

RESEARCH ARTICLE/ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ

# A Prologue to apology and futurism: Projections of nineteenth-century American Historicism in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Custom-House"

Yonca Denizarslanı 

Dr., Ege University, Faculty of Letters, Department of American Culture and Literature, Türkiye, e-mail: yonca.denizarslani@ege.edu.tr

## Abstract

Distracted by the contesting political debates between aristocratic republicanism of the Revolutionary era and democratic republicanism of the Antebellum; Nathaniel Hawthorne's narrative tone in his prologue, "The Custom-House" carries out the ideological assets of nineteenth-century American historicism in accord with which he laid ahistorical fictional elements failing to portray the entirety of early colonial New England in his 1850 novel, *The Scarlet Letter*. In this respect, "The Custom-House" portrays Nathaniel Hawthorne's Romantic projections aimed at consoling the contemporaneous polarization on the futurity of the nation as much as his redemptive quest for his ancestral past in colonial Salem. Thus, as the dean of American Renaissance authors and a fervent Romantic, Nathaniel Hawthorne's concern for an absolute-oriented moral vision, his apologetic perspective of the past, and his affirmative tone for the futurity of American democracy are most out loud in his writing. This study aims to focus on Hawthorne's apologetic and futurist projections of nineteenth-century American historicism in his prologue, "The Custom-House" for his 1850 novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, concerning his responses to the anxieties of Antebellum America.

**Keywords:** Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Custom-House," Nineteenth-Century American Historicism, Apology and Futurism

**Citation/Atf:** DENİZARSLANI, Y. (2023). A Prologue to apology and futurism: Projections of nineteenth-century American Historicism in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Custom-House" *Journal of Awareness*. 8(4): 525-544, <https://doi.org/10.26809/joa.2144>

**Corresponding Author/ Sorumlu Yazar:**  
Yonca Denizarslanı  
E-mail: yonca.denizarslani@ege.edu.tr



Bu çalışma, Creative Commons Atif 4.0 Uluslararası Lisansı ile lisanslanmıştır.  
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Nathaniel Hawthorne's prologue, "The Custom-House" for his 1850 novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, mirrors the ideological ruptures of Antebellum America as much as it manifests the genuine quests of his mastery in the art of fiction that is stimulated by an evocative revisit to his ancestral colonial past. Indeed, both motivations equally correspond to the providentialism of nineteenth-century American historicism regarding the long-dominant prevalence of early republicanism, against the grain of which the author himself strived to preserve his opponency. Moreover, having witnessed the moral duplicities of the Antebellum, as his peers in American Renaissance literature, Hawthorne was disillusioned and confused amid the darkening forces of his national present. In this respect, as a lucid expression of his angst for the regressive Antebellum present, his apologetic and futurist tone in the prologue had undercurrent alliances with early republican historicism, which evoked the self-reliant cause of early Puritanism as the founding myth of Revolutionary America, thereby sustaining the prevalence of time-bound principles of the newly born nation.

As a territorially expanding and demographically growing nation, Antebellum America was torn between unresponsive constitutive principles of aristocratic republicanism and the contesting claims of democratic republicanism concerning the debates on the early principles of liberty, security and right to property, which determined the access to democratic involvement and regional priorities over the political and economic extension of the federal power (White, 1991:57). Regarding the subsequent conditions following the westward expansion that challenged the foundational principles of early republicanism, such as the federalist versus the anti-federalist debate; nation's course of advancement towards liberal economy from its agrarian roots; and the slavery issue, nineteenth-century American historicism progressed along with contradictory ideological alliances between the pre-and post-Revolutionary America. Hence, as the recent approaches to nineteenth-century American historicism will illuminate in the related section

of this article, revival of the Reformed sense of history within the rhetoric of Revolutionary national identity was a persistent founding narrative of early republican historicism, which pervaded the Antebellum historicism with its resonating assurance in the providential exceptionality of America. Consequently, self-autonomous and self-reliant moral vision of Puritanism in the colonial beginnings was reassessed as foundational for the legitimacy of Independent American identity; thus, connecting the providential vision of the colonial Reformed polity with the secular constitutionality of republicanism in Revolutionary America. The enduring impact of republican historicism, with its innate millennial rhetoric until late nineteenth-century progressivism, has also received attention for its consequent moral duplicity in the Gilded Age. In this respect, the arguments on the phenomenal persistence of republican historicism all throughout nineteenth-century American historicism in the first section will suggest a comprehensive perspective on the deadlock of discursive practices that converted the metaphysical assets of European Romanticism into Reformed ideal of providentialism. Within the framework of these recent historical methods, the ideological ruptures and consequent disillusionments of the American Renaissance school will be examined with reference to the literary stance of Nathaniel Hawthorne in the subsequent second section, which will be foregrounding the last analytical section that aims to focus on the apologetic and futurist tone in "The Custom-House."

