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DIMMESDALE'S FALL
EDWARD H. DAVIDSON

In Christian doctrine, to which the New England Puritans scrupulously conformed, the Fall cannot be considered as a mere theological abstraction or as an historical event which happened in the ages long past. The Fall is an actual occurrence in the life of every Christian who, never sure of his soul, must continually remind himself, “I fell, I fall, I die daily that I may rise and live—even to fall and rise again.” The Fall is, therefore, not only the possible beginning of that salvation which God alone can initiate, but the first step in self-knowledge; unless a man sees himself in his degradation, he remains a hopeless enigma even to himself. Hawthorne was well aware of this doctrine and made it one of his most mordant commentaries on humankind: the Fall is the only explanation of that bond of ignominy by which all men share a common brotherhood. It is the beginning of understanding and of what Edwards called “being”—that perception of man’s “consent” to share the burden he bears with all mankind.

The narrative of the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter* is quite in keeping with the oldest and most fully authorized principles in Christian thought. His “Fall” is, to be sure, a descent from a state of apparent grace to damnation; he appears to begin in purity—he ends in corruption; he may once have been a whole man—at his death he is in spiritual disintegration. The subtlety of Hawthorne’s presentation is that the minister is his own deceiver; he is that truly damned man who convinces himself at every stage of his spiritual pilgrimage that he is really “saved.” More terrifying still, he is that rare man who is gifted with unusual powers of penetration into his own mind and soul—and all that he ever sees is a projection of his private universe. He moves steadily toward his doom quite unaware of where he is going. His Fall is, therefore, dire and irrefutable: by a sin of the flesh which he did not expiate, he corrupted his whole being. He becomes, at the last, his own savior and god, his own demon and destroyer. We might follow
the stages in this Fall which a Puritan from the age of the Mathers to Edwards would well understand.¹

Our first view of Dimmesdale gives us a hint of what seems to be his childlike credulity and simplicity; he is in the habit of treading “shadowy by-paths” and of enjoying his privacy; but when he comes forth into the light of ordinary day, he does so with “a freshness, and fragrance, and dewy purity of thought, which, as many people said, affected them like the speech of an angel.”² His first words to Hester are an admonition that she is morally responsible for the guilty secret she is hiding; she bears a double infamy, her own and that of her partner. In his eloquent appeal that she reveal her paramour, he warns, “ ‘What can thy silence do for him . . . except . . . to add hypocrisly to sin? Heaven hath granted thee an open ignominy, that thereby thou mayest work out an open triumph over the evil within thee, and the sorrow without. Take heed how thou deniest to him . . . the bitter, but wholesome, cup that is now presented to thy lips!’ ” It is instructive to note that Dimmesdale habitually refers to himself only in the third person when he is exploring the possibility of his own sin; he conveniently establishes an “it” and “I” congruence between his spiritual being, which remains somehow apart from this condemnation, and that other self which must accept the normal consequences of man’s life.

The distinction is not only rhetorical and stylistic; it is

¹ The argument of this study begins with Henry James’ statement that The Scarlet Letter is primarily the story, not of Hester Prynne, but of Dimmesdale, that “more wretched and pitiable culprit”; Hawthorne (New York, 1880), 109. It admittedly goes quite counter to most interpretations of the novel, of which the following are germane and representative: W. Stacy Johnson, “Sin and Salvation in Hawthorne,” Hibbert Journal, 1, 39-47 (October, 1951); Hyatt Waggoner, Hawthorne: A Critical Study (Cambridge, 1955), 1 → Anne Marie McNamara, “The Character of Flame: The Function of Pearl in The Scarlet Letter,” American Literature, xxvii, 537-553 (January, 1956); R. R. Male, Hawthorne’s Tragic Vision (Austin, 1957), 94; Harry Levin, The Power of Blackness (New York, 1958), 76. Newton Arvin was the first to suggest that Dimmesdale was in danger of damnation; see Hawthorne (Boston, 1929), 190; and R. H. Fogle has maintained that Hawthorne “refused” to grant forgiveness to Dimmesdale at his death; see Hawthorne’s Fiction: The Light and the Dark (Norman, 1952), 107, 186.

