

# To The New York Review of B

Fredy Perlman

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See also: "The Machine against the Garden" (author's introduction) in this issue, FE #321, Indian Summer, 1985. Web archive note: Numbers in the text are related to references at the end. They are not errors in numbering endnotes.

While skimming through a recent issue of your magazine, I came across a caricature of a man baring his chest and exposing a letter stamped or branded on it. I supposed that the mark was intended to be a scarlet letter, even though the cartoon was black and white. I learned that the branded man in the cartoon was supposed to be Nathaniel Hawthorne, author of an unforgettable exposure of bigots who branded human beings with scarlet letters.

What can this mean, I wondered. My curiosity being aroused, I plunged into the article accompanying the cartoon. [1] The article was by a Leo Marx; I did not at first remember that I had encountered this name before. The subject of the article was a book on *Hawthorn's Secret* by a Philip Young who, a footnote told me, relied on Freud to do his probing. My wonder was not dispelled by my reading of the article. On the contrary, my wonder grew.

While reading the article, I thought of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. You may remember the story. In case you've forgotten, I'll remind you. The setting is the New England of the earliest Founding Fathers of American Democracy. The story begins in the chapter titled "The Market Place," on "the grass plot before the jail, in Prison Lane." On a certain summer morning, "the grim rigidity that petrified the bearded physiognomies of these good people...could have betokened nothing short of the anticipated execution of some noted culprit, on whom the sentence of a legal tribunal had but confirmed the verdict of public sentiment." The culprit might be "a sluggish bond servant, or an undutiful child, "an idle and vagrant Indian," or it "might be, too, that a witch...was to die upon the gallows." [2]

On this particular morning, the culprit was a young woman who had given birth to a child, a baby girl whose father was not the young woman's long-absent husband. For this crime, not against nature but against the laws of legislators democratically elected in a renowned New England town council, Hester, the culprit, is not only imprisoned; she is condemned to wear a brand on her breast, a scarlet letter "A", as a lifelong reminder and visible sign of her "sin." She was further condemned, on emerging from prison, to climb a scaffold which "constituted a portion of the penal machine," the platform of the pillory, where she was to expose herself and her brand to "the stings and venomous stabs of public contumely, wreaking itself in every variety of insult." Above her were "the Governor and several of his counsellors, a judge, a general, and the minister of the town; all of whom sat or stood in a balcony of the meeting house, looking down upon the platform...They were, doubtless, good men, just and sage. But out of the whole human family, it would not have been easy to select the same number of wise and virtuous persons who should be less capable of sitting in judgment on an erring woman's heart..." [2]

## Founders of the American Way

The repression of an individual by the iron machinery of the State has rarely been so powerfully depicted. Yet this is only the beginning of the story. The sequel is an unrelenting exposure of the Bigotry, in its various guises, of the founders of the American Way of Life.

One of the ministers on the balcony overlooking the platform is “the Reverend Master Dimmesdale, her godly pastor,” of whom one of the spectators says that he “takes it very grievously to heart that such a scandal should have come upon his congregation.”

And one of the spectators is the long-absent husband, turning up just in time to see his branded wife, clutching another man’s child, on the platform of the pillory. This man changes his name to Chillingworth and undertakes to find the father of his wife’s child. His researches quickly lead him to “the Reverend Master Dimmesdale, her godly pastor.”

New England Bigotry is compounded with hypocrisy. The self-righteousness of the Chosen People rests on lies. The lies, furthermore, have intercourse with one another and give birth to broods of new lies. The guilty Reverend confesses to his congregation, he exposes himself as a greater sinner than the condemned culprit, he bares the scarlet letter branded on his own chest. And the more he confesses, the more saintly he becomes in the eyes of his admiring flock. His confessions confirm and justify the iron laws and chains needed to keep sinners less saintly than the Reverend on the straight and narrow path.

With the character of Chillingworth, the “betrayed” husband, Hawthorne added another dimension to the story. Chillingworth is not a narrow Puritan but a man of “learning and intelligence...extensively acquainted with the medical science of the day.” He is a dispassionate scientific researcher, a successor of the medieval Inquisitor and a forerunner of the modern Psychiatrist. Chillingworth quickly discovers that the preacher is his man, but he does not expose the saintly Reverend to the congregation, he does not hand the culprit over to the secular arm. Such informing would have no scientific interest. Chillingworth moves in with the guilty man and experiments with the guilt in the privacy of his own clinic, alone with his patient. He finds the sore, sticks a knife into it, slowly turns the knife, and goes on turning, fascinated by the effects. Whatever motive of revenge he might have had at the start is soon forgotten, replaced by fascination, by scientific interest in his squirming victim’s behavior. Chillingworth completes the picture of a society that confronts nature and humanity with lies, instruments of torture and lethal weapons.

