An Absent Presence: The Rewriting of Hawthorne’s Narratology in John Updike’s S.

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In the past several years, as the body of criticism on the intertextual relationship between Nathaniel Hawthorne and John Updike has grown, critics have looked at the larger or more general influences of Hawthorne on Updike, and readers of Updike’s A Month of Sundays, Roger’s Version, S., and even The Witches of Eastwick have focused specifically on his engagement with The Scarlet Letter. The first three of those novels take on, in one way or another, Hawthorne’s classic; and as Updike himself has pointed out, each work is a contemporary retelling of Hawthorne’s story from the perspective of one of the three major figures involved: Arthur Dimmesdale, Roger Chillingworth, and Hester Prynne, respectively.1

The most recent of the these, S., is particularly significant not only because it concludes Updike’s project, but also because it gives extensive voice—in contemporary form—to perhaps the most celebrated figure in Hawthorne’s canon. The novel contains an abundance of allusions that relate directly to The Scarlet Letter, some venerable and some parodic. The center of Updike’s tale is Sarah P. Worth (with the suggestive middle initial), whose “Mother’s mother’s mother’s people” were the Prynnes of New England (264). She is emotionally estranged from her husband, Charles Worth—a doctor whose hands are always cold from constant scrubbing (literally, a “chilling” Worth)—and deeply attached to her daughter Pearl. Much like her literary forebear, Sarah ventures out from the community into the wilderness (in this case, the desert) to gain a better understanding of herself and eventually has an adulterous relationship with a duplicitous religious leader whose different names, Art and Arhat, bring to mind Hawthorne’s self-absorbed minister Arthur. Updike’s heroine is preoccupied with the letter A: she swears by vitamin A, refers to her female lover as “dearest A.,”
and spends her most intimate moments in an A-frame house. As James A. Schiff points out, instead of wearing an embroidered letter A on her bosom, Sarah conceals a minirecorder between her breasts with which to chronicle her adulterous encounters (27).

These allusions, and many other Hawthorne references, could be read as mere intertextual playfulness if it were not for the close thematic proximity between the two American writers. The predominance of religious dogma, its relationship to sexuality, the representation of women in terms of male power, and the negotiation of philosophical dualisms are all issues that permeate both novels. Donald J. Greiner sees Updike as rewriting and ultimately rejecting Hawthorne’s distinction between the corrupt material and the pure spiritual modes of existence. Where Dimmesdale cannot bring himself to accept sin as a form of self-expression, the Arhat (aka Art Steinmetz) and Sarah freely engage their passions in an effort to achieve spiritual enlightenment. Yet, whatever the conclusions, the dilemmas that both authors explore are the same. As Greiner observes, “Updike may enter the bedroom while Hawthorne tiptoes past the door, but both insist on the instinctive linking of sexuality and religion” (480). Similarly, Schiff sees Updike as attempting to reconcile Hawthorne’s divisions between public and private self, interior and exterior world, and body and soul. Much like Hester, Sarah is stifled and oppressed by the various strictures placed upon her; but unlike her nineteenth-century counterpart, she is able to break free from those limitations by equating passionate and transfigurative experiences. Updike’s prescriptive take on Hawthorne’s narrative, Schiff concludes, is that “through acceptance of the body and its needs, the American self can rise from its bourgeois malaise, taste the exhilaration of freedom, and experience faith in the divine” (29).3