² All citations from The Scarlet Letter are to The Centenary Edition of The Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne (Ohio State University Press, 1962), Vol. I.
“real,” for the first true stage in Dimmesdale’s downfall comes when the minister convinces himself that the body and the soul are separate, not merely as differing expressions of life, but as absolute distinctions of the human being. The sufferings and privations of one need not be the affliction of the other; body does not conform to the motions of the soul, and spirit need not agree with the behavior of the flesh. Chillingworth, who acts as chorus to the minister’s degradation, very cleverly plays on this casuistical point. He early perceives that Dimmesdale, “all spiritual as he seems, . . . hath inherited a strong animal nature. . . . Let us,” he counsels himself, “dig a little farther in the direction of this vein!” He does so, most diabolically, by proposing to Dimmesdale the opposite view as though, by guileful indirection, he might mislead the minister into a deadly illusion. Chillingworth reasons with Dimmesdale that the split between the soul and the body only “seems”; it is not real or even true, except to the untrue man, and therefore, because flesh and spirit are really one, a “‘bodily disease [is] . . . but a symptom of some ailment in the spiritual part. . . . You,’ ” he says pointedly to the minister, “‘are he whose body is the closest conjoined, and imbued, and identified, so to speak, with the spirit whereof it is the instrument.’ ” Later he insinuatingly repeats the argument: “‘a sickness, a sore place, . . . in your spirit, hath immediately its appropriate manifestation in your bodily frame.’ ”

Chillingworth has penetrated more deeply than he has imagined: Dimmesdale’s profoundest dread is that he may, by gesture, word, or action, reveal the guilty secret of his flesh and thereby threaten the lofty state of his soul. If Chillingworth’s reasoning is correct, then indeed the corruption of the body is the corruption of the soul, and man goes his long journey to damnation. If, however, the flesh partakes only of the fleshly corruption and the soul abides in its own realm of being, then a man may say to himself that he is degraded in only one part. Jonathan Edwards’ inquiries into the process of salvation, or damnation, would have found no more fitting memorial than Hawthorne’s obsessed man: Dimmesdale had effected the de-
struction of what Edwards called “the consent of being to Being”; man is saved or damned, not by the dislodgment of one portion of his life from another, but by his knowing in all humility that what he is in his fleshly being he reflects in his soul, and the state of his spirit is manifest every instant in the outward demeanor of his daily experience.

This thought tortures Dimmesdale beyond endurance. On several occasions he tests to prove the supposition true: he pronounces from his pulpit his vile and degraded state; he confesses that he is “the worst of sinners, an abomination, a thing of unimaginable iniquity”—and the people but “reverence him the more.” The supposed confession is meaningless because the words were mere utterances of breath, of the flesh; they were but “body,” and thus they had no intellectual or spiritual substance; they were toys of speculation, playthings in an aimless casuistical logic.

In the secret privacy of his room, Dimmesdale has a chance further to test the validity of this haunting supposition that flesh and spirit partake of the same being and that one accords with the other. After a series of fasts and vigils, flagellations and scourgings until his flesh is bloody, Dimmesdale, as if his spirit were made hypersensitive in sympathy with his body, has visions “of diabolic shapes, that grinned and mocked,” of “shining angels, who flew upward heavily,” of “the dead friends of his youth, and his white-bearded father, with a saint-like frown, and his mother, turning her face away as she passed by.” Last of all “glided Hester Prynne, leading along little Pearl ... and pointing her forefinger, first, at the scarlet letter on her bosom, and then at the clergyman’s own breast.” Yet the terror lasts but a moment: these spectral warnings are not real, for the minister “could discern substances through their misty lack of substance, and convince himself that they were not solid in their nature, like yonder table of carved oak.” The torment has passed, and Dimmesdale is all the more certain that things of the flesh are fleshly and perceptions of the soul are spiritual.