As an allegory of the branding of this continent with the scarlet letter “A”, as an allegory of America—young, middle-aged and old—Hawthorne’s story is overwhelming. Melville’s *The Confidence Man* is neither as all-embracing nor as clear. The exposure of every official American virtue is as fresh today as when it was written, and it continues to be a festering sore on the “image” of America.

In the USSR, such festering sores are “liquidated”; the authors’ names are removed from encyclopedias and library catalogues, the stories are removed from bookstores; the State sees to it that the story and the author never existed.

American methods are much subtler. Here it is not forgotten that the Catholic Church gained in stature by turning burned heretics into Catholic saints. Here heretical authors were turned into “American classics” while the anti-American purport of their work was handed over to the secular arm. Here the secular arm saw to it that readers read the exposures the same way Reverend Dimmesdale’s congregation heard his confessions, as yet another proof of the virtue of the authorities sitting or standing on the balcony overlooking the platform of the pillory.

With these thoughts and recollections passing through my mind while I read the review of Hawthorne’s *Secret* in *The New York Review of B*, I suddenly remembered where I had previously seen the name of the reviewer. I found my old copy of *The Scarlet Letter*, a 1959 Signet Classic, and there, on the title page, below the author and title, I saw the words: “With a Foreword by Leo Marx.” A professor at Amherst College. The very man who reviewed Hawthorne’s *Secret*. I remembered that my Signet Classic contained different works by different authors, the shorter a polemic against the longer. I reread the “Foreword” and confirmed my memory. Sure enough, the “Foreword” is like a nearly-opaque lens intended to help students stay on the straight and narrow path while wandering the forest; it is a crutch, a map, a “How to read this book without getting lost” guide; it removes the sting and makes the “great American classic” safe for wholesome American students.

In this “Foreword,” Professor Marx warns that “entering the world of *The Scarlet Letter* is like walking into a large, many-sided hall of mirrors.” He, the Professor, possesses the key to this labyrinth. The key is the Professor’s view of “the wilderness.” The landscape, the geography is “no mere backdrop; it is inseparable from policy and action and meaning.” To Professor Leo Marx, the wilderness is “grim.” Its grimness can even be felt “in the grim mood of the crowd waiting at the prison door.” The Professor grudgingly admits that “some of the grimness can be explained in other ways,” but he promptly disposes of the “other ways”; he insists that it is neither the Puritan colony nor its Bigotry, but rather the Wilderness that is “grim.” And he drives his point home. “Here is a tiny outpost of English society cut off from civilization by the ocean on one side and a vast, unexplored reach of wild nature on the other. What this may portend is quietly suggested by the appearance of a savage at the edge of the crowd.” [3] This statement does not come from a racist “Indian-killer” of the Jacksonian era of mass exterminations; it comes from our contemporary, Amherst Professor Leo Marx, a century after the holocaust perpetrated on this continent’s original inhabitants was officially terminated. The war is still going on. [4] The Wilderness is still a place that has to be extirpated, enclosed, pacified and processed. The wild forest is a place of “tempting licence,” “a place where people elude the rules of the community,...a place where no laws obtain; in short a moral wilderness.” [3]

The wilderness is red, like Hester’s letter. And the Professor, like the saintly Reverend, is “committed to the iron side, with all that that implies about man’s weakness and his inescapable need for restraint, order and institutional control.” From that side, the iron side, Professor Marx declares war on Hawthorne, who “deliberately enlists us all on Hester’s side,” on the wild side, for, in the Professor’s words, “Hester is perfectly willing to disregard all that men [sic] have inherited from the past—religion, tradition, law and society. She believes in the new beginning.” Professor Marx does not, and he turns somersaults in order to pull the “great American author” away from “the sentimental side” over to his side. “Hawthorne calls forth our warmest impulses—our sympathy for the lonely, our solidarity with the persecuted, our anarchic urge for fulfillment now; and then, when our gentlest selves have been exposed, he forces us to recognize their fallibility.” [3]

## The Moral of It All

Nowhere in *The Scarlet Letter* did Hawthorne force us to recognize the fallibility of our anarchic urge, but Professor Marx wishes he had; his wish becomes a fact and finally it becomes “the moral” of *The Scarlet Letter*: “Hawthorne finally would have us see that as a principle the wild rose is no more adequate than iron.” The problem is that, “having weighted the argument so heavily on the sentimental side, it is no easy task to restore the balance.” [3] I readily admit that it is no easy task for me to imagine a “balance” between a wild rose and iron; I picture the flower firmly held in a vise; in human terms, I imagine an individual, gifted with life and thought, encased in armor.