Despite their limitations—for example, both Schiff and Greiner tend to underemphasize Hawthorne’s identification with Hester as victim—these critical readings emphasize two of the predominant themes that link the texts. In doing so, they follow the nascent trend of criticism on Updike’s Scarlet Letter novels, which rests almost entirely on thematics. Such studies, valuable in their own right, do not, however, reveal the more subtle ways in which this late-twentieth-century writer takes on Hawthorne’s nineteenth-century tale. In terms of S., they overlook the various narrative strategies Updike uses, modes of storytelling that inextricably link his project with Hawthorne’s. This seems odd, for in many ways S. stands out as more technically experimental than most of Updike’s other works (at least more so than the Rabbit novels, by which he is best known). In approaching The Scarlet Letter, Updike addresses shared thematic interests—issues that clearly concern his work as a whole—and also structures his novel so as to foreground narrative authority. In other words Updike, much like Hawthorne, considers the ways in which his story of Sarah Worth is put together through another subject, a fictional authorial presence that Updike himself has constructed. This presence is an additional intrusive “character” who stands between the real-world author and his story and both underscores and problemat-
tizes the means of creating a narrative. The more formal aspects of Roger’s Version have received some attention, but for S., which many consider the most consciously constructed of the trilogy, there is on this issue a conspicuous absence.4

The significance of Updike’s narrative technique raises the question of his place in contemporary American letters. Critics, focusing primarily on his earlier works, have usually viewed Updike as kind of mannerist realist. His stylistic precision, aesthetic concerns, and focus on the white middle and upper-middle classes have placed him in the tradition of such writers as Henry James and Ernest Hemingway and in the company of his contemporaries J. D. Salinger and John Cheever. In both The Columbia Literary History of the United States (Bradbury 1138) and The Columbia History of the American Novel (Van Leer 508), he is described along with Cheever as one of the most representative figures in post-war social realism or neorealism. These categorizations are not without justification, but they tend to limit the reception of Updike’s more innovative works, especially those that foreground metafictional aesthetics (for instance, the Hawthorne trilogy and the Bech books). If, as is sometimes the case in the academy of contemporary literature, more obvious “postmodern” concerns (defined in a broad sense) are privileged over “worn out” realistic or mimetic strategies, then such an attitude may exclude certain writers from contemporary critical attention.5 Such are the limits of strict genre criticism and periodicity. Placed solely within the school of neorealism, then, some of Updike’s experimental techniques might go unnoticed.

One literary assemblage into which Updike has not been placed is that of aesthetic postmoderns.6 Writers such as John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Philip Roth, Thomas Pynchon, Robert Coover, and John Hawkes all employ craft and structure to problematize traditional concepts of identity, authority, and textuality.7 In his semimanifesto “The Literature of Exhaustion” Barth brings many of these issues to the fore and prescribes what many have since seen as the main tenets of postmodern writing. For him, writing in the 1960s, the realistic bourgeois novel was at a dead end because it refused to take into account or build on the high modernist lessons of Joyce, Mann, and Faulkner. What was needed, he argued, were not fictions that attempted to represent life directly, but on the contrary, fictions that attempted to represent the representation of life. In this way, writers could pick up where the modernists left off and explore the constructedness of their own art in “novels which imitate the form of the Novel, by an author who imitates the role of Author” (72). Clearly, one would be stretching to place such works as Rabbit, Run or Couples under this rubric.

In S., however, Updike breaks free from what Barth would call a tired mode of representation. To do that, he turns to a premodern master of narrative technique and becomes one of the latest participants in what Richard Brodhead has dubbed “the School of Hawthorne.” One critic, G. R. Thompson, has attempted to trace the narrative trajectory connecting Hawthorne’s technique to that of more contemporary writers. Comparing Hawthorne’s mode of storytelling to Edgar Allan
Poe’s, Thompson foregrounds what he sees as one of the centrally defining strategies in Hawthorne’s narratives: a deliberately intrusive authorial presence. This presence usually comes in the form of an exterior third-person narrator; even when the story is technically told in the first-person, Hawthorne habitually frames the tale with an author figure presenting the tale as if outside the action. In this way, the presence always problematizes the text because the “intrusive author constantly suggests alternative interpretations; speaking alternatively in jest and in earnest, he invites us to collaborate with him in a little truthful fiction with a multiplicity of morals that may or may not be pertinent, suggesting a crisis and a denouement to come that may or may not actually occur in the text” (191). Thompson then goes on to place this narrative stance within a more contemporary context:

Hawthorne was doing something different [from Poe]—and something more in tune with the taste of the later twentieth century than with that of the earlier. Without becoming overly involved in the terms “modern” and “postmodern,” I should observe that in part the “postmodern” involves an exaggerated return to authorial presence in a metafictional mode, partially with the effect of questioning the reliability of text as text (not just story) and storyteller as author (not just narrator). (194)

In terms of postmodern posturing, these comments are similar to those of Barth when he proposes a new direction in fiction, except here the self-reflexive impulse in American literature is given historical roots.