The literary legacy of Nathaniel Hawthorne has been most appreciated regarding his secluded inner struggles and anxieties for the national future at the threshold of the Civil War. "The Custom-House" has received attention for his genuinely expressed personal relation to his 1850 novel, *The Scarlet Letter*; his Romantic perception of subjectivity; and his choice of allegorical language for the exposure of his moral vision. The recent Hawthorne scholarship has also focused on his ahistorical fictional elements that failed to represent the penal culture of colonial New England. Partly because of his fictional appeal to the colonial past, less has been

mentioned about how he projected the tenets of nineteenth-century American historicism. On the other hand, his disillusionment by the enduring political anxieties imposed upon his private circumstances had a profound impact on his authorship. Moreover, as an ardent Romantic, Hawthorne had a peculiar moral vision as he was concerned with the metaphysics of German Idealism and its respective schools of thought in Western historicism. In this respect, this article aims to focus on the interconnectedness between nineteenth-century American historicism and the moral vision of Nathaniel Hawthorne with reference to his apologetic and futurist tone. The following sections preceding the analysis of "The Custom-House" will be foregrounding the intellectual and literary background of nineteenth-century historicism and Hawthorne's prominence in the American Renaissance.

## 2. THE LEGACY OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN HISTORICISM

Concerned with the resonating aspects of republican historicism, recent studies focus on the interconnectedness between the ideological appeals of the early republican spirit of the Revolutionary age and the providentialism of the colonial founders in grounding the millennial identity of the nation as a constitutive rhetoric of American political thought in nineteenth-century historicism. In his "Republicanism and Early American Historiography," Robert E. Shalhop asserts that the recent scholarship on American historicism has brought forth a new focus on the role of Whigs-oriented republicanism of the early Revolutionary era leaving aside the prioritized impact of Puritanism on American millennialism:

*Within the last several decades a dramatic reorientation has taken place in interpretation of the Revolutionary and early national periods. This new perspective is the result of scholars' recognition of the vital function of republicanism in early American society. As an increasingly sophisticated comprehension of republicanism continues to transform our understanding of the Revolution and its aftermath, it has the potential to collapse the idealist-materialist dichotomy in the progressive-*

*whig dialogue that has dominated twentieth-century American historiography.* (Shalhop, 1982: 334)

Likewise, Dorothy Ross agrees with Shalhop's remarks on this reoriented focus on the impact of republicanism, in her "Historical Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century America," highlighting that:

*The foundation on which to build an understanding of historical consciousness in nineteenth-century America has been constructed by two generations of scholars of Puritanism and millennialism-most notably Perry Miller, Ernest Tuveson, and Sacvan Bercovitch. More recently historians have recognized that republicanism is an essential part of the structure.* (Ross, 1984:909)

Her initial focus on the absence of historical consciousness in America drives attention to the cyclical sense of time. To Ross, the recurrence of innate teleological sense inherited from the pre-modern and secular historicism is evident in the constant reversal of God versus human dichotomy in conducting the course of history in the West. Stressing an undercurrent correspondence between republicanism and millennialism, Ross's comparative approach to nineteenth-century European and American historicism offers a comprehensive perspective on the absence of historical consciousness in today's American culture. Eventually, she asserts that the disparity between European and American progress equally broadened the gap between European and American thought. She exemplifies this phenomenon with the prolonged legacy of Romanticism-oriented historicism in America:

*Historicism took root in America just at the moment when Europeans began to recognize its disturbing relativistic implications and make efforts to escape them. This contrasting development offers opportunities for comparative analysis and requires a closer look at historical consciousness in America before the Progressives.* (Ross, 1984:909)

Furthermore, adhering to Morton White's suggestion, "that Progressives were the first social thinkers to take seriously the idea that society must be understood as a product of continuous historical

change" (Ross,1984:909), Ross' alerting tone for the underlying cultural disparities for the persistence of this gap makes sense:

*Indeed, that is something of an understatement, for Europeans preceded us in their awareness of historicism by almost a hundred years—rather long for a provincial lag. If White's timing is correct, and I believe it is, the belated appearance of historicism in American culture is more striking and problematical than he realized. (Ross, 1984:909)*