Of course the Professor does not, for he cannot, quote the moral with Hawthorne’s words. He tells us that Hawthorne placed this moral in “the final chapter” where “he spells out the lesson,” where “the language is so simple, the author so outspoken, and the meaning so plain that we scarcely recognize the moral—much less its profundity.” [3]

I glanced at Chapter 24 of Hawthorne’s story, titled “Conclusion,” and I admit that I could “scarcely recognize” anything like Professor Marx’s moral, “much less its profundity.” But then I noticed that my Signet Classic contained yet another “final chapter” after the story’s final chapter, a short story written by Hawthorne at a different time and in a different spirit, a story with the title “Endicott and the Red Cross.” I realized that Professor Marx had committed a sleight of hand, that he had set a trap for his students, by appending this story to *The Scarlet Letter*.

The story of Endicott and the Red Cross, jarring as a conclusion to the tale it follows, seems to show its author as a defender of iron Puritans and an enemy of the scarlet and the wild; it seems to contain Professor Marx’s “lesson.” Here the famous Puritan governor Endicott, in his “polished breastplate,” confronted the bearers of England’s “banner of the Red Cross.” “In close vicinity” to Endicott stood “the sacred edifice” as well as “that important engine of Puritanic authority, the whipping post.” Nearby, “at one corner of the meeting house was the pillory, and at the other the stocks”; the head of an Episcopalian was “incased” in the one, the feet of a “fellow criminal” in the other. A woman wore “a cleft stick on her tongue, in appropriate retribution for having wagged that unruly member against the elders of the church.” “Among the crowd were several whose punishment would be lifelong; some,

whose ears had been cropped...; others, whose cheeks had been branded with the initials of their misdemeanors; one, with his nostrils slit and seared; and another, with a halter about his neck..." The King's men were also on hand, with their banner, threatening to curb the powers of the Puritan authorities. Endicott ordered the English banner lowered "and, brandishing his sword, Endicott thrust it through the cloth, and with his left hand rent the Red Cross completely out of the banner." The story ends with a moral, a lesson. "With a cry of triumph, the people gave their sanction to one of the boldest exploits which our history records. And forever honored be the name of Endicott! We look back through the mist of ages, and recognize in the rending of the Red Cross from New England's banner the first omen of that deliverance which our fathers consummated after the bones of the stern Puritan had lain more than a century in the dust." [5]

We recognize in Endicott the forerunner of the Jacksons and Reagans. We see the glorious origins of the American Way of Life. "The language is so simple, the author so outspoken, and the meaning so plain that we scarcely recognize the moral..." A lazy student could simply leap from the "Foreword" to the book's last paragraph to learn what it all meant. The moral, the profound lesson, is patriotic; it can be summarized as "Stars and Stripes Forever!"

The last paragraph of the Signet Classic edition of *The Scarlet Letter* annihilates all that precedes it. Hemmed in between Professor Marx's "Foreword" and the patriotic last paragraph, Hawthorne's tale lost its sting and, like Joan of Arc, could safely be placed among the angels.

Yet only a person steeped in the metaphysics of empire-building could read this last paragraph without suspecting that its author had his tongue in his cheek. Even a student who allowed the last paragraph to annihilate all that preceded it could have disabused herself by simply reading yet another of Hawthorne's short stories, a story with the title "The Maypole of Merrymount." If this story had also been appended to the Signet Classic edition, no reader could have missed the irony of the seemingly patriotic last paragraph, nor could any reader have read that paragraph as a celebration of the feats of Endicott and his imperial successors.

## The Maypole at Merry Mount

In the story of the Maypole, Hawthorne made his view of Endicott's America amply clear. If Europeans had to land on this continent's shores, they need not have brought their repressive State machinery, their prisons, pillories and stocks, their genocidal militarism and their Bigotry along with them. Another alternative existed. There were initially two different groups of settlers on New England's shores: Endicott and his Puritans were in Salem; altogether different people were in Mount Wollaston (which they renamed Merry Mount).