In rewriting the nineteenth-century classic, Updike uses Hawthorne’s subject matter and, what is perhaps more significant, his technique as well. A close reading of The Scarlet Letter serves to highlight this relationship. Updike’s narrative starting point appears in the opening pages of Hawthorne’s text. From the outset, Hawthorne problematizes his association with his text. The narrator of “The Custom-House” section begins his tale by juxtaposing questions surrounding the authenticity of authorship and of the text. Musing on how appropriate it is for a writer to disclose himself to his readers, he concludes that an author may present himself as long as he “still keep[s] the inmost Me behind its veil. To this extent and within these limits, an author, methinks, may be autobiographical, without violating either the reader’s rights or his own” (121–22). Immediately afterward, he tells us that by presenting his Custom-House sketch he is “offering proofs of the authenticity of a narrative therein contained” in the pages that follow (122). Are we uncritically to take the narrator at his word and assume that he is in every sense of the word Nathaniel Hawthorne? This question arises again when the narrator discloses his first glimpse of the scarlet letter. He prefaces this account by warning his reader not to smile at or doubt what he is about to say, but to take him at his very word. Is this the “inmost Me” letting down his guard and imploring us to believe that this is actually his experience? Did the discovery of the tattered scarlet letter actually occur, and when he held it to his chest, did it actual-
ly feel like the “burning heat” of a “red-hot iron” (146)? By conflating the issues of textual and authorial reliability, Hawthorne is ironically distancing himself from his own text and throwing into question how we are to read it. The author’s “rights” that he seeks not to “violate” are dubious at best: for, as the author of the text, he ultimately controls the rules of the game (at least as contained within the book’s covers) making any issue of rights purely academic. The “reader’s rights” are equally curious, if not more so, because any particular reader is at perfect liberty to accept or doubt the written word as he or she sees it. When the narrator implores us to believe him, we are not so much receiving the word of the law-giving Yahweh as that of Janus. As Thompson suggests, Hawthorne (the flesh-and-blood writer) has established an authorial presence in the guise of “Hawthorne” (the narrator of a fictional text) to guide us through and prepare us for the textual doorways we are soon to encounter (190–91).9

The irony of the narrator’s appeals becomes even clearer when he tells us later, in connection with Surveyor Pue’s document, “I have allowed myself, as to such points, nearly or altogether as much license as if the facts had been entirely of my own invention. What I contend for is the authenticity of the outline” (147). Either way, fact or invention, the audience ultimately is in no position to judge the extent of the narrator’s license with his subject matter. The only thing the reader has is the text itself, the space where fact and invention, the actual and the imaginary, can come together in an “outline” of the author’s making. Herein lies Hawthorne’s theory of the romance. When “moonlight” makes its way into the space of the everyday, it transforms the familiar into something wholly other, “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” (149). It is the neutral territory of the text that Hawthorne has taken as his domain, eschewing closure and demonstrating that the author’s relationship with the text, much like the text itself, is a constructed space inviting ambiguity.

