方式表現出。他假托在海關樓上發現了前人遺稿，其中女主角的故事給他很大的啟示。他宣稱紅字即是由遺稿改編而成。這也是促銷手法之一，極類似當時讀者所喜愛的歌德式小說慣用的技倆。有了覺悟後他意識到海關生活對他想像力的傷害。總的來說，「海關」是他的兩難與覺悟過程之戲劇化，其目的方面是自省，另一方面則在促銷紅字。