If Dimmesdale can condemn the flesh for sin and guilt of which the spirit is presumably free, he cannot escape the gnaw-
ing torment that his outward semblance of look and behavior may reveal his secret. He is brought suddenly against the probability that his features of eye and mouth have been recast in Pearl's face and that, in this most common revelation, he may be detected. "'O... what a thought is that, and how terrible to dread it!'" he cries, "'that my own features were partly repeated in her face, and so strikingly that the world might see them!'" The cry sounds like fatherly solicitude that the child may bear a double odium; but the appeal comes long after Dimmesdale has assured himself that his soul has been freed from the torments of the flesh. Others may suffer the ignominy of the body; he enjoys its transcendent and exquisite pain as sign of his spiritual exaltation.

The minister has convinced himself that the dislocation of soul from body is irrefutable and that the world, with its temptations and sorrows, is but the shadow of a shadow. "The only truth, that continued to give Mr. Dimmesdale a real existence on this earth," Hawthorne notes, "was the anguish in his inmost soul, and the undissembled expression of it in his aspect." He reasons with Chillingworth on a most curious, and insinuatingly wicked, argument: he suggests that the judgment on that Last Day will not be God's punishment of the damned and reward of the saved. Quite the contrary: judgment day will be the final revelation of human guilt and the opening of the mysteries of this world "'merely to promote the intellectual satisfaction of all intelligent beings, who will stand waiting, on that day, to see the dark problem of this life made plain... And I conceive,'" the minister concludes, "'that the hearts holding such miserable secrets... will yield them up... not with reluctance, but with a joy unutterable.'" This is indeed a strange doctrine, that God is planning an intellectual and spiritual guessing game for the children of men. Dimmesdale even repeats it, in slightly variant terms suitable to the less sophisticated understandings of Hester and her child: "'At the great judgment day, ... thy mother, and thou, and I, must stand together! But the daylight of this world shall not see our meeting!'" As though in heavenly dismay at this pronounce-
ment, the meteors flash across the sky to show that the saintly Winthrop has passed from this world or, perhaps, that the farther universe does not accept this wily logic.

Dimmesdale's "Fall" is, in religious and philosophical terms, the "skeptical predicament." It is a descent into one of the most haunting and terrifying conditions of the human soul. It is the narrative of many sinners and saints, of Augustine in his despair, of Edwards in his questioning, of Pascal, all of whom used doubt as the first step toward the affirmation of belief. In the skeptical argument, which Dimmesdale follows albeit unknowingly, the believer or doubter must abjure all rational certitude that he can establish the principle of divine authority. God is, of a certainty, "God," but man's knowledge of Him cannot be based on the orderly operations of this world; rather, the principle of God must be predicated on that which is most "God," namely, a divine essence which, by virtue of its divinity, does not deign to assume earthly form nor display itself in the behavior of human or natural life. Thus flesh is separate from spirit; "essence" does not inhabit body; man lives a double life, condemned to the daily galling of his flesh and exalted, if exaltation is possible, in his spirit. Since man can struggle only feebly to overcome his fallen state, his one recourse is to live under the condemnation of the flesh and yet to seek, by direction of those ineffable signs which God does give to man, the way toward understanding and even salvation.

If Dimmesdale descends toward that place of doubt which skeptics, and saints too, have known, he never reaches that center of despair which Pascal, for one, so brilliantly revealed. Despair is the measure of a man's ignominy in his own sight and in the sight of God; it is the token of true self-awareness which nothing can appease except the full knowledge of the utter meanness and triviality of one's own soul. Dimmesdale's horrifying condemnation of his body is an outward and, for him, visible sign, not of the appropriate condemnation of the flesh which might begin the way toward enlightenment, but of the widening distance between the two sides of his being. The
flagellations are to convince him that only the flesh bears the odium of Adam’s primal crime; the body alone shows the hideous marks of its damnation. All the while the soul, even as the minister thinks it is freed from the infamy of its partner, is damned irrevocably. Mistress Hibbins, even before the minister’s public confession, knows his state with unmatched clarity: “‘When the Black Man sees one of his own servants, signed and sealed, so shy of owning to the bond as is the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale, he hath a way of ordering matters so that the mark shall be disclosed . . . to the eyes of all the world!’” Dimmesdale’s abject and, at the same time, self-glorifying spiritual pride has turned his whole world into a deadly illusion: “It is the unspeakable misery of a life so false as his,” Hawthorne remarks, “that it steals the pith and substance out of whatever realities there are around us, and which were meant by Heaven to be the spirit’s joy and nutriment. To the untrue man, the whole universe is false,—it is impalpable,—it shrinks to nothing within his grasp.”