Updike apparently had this narrative technique in mind when writing S. In a 1979 speech before the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, he told his audience,

Where the two incompatible realms of Hawthorne’s universe impinge, something leaks through; there is a stain. A sensation of blasphemous overlapping, of some vast substance chemically betraying itself, is central to the Gothic tradition of which Hawthorne’s tales are lovely late blooms. The stain, this sinister spillage from another world, can take the form of poison, of a potion, of dreams and mirrors, of over-insistent symbols like the scarlet letter or Donatellos’s presumably pointed ears. (“Creed” 77)

Texts, like poisons or chemical substances, are highly volatile substances, the continued use of which is not always certain to produce a uniform reaction. Updike’s image of the stain is particularly apt because it suggests the problematic trace of a mixture that is difficult, if not impossible, to erase. In his own work,
the “stain” of ambiguity appears in the text’s constructed fibers. Although Updike does not frame Sarah’s tale with a preface or a narrator as Hawthorne does with his, he nonetheless places a number of clues in the text that give a similar effect. On the one hand S. appears to be a collection of texts compiled not by an interior subject but by an omniscient author figure completely outside the text and subscribing to the notion of mimetic representation. The most likely candidate for such a figure would have to be John Updike himself, the academy’s posterboy for neorealism. However, a closer reading reveals the hidden textual seams that hold the fragments together.

The most striking of these appears in the tape-recorded texts. Such bracketed comments as “[end of tape],” “[Responsive mumble],” “[Breathlessly],” and “[One male voice, indicated below by italics]” are all extratextual, dramalike cues that accompany the recorded text from Sarah’s minirecorder. What makes these cues so curious is that they are conspicuously absent from Sarah’s written texts. None of her letters has any type of clue or hint as to the context of the letter outside of the letter itself. (Most letters are easy to decode, but some, such as Sarah’s first correspondence to Eldridge, may require the reader to flip back to be reminded that he is her hairdresser’s younger son and then to read ahead to confirm that it is indeed a postcard that Sarah is mailing.) Why contextualize one type of text and not another? The answer comes during one of Sarah’s clandestinely recorded conversations. While she is recording one of her “letters” to her friend Midge, there is the cue “[Silence. Rustling. Heartbeat?]” (129). Later, during another taped conversation, an interruption in the text foretells the entrance of the Arhat: “[Amplified clatter and scraping as of a drawer being opened and shut. Subsequent conversation faint and transcribed with difficulty. Male voice in italics below as before]” (177, emphasis added). Someone is transcribing Sarah’s oral message into written text, and while doing so is attempting to make sense of the stray noises and static that blur at times into meaninglessness. This revelation is significant for two interrelated reasons. First, the revelation hints at the “postmodern” quality of the text and the foregrounding of its constructedness. The movement from the oral to the written and the imposition of meaning onto slippery signs immediately call to mind the deconstructive theories of Jacques Derrida. (It is perhaps no accident that deconstruction and Derrida are mentioned at least twice in the novel or that Pearl attends a class of “Mr. Bloom’s” while at Yale.) As Sarah writes at one point, “I have often considered that language is stranger than it seems. It conveys meaning, we perceive that, yes, but also it makes a tribal code, a way to keep out others. It is of that intricacy which in paper currency is meant to defeat counterfeiters” (131). More important, Updike is inserting an authorial qualifier not unlike Hawthorne’s. What may have at first been an implied assumption of omniscience now becomes a telling admission of narratological culpability. The reader sees for the first time the “damning” evidence of a questionable authorial presence.