At this point, Ross calls for a definitive approach to historicism from its premodern origins to German Idealism until its evolution to the modern sense:

*. . . in its broadest, and deceptively simplest, meaning: historicism is the doctrine that all historical phenomena can be understood historically, that all events in historical time can be explained by prior events in historical time. Although traces of this understanding of history appeared in other epochs and places, its full comprehension was a late and complex achievement of the modern West. (Ross, 1984:910)*

Affirming contemporary theories on historicism concerned with the unprecedented regressions observed in the aftermath of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century revolutions, Ross is critical of the initial schools of historicism that projected an evolutionary course for the reception of historical sense in the West. Indeed, as a handover of epistemological turn from the late Medieval Ages towards the secular understanding; both phases equally dogmatized change according to the peculiarities of their own teleological sense. While the former, premodern phase of historicism, grounded the sense of history on a precept for eternity, rejecting the human aspect of historical change, the latter equally dogmatized change ". . . as a succession of qualitatively different phenomena—and not merely as random variations, the surface appearance of essentially unchanging things, or the recurring cycle of an endless wheel . . ." (Ross, 1984:910). Hence, with its emphasis on change as a break from custom and tradition, secular historicism prioritized progress as a precondition for historical sense, disregarding the entirety of a given epoch. As Shalhop and Ross admit, a regressive mode of historicism with

its vicious cycle of finitism and millennialism continued in American historicism until recent approaches focusing on the constitutive role of early republicanism that left aside the previously prioritized role of Puritanism.

In this regard, referring to Giambattista Vico's 1725 book, *New Science* is significant for his approach was the first comprehensive attempt for the study of history in relation to epistemology and its fundamental institutions in the West. As an earlier apostle of modern historicism, Vico's cyclical view of history was a challenge against the grain of eighteenth-century secular prospects of historicism as he objected to the future-oriented progressive frame for the rise of civilizations, which identified history with a true break from custom and tradition. Instead, Vico framed the rise of civilizations within the cycle / *ricorso* of three phases that were namely the divine, heroic, and human ages, all of which recur through an unceasing dialectic between the language and the constitutive knowledge of a given society (Vico, 2013: 22-23). Thus, while emphasizing human conduct in the historical sense, Vico rejected both the unchanging divine-oriented sense of time and the unilateral vision of secular historicism. In tune with Vico's *ricorso* of history, Ross, too, asserts that the continuities between historical phases persist through the binding mindsets, which recurrently prevail in discursive practices:

*The growing secular understanding of historical change was still associated with divine power and the immutable laws and values God had bestowed on humanity. The idea of progress that emerged in the eighteenth century, with its confidence in human powers and unidirectional sense of time, was a major step in the direction of historicism, but it did not always cross the divide. (Ross, 1984: 911)*

Eventually, the rhetoric of the Enlightenment philosophers, political treatises, declarations of rights, constitutional amendments, and legal practices gained legitimacy to the extent they confirmed the existing structures. While the reversal of God versus human dichotomy pertained to the precept of eternity as the generating force behind the teleological frame of time, handover of progressivism marked the

rhetoric of historicism in late nineteenth century. Underlining the long-term devastating impact of such metanarratives of varying schools of thought, Ross exemplifies the disparity between the rhetoric of progressivism and its deluded practice in the Gilded Age:

*The Gilded Age thus appears to be the decisive period in which the balance shifted from theological toward naturalistic world views, and from Providential toward historicist views of time. It was also the period in which Americans experienced massive historical changes that directly challenged their historical self-perception. Instead of progressively fulfilling its republican destiny, America appeared to have sunk into corruption and to be rapidly destroying the fundamentally agrarian and harmonious social basis on which republican virtue depended. (Ross, 1984:925)*

Turning to the undercurrent legacy of the teleological and divine sense inbred in Kantian and neo-Kantian prospects of nineteenth-century historicism, Ross' focus is remarkable, as she states that, secular or not, teleological sense of time was indeed the legacy of classical thought, which helped to dogmatize Medieval scholasticism that projected millennialism and an apocalyptic vision, bounding human reason to divine order (Ross, 1984: 910). In a likely pattern, as observed between the resonating aspects of premodern and modern/secular historicism, crisis and ambiguity seem to bring forth a pervasive appeal to the sense of time, in Michel Foucault's terms,

*. . . as if time existed only in the vacant moment of rupture, in that white, paradoxically atemporal crack in which one sudden formulation replaces another. Whether as a synchrony of positivities, or as an instantaneity of substitutions, time is avoided, and with it the possibility of a historical description disappears. (Foucault, 1972:166).*