The Fall in The Scarlet Letter is thus in keeping with one of the main traditions in Christian thought; it is quite in accord with that central drama of the Puritan quest for self-awareness through pain and the darkness of the soul. Yet Dimmesdale undergoes a second “Fall”; it may not be suitable to the teachings of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Puritan divines; it is, however, singularly apposite to the time in which the novel was written, for it is a moment in the drama of Romantic consciousness.

The skeptical predicament did not disappear when, with the closing of the seventeenth and the opening of the eighteenth centuries, men thought they could know God in the mechanism and worship divinity in the design. The valid issues of doubt, left from Hume and Berkeley and intensified by the new perils of idealistic thought from Germany, led directly to the Romantic sensibility. By means of the skeptical argument concerning the relation of the single self to the world, of the question of knowledge when “knowing” is controlled by and pertinent only to the single knower, and of the continuity
of ideas which are subsumed under the special character of a man both acting and knowing, the Romantic inquiry entered that strange domain of the ego-centric consciousness, the journey of the single autonomous mind, which formed the boundaries of such diverse writers as Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Carlyle, of Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, and, later, William James. However out of keeping his place may be in such company, Dimmesdale belongs in the record of Romantic thought; he is a case in the Romantic sensibility; he is a member of that demon-driven band which includes Byron's Cain and Melville's Ahab.

The Romantic version of the Fall was quite like that other descent of the soul in Christian tradition (the very animus of Romantics like Shelley to the Christian assumption betrays the relationship). The one significant difference was that the new psychology of the Fall abandoned any formal authority or rationale of creeds, dogma, or history and made the soul's downward journey a descent into the darkness which was a necessary prologue to self-discovery. The Fall was, accordingly, not the loss of self, but only the removal of that portion of the self which must be lost or discarded in order for the self to find its true being. One "fell" that he might be freed from convention, from the entanglements of prejudice and conformity, from everything that, for Wordsworth or Thoreau, denied the self's unique character. One fell into "non-being"; one rose to "being." Carlyle's Sartor Resartus and Emerson's "Fate" are texts in the history of that necessary privation which must accompany the almost ecstatic loss of that encumbrance which, until one "fell," would threaten one with a greater annihilation—the wastage of the mind and soul in an inimical, a debased world.

Thus the Romantic sensibility interpreted the Fall both morally and aesthetically. Shelley's Prometheus was chained to a rock in the Caucasus for an infraction of the divine law, but his real revolt was in behalf of art and the artist who annihilates a universe that he may create a new wonder. Romantic ontology made the Fall an inevitable prelude to self-realization; it
was the "noble doubt" which accompanied every moment of the inquiring spirit; it was not just one occasion in the artist's lifetime in which he "fell" and "rose"; it was, rather, a dramatic and personal necessity on each separate occasion when a work of art was undertaken. The Fall became, therefore, that necessary, obsessive moment which must precede the accomplishment of any work of art. Quite rightly the Romantic artist sought to be possessed by his "Daemon."