Another indication of the novel’s foregrounding of its consciously constructed
quality comes in the concluding pages of the text. The last three letters that Sarah writes are to Charles, the Arhat, and her former boyfriend, Myron Stern. That is the first time in the book that she has written anything to Myron, and in her letter she reminisces about the relationship they once had, hints at possibly getting together with him in the future, and then asks him to forward the other two letters (which she has enclosed with his letter). Although chronologically his letter is written last, in the novelistic arrangement of the letters Myron’s is revealed before those of Charles and the Arhat. Again, a cursory reading would suggest that such an arrangement makes perfect sense, that the author of the novel has placed the other letters last because Sarah makes reference to them in her letter to Myron, thereby contextualizing their presentation. And by closing the novel with the two letters to the Arhat and Charles, Sarah is thereby given the status of a truly independent woman who with the stroke of her pen has renounced the two repressive patriarchal figures in her life. However cogent those arguments might be, another reading problematizes those conclusions. That instance is the only place in the novel where a letter is presented out of chronological sequence, thereby drawing attention to the suspect arrangement. What is more, if Myron’s letter were inserted after the other two, then Sarah’s final words might suggest a closed (and rather uninspiring) sexual quest: leaving her husband at the beginning of the novel, experimenting with a lesbian relationship in the middle, and reinscribing her heterosexuality by the end. As presented, the success or results of Sarah’s quest—both sexual and existential—are not at all certain. The arrangement of these last letters, along with the issue of tape transcription, raises the question of an intrusive “narrator” manipulating the text to make it more ambiguous. In effect, the text has been rewritten by a figure exterior to the novelistic action. Again, Updike never intimates who this figure might be. Has a fictionalized Updike, Sarah herself, or a third-party chronicler completely outside the story arranged the letters, postcards, journal entries, and tape recordings? But then, Updike does not need to reveal the identity of his textual manipulator. The traces of his (or her) work are enough to complicate, and formally strengthen, the entire text. Updike’s authorial “presence” is more powerful in its absence than in its actualization.

One effect of such ambiguity is the open-ended nature of Sarah’s gender identifications. Throughout the text she is described in terms that are not entirely compatible. The ashram name the Arhat gives her is Kundalini, “the serpent of female energy dormant at the base of the spinal column,” coiled up and ready to strike (272). She is pleased and easily identifies with her new Eastern identity. At the same time that Sarah is “feminized” through her Oriental sensibilities, she is “masculinized” by her Western language. Her lesbian lover, Alinga, calls her a “dark and stormy prince” (166), and Sarah later corroborates by referring to herself as “a strangely weak man” (167). Her last encounter with the Arhat is similarly telling. The holy man intimates, after Sarah rejects his final sexual advances, that she has “gotten a bit butch since coming here,” and when she final-
ly asserts her intentions to leave the community he tells her that she has “spoken like a man” (229). Sarah, for her part, gladly accepts this designation, and makes the role reversal complete. “You’re the nothing,” she tells Art, “not us cunts. You’re the shunya [a courtesan; also a void or absence]” (229). It is no accident that Updike has chosen for Sarah’s story a religion (or at least its bastardized American version) whose images of masculinity and femininity are more fluid than fixed, where identity at times is nothing more that the shedding of one set of clothes and the donning of another. “What’s the point of living if you can’t shuck skins?” Art asks Sarah. “What does it matter, what name I have? Or you have? A little flick of karma, and I’m a centipede, and you’re a chestnut tree in blossom” (222, 223). This theoretical principle, significantly enough, is presented by the character in the novel who most fully manipulates issues of identity and does so primarily for selfish and cynical reasons. Like Sarah, the Arhat (or Art) has a serious investment in the “shucking of skins,” but unlike his female follower he undergoes his transformation not for inner personal strength, but strictly for material gain. Sarah’s efforts in assuming a new identity are more sincere, heroic in many ways, and make her a more sympathetic character. Her desires for self-definition become one of the thematic centerpieces of the novel.

The significance of Sarah’s independence becomes clearer when the reader considers the structure of Updike’s text. The novel is made up 61 chapters of varying lengths. Some are lengthy; the ones containing the three tape-recorded messages to Midge collectively take up over one quarter of the book. Others, like the letters and postcards she sends to her dentist, her Swiss banker, and a variety of Ashram contributors cover less than half a page each. In the first half of the book, as her association with the Ashram Arhat grows, she increasingly uses another’s voice, writing on behalf of the spiritual leader and signing the correspondences “Shri Arhat Mindadali, M.A., Ph.D., Supreme Meditator, Ashram Arhat” (111). That seems appropriate, given that she works in the office of the Arhat and apparently is relied on to see to his communications. Yet that shift in voice is highly ironic: she left the comfortable life with her husband and headed for the Arizona desert because she needed to find her own identity. The reassertion of her own voice, despite her new religious belief in losing herself within the Arhat, comes in the middle chapter of the novel. After chapter 31—which comes at about the center of the novel—she begins to use her own name and nicknames exclusively. Only once more does she write under the name of the Arhat (in a letter to Mrs. Blithesdale). But by that time Sarah’s independence has taken on a clandestine nature: she is skimming money from the ashram and putting it into her own Swiss bank account. Sarah Worth finally finds her name, suggesting a movement from submissiveness to existential dominance. The significance of that shift lies in the fact that it is the book’s arrangement, its narratological construction, that brings Sarah’s assertion to the fore. Once again, the ambiguous authorial manipulation of textual artifacts underscores the novel’s central themes.