Those at Merry Mount were everything the Puritans were not. "Jollity and gloom were contending for an empire." [6] At Merry Mount, "the Maypole was the banner staff...They who reared it, should their banner be triumphant, were to pour sunshine over New England's rugged hills, and scatter flower seeds throughout the soil." These people laughed, danced in masks, caroused and fornicated, and they invited their neighbors, the people of the woodlands, the original inhabitants, to join them in their festivals.

"But a band of Puritans, who watched the scene, invisible themselves, compared the masques to those devils and ruined souls with whom their superstition peopled the black wilderness." Sensing the invisible threat, the dancers and carousers sadly reflected that "nothing of futurity will be brighter than the mere remembrance of what is now passing." It was an epoch when "mirth makers of every sort began to be discountenanced by the rapid growth of Puritanism..." [6]

"Not far from Merry Mount was a settlement of Puritans, most dismal wretches, who said their prayers before daylight, and then wrought in the forest or the cornfield till evening made it prayer time again...A party of these grim Puritans, toiling through the difficult woods, each with a horseload of iron armor to burden his footsteps, would sometimes draw near the sunny precincts of Merry Mount.. The men of iron shook their heads and frowned so darkly that the revellers looked up imagining that a momentary cloud had overcast the sunshine... Should the grizzly saints establish their jurisdiction over the gay sinners, then would their spirits darken all the clime, and make it a land of clouded visages, of hard toil, of sermon and psalm forever...The leader of the hostile party stood in the centre... So stern was the energy of his aspect, that the whole man, visage, frame and soul, seemed wrought of iron, gifted with life and thought, yet all of one substance with his headpiece and breastplate. It was the Puritan

of Puritans; it was Endicott himself!...And with his keen sword Endicott assaulted the hallowed Maypole. Nor long did it resist his arm. It groaned with a dismal sound; it showered leaves and rose buds upon the remorseless enthusiast...‘There,’ cried Endicott, looking triumphantly on his work, ‘There lies the only Maypole in New England. The thought is strong within me that, by its fall, is shadowed forth the fate of light and idle mirth makers, amongst us and our posterity...Wherefore, bind the heathen crew, and bestow on them a small matter of stripes apiece, as earnest of our further justice. Set some of the rogues in the stocks...Further penalties, such as branding and cropping of ears, shall be thought of hereafter’...‘And shall not the youth’s hair be cut?’ asked Peter Palfrey, looking with abhorrence at the lovelock and long glossy curls of the young man. ‘Crop it forthwith, and that in the true pumpkin shell fashion,’ answered the captain. ‘Then bring them along...There be qualities in the youth, which may make him valiant to fight, and sober to toil, and pious to pray; and in the maiden, that may fit her to become a mother in our Israel...’” Those not exterminated would be reduced to wage-workers and housekeepers; love and laughter would give way to industry, playfulness to Bigotry and flowers to shears of iron. “As the moral gloom of the world overpowers all systematic gayety, even so was their home of wild mirth made desolate amid the sad forest.” [6]

The author of the story of the Maypole cannot easily be made to carry Professor Leo Marx’s moral; he cannot easily be visualised standing alongside “bold” and “honored” Endicott; he can more easily be visualised in Endicott’s pillory, alongside his friends Emerson; Melville and Thoreau, one in the stocks, the second with his ears cropped the third with his nostrils ‘slit and seared. Despite his place of birth and his illustrious ancestry, the “great American writer” can be considered a forerunner of all the Unamericans, a beacon to anarchistic and seditious aliens who longed for the imminent overthrow of American government.

Professor Marx hemmed in *The Scarlet Letter*, but to no avail. Only a few short years after the publication of his Signet Classic, his students began to scatter flower seeds throughout the soil, to laugh, dance, carouse and fornicate, to identify with all that was “dark,” “wild” and “savage” to the Professor. Rebels repelled by the metaphysics of Indian-hating and empire-building turned their backs on the entire iron edifice of violent Americanism with all its Bigotry and Racism. And some of the rebels saw the author of “The Maypole of Merry Mount,” and also the author of *The Confidence Man*, as precursors of the rebellion. [7]

It appeared as if the saints of American letters were about to fall among malcontents, insurgents, mirth makers and witches. Something had to be done. A new method of exorcising the subversive purport of ancient stories had to be found.