Dimmesdale's Fall, in the context of moral Romanticism, begins at a stage in his descent after the other and parallel Fall had already been under way. Our earliest clue is his conjecture that the confrontation of the single self and the world outside is inevitable and unceasing pain; yet that pain is the preliminary step to self-enlightenment; suffering has meaning and anguish has purpose. Dimmesdale first voices this argument when, during the interview in Governor Bellingham's mansion, Hester is found wanting in the religious instruction of her child. She appeals frantically to the minister, who speaks reassuringly: "'This child... hath come from the hand of God. . . . It was meant for a blessing. . . . It was meant, . . . as the mother herself hath told us, for a retribution too; a torture, to be felt at many an unthought of moment; a pang, a sting, an ever-recurring agony, in the midst of a troubled joy!'" Pain of the body one can endure; pain of the soul is the deepest hurt of all. Yet suffering and humiliation are the only valid ways toward understanding. As if in elaboration of this argument which he has placed, quite effectively, in Hester's defense, Dimmesdale then reasons on his own situation. If he were merely a clod or a beast, then he would never have been afflicted with the pain which tortures him. Since his refinement and perceptions are the inevitable accompaniments of guilt and sorrow, then he should be willing, albeit the flesh rebels, to endure the anguish gladly. The soul's doubt and the hurt of the spirit are God's twinges. "'Were I an atheist,' " he says, "'—a man devoid of conscience,—a wretch with coarse and brutal instincts,—I might have found peace, long ere now. . . . But, as matters stand with my soul, . . . all of God's gifts that were the choicest
have become the ministers of spiritual torment. . . I am,' "he cries, "'most miserable!' " The Romantic elevation of the exquisitely-tuned self seldom obtained so dire and haunting a commentary as this exaltation of a minister who had made adultery not a sin but a way toward the fullest accomplishment of the self.

Dimmesdale shapes the world into a solipsistic projection of his innermost guile and balances the universe on the pinpoint of his own unique cognition. Whatever he sees "is," and whatever he thinks becomes the truth of the absolute. He makes, at one stage of his pilgrimage, a quite subtle distinction between "penance" and "penitence." One is mere motion and gesture, the empty formalism of the hypocritical heart; the other is that profound abnegation of the soul which God requires before the sinner can be cleansed. However cogently he recognizes to what definition his own behavior conforms, Dimmesdale knows the words are but toys of speculation by which the mind can make its own truth in any way it desires. Perhaps, for the skeptic, only the Word is real after all: a word, any word can evoke a belief or call forth a thought. Yet Dimmesdale cannot escape the terrifying possibility that words may be freighted with meaning: even as he stands in the pulpit and makes open declaration of his shame and corruption, he is not quite sure but that his words may convey his inward confession. When the parishioners nod their heads and credit him with most saintly spirit, then Dimmesdale knows he is free: words are even emptier than the air which carries them.

The skeptic's and the Romantic's version of the Fall merge in one principle. The true and final damnation comes when, having chosen to descend in order that he may rise and having disjoined the several parts of his being in order that he may gain a truly unified sensibility, a man may so far widen the rifts in his consciousness that the real world becomes itself a riven and dismembered horror. Poe entered this frightening disjunction in "The Fall of the House of Usher" and in "The Raven"; and Melville sent Captain Ahab on a voyage which drove toward the obsessive and irrevocable dislodgment of the
world from a man's own being. Thus the Fall turns downward with an ever-increasing acceleration and leads, not to self-abnegation and eventual regeneration, but to ultimate annihilation.

Dimmesdale's Fall along this route of the destructive consciousness is as awesome as that of a soul plummeting through Milton's chaos to hell. We can follow that descent because Hawthorne has carefully charted it for us. It begins for Dimmesdale during the forest interview when he pledges with Hester that the two would leave Boston and thereby live for "self." Then Dimmesdale walks to the village and undergoes a sudden transformation which would delight the gloating eyes of Satan or Chillingworth. In yielding himself "with deliberate choice" to do that which "he knew was deadly sin," Dimmesdale finally acknowledged the long-hidden secrets of his bestial, fleshly nature. He never had effected a separation of flesh from spirit; the wickedness of one was the evil of the other; "the infectious poison of that sin," Hawthorne says, "[was] rapidly diffused throughout his moral system." Dimmesdale meets one of the saintly deacons of his church and nearly mouths some awful blasphemy; he passes "the eldest female member of his church" and almost speaks a dreadful heresy; he hastens by "a maiden newly won," for he can hardly keep from speaking a dreadful obscenity. It was, Hawthorne noted, "another man" who had returned from the forest interview. The Dimmesdale who emerged had lost hold on reality; his "mind vibrated between two ideas; either that he had [been]... only in a dream hitherto, or that he was merely dreaming... now." He had gone the dire and crucial way when, by condemning the world of the actual, he was betrayed by the very bestiality he had presumably renounced. His obsessions were not mere "dream"; they were themselves real.