Yet the constructed nature of Sarah’s tale raises questions surrounding her
heroism. James Schiff argues that Updike, through his retelling of Hawthorne’s tale, “deromanticizes Hester, challenging feminist readings which confer sainthood upon her” (27). Such a reading, I argue, seems entirely valid, but what makes this demythologizing so significant is the way in which Updike does it. Like Hawthorne, Updike uses authorial presence to explore his themes and to frustrate any single straight reading of his text. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne mischievously complicates an unambiguous reading of Hester. From Surveyor Pue’s letter in the custom-house, the narrator notices that Hester’s story was transcribed from “oral testimony” (similar to Sarah’s transcribed tape recordings) that discloses no certainty as to her reception in her community. He notes that she probably “gained from many people the reverence due to an angel, but, I should imagine, was looked upon by others as an intruder and a nuisance” (146). This mixed message surfaces again at the end of the romance. Hester, now living on the margins of the wilderness and receiving frequent female visitors, prophesies to her audience that “at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven’s own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness” (344). Such a passage certainly contributes to the feminist reading to which Schiff alludes, and with good reason. Hester, of everyone in the book, is by far the strongest and most admirable character. Unlike Dimmesdale, she is a rebel figure with few reservations about disregarding the creed of her community by exploring the forbidden side of existence. As Hawthorne describes her:

She had wandered, without rule or guidance, in a moral wilderness; as vast, as intricate and shadowy, as the untamed forest [. . .]. Her intellect and heart had their home, as it were, in desert places, where she roamed as freely as the wild Indian in his woods [. . .]. The tendency of her fate and fortunes had been to set her free. The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread. (290)

Although Hawthorne sets up his heroine as the coming savior of womanhood (or read more generally, as human wholeness), he nonetheless denies her that role. He does so at the moment of Hester’s transfiguring prophecy: “Earlier in life, Hester had vainly imagined that she herself might be the destined prophetess, but had long since recognized the impossibility that any mission of divine and mysterious truth should be confided to a woman stained with sin, bowed down with shame, or even burdened with a life-long sorrow” (344). Feminine empowerment, one could argue, is undercut in full bloom. Hester leads no one into a new promised land; instead at the end of the novel she is buried next to the man who refused to acknowledge publicly her love. In that way, the ambiguous qualifier “in Heaven’s own time” resonates with the deepest irony. Whether Hawthorne ultimately celebrates or undermines Hester’s feminine authority is beside the point. What is significant, in relation to the power of Hawthorne’s narrative, is that there is no definitive authorial position.
In *S.*, Updike assumes a similar stance in terms of Sarah. From the beginning, he aligns her with Hawthorne’s heroine and all the transformative potential that Hester suggests. The two allusions that open the novel both refer to Hester Prynne’s dark and potentially wild nature. In addition, Sarah describes herself as having “dark hair and a rich complexion” that sometimes makes her “look too much like a squaw” (7). Her days as an ennui-ridden housewife resemble what we can assume to be Hester’s time in Salem prior to meeting Dimmesdale. As Sarah tells Midge after she arrives at the Ashram, “When I think of all those days rattling around in my old house, going from room to room picking up, waiting for Pearl to get back from school or Charles from work or for somebody just to call or the mailman to come up the drive with his Laura Ashley catalogue [. . .] it seems obscene in a way and yet a kind of paradise.” But, as she states immediately afterward, her paradise is never in the present (41). Later, in a letter to her daughter Pearl, she gives this sense of purposelessness a particularly gendered tint:

The strange thing about womanhood is that it goes on and on—the same daily burden of constant vague expectation and of everything being just slightly disappointing compared with what one knows one has inside oneself waiting to be touched off. It’s rather like being a set of pretty little logs that won’t quite catch fire, isn’t it? (85)

She longs for a way out of her existential impasse and attempts to break free by leaving her husband and running to the utopian community in Arizona. There she hopes to “recycle” her “poor bedraggled silly life” by completely shedding her former existence of submission, subservience, and materialism (36–37). “I feel fragile and naked but free,” she writes her psychiatrist from the ashram. “Thank you for giving me, in our many talks [. . .] the ego-definition and strength to attempt this. Perhaps now the task next before me is ego-transcendence” (29). We may be tempted to read the ending of the novel as Sarah’s successful transcendence beyond her former condition. In her last letter to the Arhat, she assertively quotes from “the blessed Dhammapada [the Buddhist path of truth]: ‘I have conquered all; I know all, and my life is pure; I have left all, and I am free from craving. I myself found the way’” (249).

Yet such a reading is confounded by the same texts that seem to uphold it. The letters are structured in such a way that Sarah’s words constantly undermine (or, as one might be tempted to say, deconstruct) themselves. For instance, almost every denial of her former life is accompanied by an embrace of the conditions she attempts to flee. Early on she writes to her husband that the Arhat “promises me nothing. Nothing is exactly what he promises—that my ego will become nothing, will dissolve upward” (64). Yet, immediately after those words, she entreats Charles to take care of the home lawn and garden that she loves and then urges him to sell their house at the Cape and to “be sure to send me half the proceeds” (65). Sarah never escapes these materialistic cravings, for such curious juxtapositions occur throughout the novel. At one point, she responds to a cou-
ple of parents who accuse the ashram community of brainwashing their son: “‘brainwashing’ is a nebulous term that could with justice be applied to our elementary-school introduction to the history and the capitalist, ‘freedom-loving’ values of the United States” (200). But immediately following that ideological outburst is an entreaty to Pearl to forsake her Dutch fiancé, whom Sarah sees as the progeny of European decadence. Europeans, she warns her daughter, “chose to hang back from the great spiritual adventure America was and is [. . .]. [T]he delicacy of our American reality keeps escaping them, the way our whole lovely nation is founded on the edge of a dream, on the edge of purusha [eternal cosmic spirit]” (204). Sarah cannot help waxing poetic about the nation she so easily bashed earlier. The irony of all of this is that she never seems to be aware of the contradictions embedded in her own words. Such equivocation suggests that her spiritual quest is one in constant arrest. She can never completely transcend her ego, for ego-transcendence is a mere fiction, a constructed facade posing as reality. Like Hester’s heroism, Sarah’s desires are always complicated by the narrative that gives them life.

Updike is keenly aware of the artistic force behind *The Scarlet Letter*, in terms of its thematic reveries and, perhaps more significantly, in the way that it represents those ideas through a foregrounding of narrative authority. As Sarah writes to Pearl at one point, “Think of these letters as what I do now instead of embroidery” (158). Much like Hester with her sewing, Sarah becomes an artist figure, working on pieces of paper to create herself. In this sense her writings becomes a metaphor for the entire novel: just as Sarah asserts herself through words, so Updike “embroiders” his protagonist through an authorial manipulation of those words. By writing *S.* in the tradition of Hawthorne’s romance, he participates in a tradition of the self-reflexive form of American narrative predating the postmodern heydays of the 1960s and 1970s, and he thereby positions his work in a way that complicates traditional neorealist concerns. Any future reading of Updike’s fiction, especially of his later novels, would do well to reconsider the stylistic influence of Hawthorne, which Updike most convincingly demonstrates.