Another comparison with the USSR can be instructive. There an individual who publicly rebels against the pathological behavior of the State is promptly arrested and incarcerated in a psychiatric hospital. The individual’s critique is inverted; it is turned against him. All tortures, all crimes are permitted to the State; they are its norm; the State can even brand an individual with a letter “I” (Insane) if the individual refuses to take part in the State’s crimes. It becomes the task of the State’s torturers, in this case psychiatrists, to remake the individual into a “normal” participant in officially sanctioned insanity, namely to break the individual’s spirit.

Here the same result is obtained with somewhat different methods. The lessons of the early Pioneers have not been forgotten. Here critics are not incarcerated in the overcrowded prisons and psychiatric hospitals, to be fed and lodged at public expense. Here critics are branded and placed on the platform of the pillory; here the torture is not inflicted inside the confines of the penal institution, but in public view. And thanks to the progress of information technology, even long-dead critics can be branded and displayed on the modern platforms.

In 1959 Professor Leo Marx hemmed in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* but failed to remove its sting. Twenty-six years later, the Professor turned on the author. He discovered the dossier published as *Hawthorne’s Secret: An Untold Tale*, by Philip Young, “a biographical critic with something of a reputation as a gifted literary detective.” [1] I was tempted to refer to the detective as a modern Chillingworth but I remembered that, in his earlier “Foreword,” the Professor had warned that this character was not lifelike; “this cold-blooded man is a stock character, a villain out of the Faust myth who anticipates the heartless psychiatrist of current lore.” [3] Since Chillingworth was only a “stock character” out of a myth, and since even the “heartless psychiatrist” exists only in “current lore,” I will refrain from comparing the literary inquisitor to anyone else; I’ll stick to the facts.

Professor Marx says that “Young has altered the way we think about a major author and his work. He has left us with a Hawthorne who in one important respect bears a striking resemblance to his own creation, Arthur Dimmesdale: in the relationship between his secret guilt and his public discourse.” [1]

Hawthorne's secret, as the branded figure in the cartoon already told us, is Incest, sexual relations with his sister.

Yet the wonder of it all—and Professor Marx admits this—is that “Young has no evidence whatever of an actual incestuous relationship between Hawthorne and his sister.” [1] (!)

The entire “case” rests on insinuation. The only “proven fact” is that Hawthorne had a sister. The only other information in the dossier is that two sisters of Hawthorne's first American ancestor were found guilty of incest by a Puritan court. This information is apparently not offered as a joke. The reader is asked to believe that the Puritan court reached its verdict on the basis of evidence more substantial than Philip Young's. The reader is also asked to believe that the propensity to incest is hereditary.

A latter-day apologist for the iron Puritans might still believe in the fair-mindedness of a Puritan trial; others will only wonder what the two women had actually done, if anything at all. A latter-day believer in the racial transmission of cultural traits might be disposed to believe that the propensity to incest is similarly transmitted; others will be as repelled by the genealogical as by the racist Bigotry.

A quarter of a century ago, the Professor tried to remove the “grimness” from the Founding Fathers and transfer it to the Wilderness. Now he is trying to remove the guilt from the State and transfer it to the critic.

Now my wonder is dispelled. I think I finally understand what all this means. We've returned to the now-grassless plot before the jail, in Prison Lane. We, the readers, are spectators looking up at a scaffold which is called *The New York Review of B*. On this scaffold or platform stands the author of *The Scarlet Letter* and “The Maypole of Merry Mount,” baring his chest to display a scarlet “I.” Above him are the Governor and several of his counsellors, a judge, a general, a professor and a literary detective, all of them sitting or standing in a balcony, looking down upon the platform. These good people are dressed in all their finery, but in the place where their faces should be, nothing is visible but a capital letter “B,” its colors red, white and blue, its pattern of stars and stripes varying from one personage to the next.

—February 1985

## References

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2. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, Signet Classics (New American Library), 1959.
3. Leo Marx, “Forward” to *Ibid.*, pp. vii–xii.
4. See Frederick Turner, *Beyond Geography: The Western Spirit Against the Wilderness*, Viking Press, New York, 1980.
5. Nathaniel Hawthorne, “Endicott and the Red Cross,” appended to *The Scarlet Letter*, Signet Classic, 1959, pp. 247–254.
6. Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The Maypole of Merry Mount” in *Selected Tales and Sketches*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967, pp. 138–149.
7. Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building*, Meridian (New American Library), 1980.

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Fredy Perlman  
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