Dimmesdale's fullest revelation comes at his public confession. It is hardly a "confession" at all, but rather a triumphant display of that egocentric conviction that man builds his universe from within. It is as though Emerson's declarative possibility of each man's self-truth were lit by hell fire. The con-
fession merits careful attention. Dimmesdale’s first words are not pleas for sympathy but cautions to Hester: “‘The law we broke!—the sin here so awfully revealed!—let these alone be in thy thoughts!’” The minister’s definition of “penitence” as opposed to “penance” is ironically appropriate. Then Dimmesdale continues: “‘It may be that, when we forgot our God,—when we violated our reverence each for the other’s soul,—it was thenceforth vain to hope that we could meet hereafter, in an everlasting and pure reunion.’” Note the emphasis on the enclosing “we” and “our” in Dimmesdale’s shared damnation—hardly a solace for the woman who had endured so patiently the trial of seven years.

Then occurs the most remarkable solipsistic argument of all: the dying man’s words are uttered, only to come back and turn in upon themselves as though the Word is the soul’s true currency and mortal flesh is but the vestment of regeneration in one man’s egocentric universe:

God knows; and He is merciful! He hath proved his mercy, most of all, in my afflictions. By giving me this burning torture to bear upon my breast! By sending yonder dark and terrible old man, to keep the torture always at red-heat! By bringing me hither, to die this death of triumphant ignominy before the people! Had either of these agonies been wanting, I had been lost for ever! Praised be his name! His will be done! Farewell!

Note the measured, and arbitrarily italicized, insistence on only two beings, God and Dimmesdale. The universe is lit, in the dying man’s eyes, by a light which shines only upon him; and when that light went out, only a murmur “rolled . . . heavily after the departed spirit.”

Perhaps the question is meaningless: did Dimmesdale die damned or saved? Chillingworth, for one, quite obviously believed that the minister’s soul had been cleansed at the last instant: the leech, “as one intimately connected with the drama of guilt and sorrow,” knelt beside the dying man and “repeated more than once, . . . ‘Thou hast escaped me!’ ” Chillingworth’s revenge, as monstrous as Hamlet’s aim of sending King Clau-
dius to suffer in eternity, did fail. Yet, for all the diabolical guile he had invented, Chillingworth may have merely embellished what had already been accomplished. Dimmesdale wasdamned the moment he regarded himself as a particular, a destined man whose sin could ennable and whose suffering might spiritualize the gross, earthly part. He committed himself to an irretrievable split in his life and being: the flesh he beat and denigrated as though it alone were the cancerous part; his spirit he exalted because, once freed of its gross partner, it could be lifted above the substantial shows of this earth. Here were combined the Puritan and the Romantic predicament: for the Puritan, and the Christian, a man must be brought low in order that he may rise; he must pass through corruption in order to reach incorruptibility; he must die in the flesh in order to be reborn in the spirit. For the Romantic, the soul, of the artist or perceiver, must first submit to and then transcend the world of "daily solicitude," in Coleridge's apt phrase; it must be humiliated so that it may enlarge; it must suffer so that it may create. The Christian narrative details the record of the fallen, the rescued, and the regenerated soul; the Romantic adventure narrates the inevitable descent and the recovery which bring that moment of ecstatic creative imagination.

Dimmesdale went the Puritan and the Romantic way toward damnation. He ordained his own corruption by convincing himself of his right to put an affront upon nature, his own and "human" nature; he fashioned the split in his own being, and he separated himself from those to whom he was most intimately bound. As he felt the ascent of his mind and the almost excruciating refinement of his soul, he became ever more the victim of the darkening of his consciousness as the implacable ring of fate closed round his whole being. Thus he suffered a double damnation: he died convinced of his moral freedom in a morally predestined world. His sin was hideous, not because of what he did to others—indeed, *The Scarlet Letter* clearly shows how little effect he had on anyone—but because he became that ultimate criminal in Hawthorne's order of humanity, the outcast of the universe.