**NOTES**

1. See “Fresh Air,” 207–8. Some of the critics who deal specifically with these novels, either singly or as a trilogy, in terms of their relation to *The Scarlet Letter* include Frederick Crews, Donald J. Greiner, Carol Iannone, James A. Schiff, and Raymond J. Wilson III. For other studies of Updike and Hawthorne that do not focus on the trilogy, see Samuel Chase Coale (who reads Updike in terms of the Hawthorne’s conception of the romance) and Patrick W. Shaw (who highlights in Updike’s short story “A&P” the presence of “Young Goodman Brown”).

2. A number of allusions are not specifically limited to *The Scarlet Letter*: Sarah and her husband bought their New England home from an “old Mrs. Pyncheon”; on her way to Arizona, Sarah stays
at a motel near “a dreary area called Hawthorne” (31); the ashram community, much like Brook Farm, is a utopian project that nonetheless begins to mirror the culture it sought to distance; Sarah uses as her “post office” the Babbling Brook Motor Lodge whose chintzy stationary displays a child “dabbling” in the brook surrounded by “dark ominous trees” (99); and the Arhat draws much of his financial support from a rich patroness by the name of Melissa Blithedale.

3. For an additional thematic reading on the religious issues underlying S., and one not necessarily emphasizing Sarah’s personal struggles, see Judie Newman’s study of the imperialistic and capitalistic implications of the novel.

4. In an extended review of Roger’s Version, Frederick Crews discusses the ambiguity of Updike’s later fiction but does so only briefly and in terms of the development of his career. Raymond J. Wilson, on the other hand, gives a more sustained reading to structural issues. He argues that Updike is using Roland Barthes’s theory of intersecting language codes to imbed sophisticated strategies of intertextuality in Roger’s Version. Hawthorne is in the text, Wilson argues, but not in the static ways that would limit Updike’s retelling as mere parody.

5. I am thinking here not only of an older generation of American postwar writers such as Updike, Saul Bellow, and Bernard Malamud, but also of younger writers who may not fit nicely into any post-structuralist paradigm, for example, Tom Wolfe, Raymond Carver, and Bobbie Ann Mason. Such writers, it seems to me, receive more attention in creative writing programs than they do in literary courses.

6. Because of the multiple definitions of postmodernism, I use the term “aesthetic” to designate those writers who use formal or structural techniques in ways that are self-reflexive and that highlight the constructedness of the text.

7. Roth is an interesting case here in that he has a foot in both Jamesian realism and formal postmodernism. Many times he has been associated with Updike as one of the most representative figures in neorealist fiction. (George J. Searles, in fact, explores these similarities in The Fiction of Philip Roth and John Updike.) Roth has managed to acquire the “postmodern” label in ways that Updike has not in part because he has tended to sustain his experimental techniques over a longer period, evolving into a writer quite different from that of “Goodbye, Columbus” and Portnoy’s Complaint.

8. Thompson further explores this narrative stance in The Art of Authorial Presence, where the focus is on Hawthorne’s short stories.

9. It would be significant to note here another postmodern example of the kind of presence Hawthorne establishes. Philip Roth, interested in the textual crossroads between fiction and autobiography, constructs the persona of “Philip Roth” to narrate four of his more recent works. The best example of this, I believe, is Operation Shylock: A Confession, where, in ways that would make Hawthorne proud, he appeals to the reader to believe the highly unlikely tale that he is about to reveal.

10. Another significance in Updike’s textual arrangement can be seen at the opening of Sarah’s last letter of the novel, the one to Charles. As the dates indicate, it was written between December 13 and 18, “while a full moon comes and goes” (253). That reference is suggestive of both femininity and artistic inspiration, but it most likely alludes to the moonlight that Hawthorne finds so transfiguring in “The Custom-House.”

WORKS CITED