An early forerunner of these modern approaches to historicism, Vico's quest for the epistemes of origins was a brave approach despite the *Zeitgeist* of his age:

*My science sheds light on the origins of both languages and letters, which were previously the despair of historians and philologists, whose bizarre and*

*grotesque opinions I shall review. The unfortunate reason for their error is obvious: they simply assumed that nations developed language first, and then letters. Yet languages and letters were born as twins and developed at the same pace through all three kinds. (Vico, 2013: 23)*

Concerning the coexistence of language and letters, Vico's negation of one of the founding dichotomies of Western thought, which prioritized phonocentrism over logocentrism was groundbreaking in eighteenth-century scholarship that preceded the alignment of Enlightenment and Romantic schools of thought. Until Jacques Derrida problematized Jean Jacques Rousseau's 1781 *Essay on the Origin of Languages* in his *Of Grammatology* (1967), the precepts that speech was prior to writing, and the authenticity assigned to oral stages as self-expressive modes of language were unchecked. Arthur Bradley mentions that, to Derrida, Rousseau's suggestion that language originated in *passion* rather than *need*; and his following assumption that oral tongues of the southern hemisphere originated in *passion*, whereas the written culture of the northern hemisphere originated in *need*, had unprecedented epistemological consequences (Bradley, 2008:127). Bradley underlines Derrida's emphasis that, by elevating the natural state, which is identified as an assumably genuine mode of being prior to civilizations, Rousseau not only proposed a metaphysical urge for the intuitive reasoning in association with *passion*-oriented southern tongues, but he also claimed a criterion of the civilized state and its binary opposite, the uncivilized; mapping this dichotomy onto geographical perception. Thus, fixing his own zero-point-orientation, which is northern *need*-oriented lettered culture, as the phase of digression from the initial *passion*-oriented tongue of the southern pole, Rousseau brought closure to all possibilities other than the linearity of evolution even if he targeted at the respective disintegrating progressive forces of modernity:

*So, for Rousseau, in other words, it becomes clear that the difference between the North and South Poles is not simply a geographical distinction but a linguistic, political and ultimately a moral one: the degeneration of language in modernity is, put another way, nothing*

*less than the becoming-North of the whole globe. (Bradley, 2008: 127)*

Moreover, what discontended Derrida most was the way Rousseau aligned primitivism and natural state with the realm of sublime, disregardful of the contemporaneous epistemic break with the absolute:

*It is clear, to begin with, that Rousseau's geographical claim militates against his larger linguistic, political and moral purpose. Quite simply, what defines the geography of the globe is its mobility: the world turns on its axis, seasons change and all positions – north, south, east and west – exist in relation to other positions. Yet, Rousseau's account of the origin of language tries to freeze this essential relativity and variability into a set of static, absolute differences. Every language is assigned an absolutely fixed position on the globe – either the North Pole or the South Pole – as if no position between these two extremities could possibly exist! (Bradley, 2008:128)*

Besides focusing on Rousseau's denial of relativism that fixed both the spatial and cognitive categories of the essence by assigning need-oriented advancement of letters, culture and civilization to harsh climatic conditions of the North, while allying the South with the sense of the eternal presence of the present that gave way to the passion-oriented origin of language; Derrida gives attention to his metaphysics of the presence which refers both to the precedence and substitution of the present:

*Thus the North, winter, death, imagination, representation, the irritation of desires-this entire series of supplementary significations-does not designate a natural place or fixed terms: rather a periodicity. Seasons. In the order of time, or rather like time itself, they speak the movement by which the presence of the present separates from itself, supplants itself, replaces itself by absencing itself, produces itself in self-substitution. It is this that the metaphysics of presence as self-proximity wishes to efface by giving a privileged position to a sort of absolute now, the life of the present, the living present. This metaphysics of presence constantly reappears and is resumed in Rousseau's text whenever the fatality of the supplement seems to limit it. It is always necessary to add a supplement of presence to the presence that*

*is concealed. "The great remedy to the miseries of this world" is "absorption into the present moment," says Rousseau in *The Solitaries*. (Derrida, 1997: 310)*

Engaged in problematizing the absolute-oriented perception of the sense of presence in Rousseau's thought, Derrida's critique of Romanticism highlighted the regressive forces of change in modernity. Once disillusioned by the promise of revolutionary breaks from the retarding oppression of the traditions and customs, which failed to evade the prevalence of the past, Romanticism presumed a metaphysical sense of time as a niche for the ceaseless substitutions of the presence of the past to escape the angst of the present. In this respect, although the mindset of the Romantics retained the linearity of progress inherited from the secular vision of historicism, their restless need for the absolute, which is frequently associated with the present, was the deadlock of nineteenth-century metaphysics:

*Every time that Rousseau tries to recapture an essence (in the form of an origin, a right, an ideal limit), he always leads us back to a point of full presence. He is less interested in the present, in the being-present, than in the presence of the present, in its essence as it appears to itself and is retained in itself. Essence is presence. As life, that is as self-presence, it is birth. And just as the present goes out of itself only to return to itself, a rebirth is possible which, furthermore, is the only thing that permits all the repetitions of origin. Rousseau's discourse and questions are possible only in the anticipation of a rebirth or a reactivation of the origin. Rebirth, resurrection, or reawakening always appropriate to themselves, in their fugitive immediacy, the plenitude of presence returning to itself.*

*That return to the presence of the origin is produced after each catastrophe, at least in so far as it reverses the order of life without destroying it. (Derrida, 1997: 309-310)*

As evidenced by Derrida's critique of Rousseau's deluding assumptions that turned against his redemptive advocacy of primitivism, agency of the speaking subject mattered for the unfolding of established meaning categories. Affirming what Vico had foreseen with the constant reorientation of reason towards metaphysics, Derrida offers a

comprehensive analogy between early Romantic school and late-nineteenth-century neo-Kantian historicism:

*This play of the supplement, the always open possibility of a catastrophic regression and the annulment of progress, recalls not only Vico's ricorsi. Conjugated with what we have called geometric regression, it makes history escape an infinite teleology of the Hegelian type. In a certain way, considering that history can always interrupt its own progress, (and must even progress in regression), (re) turn behind itself, Rousseau does not make "the work of death," the play of difference and the operation of negativity, serve in the dialectical accomplishment of truth within the horizon of parousia. But all these propositions may be inverted. This finitism of Rousseau emerges also on the basis of a providentialist theology. Interpreting itself, it effaces itself on another level as it reduces the historic and negative to the accidental. (Derrida, 1997: 298)*

Already foreseen by Vico's cyclical turns of history observed by the recurrence of constitutive knowledge, which laid the foundations of Western societies; inbred metaphysical mindset of nineteenth-century European historicism flourished with the unprecedented times of crisis following the political, economic, and cultural revolutions of the precedent century. Distanced from the initial assets of Kantian thought, late nineteenth-century historicism reformulated the perspective of time and being within neo-Kantianism as identified with the Hegelian approach to historical sense focusing on human conduct and progress through a ceaseless series of dialectical relationships. Nonetheless, the Hegelian dialectics pertained to the founding status of the teleological mode of being as a recurring episteme of truth from the classical, Medieval, Reform, secular and Romantic schools of thought. Hence, essentialism remained as a legitimate discourse for articulating hierarchal power relations concerning the fluid display of agencies in the West. Regarding this ideological backdrop, Michel Foucault, too, denied history as progress. To him, successive revolutions, which came to represent progressive breaks with the past, were only power handovers in discursive practices. Concerning this epistemological

handover, in his *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), Foucault's rejection of progressive sense of history was devastating in the sense that he deconstructed the dichotomous aspect of subject versus object relations and their assigned paradigm shifts:

*My aim was to analyse this history, in the discontinuity that no teleology would reduce in advance; to map it in a dispersion that no pre-established horizon would embrace; to allow it to be deployed in an anonymity on which no transcendental constitution would impose the form of the subject; to open it up to a temporality that would not promise the return of any dawn. My aim was to cleanse it of all transcendental narcissism; it had to be freed from that circle of the lost origin, and rediscovered where it was imprisoned; it had to be shown that the history of thought could not have this role of revealing the transcendental moment that rational mechanics has not possessed since Kant, mathematical idealities since Husserl, and the meanings of the perceived world since Merleau-Ponty - despite the efforts that had been made to find it here. (Foucault, 1972: 203)*

Eventually, all these contesting but Euro-centric viewpoints on historicism become further complicated when applied to the asymmetrical proceeding of modernity in the colonial and post-Revolutionary conjuncture of the American strand. From self-autonomous Puritan rule to Anglican handover with the inception of common law in 1648, extended restraint of the imperial metropole brought the downfall of the ecclesiastical body politic and magistral authority in mainland New England colonies. Nevertheless, despite the decline of Calvinism and the manifesting rule of Anglicization before the end of the seventeenth century, pre-Revolutionary spirit revived the Reformed character of early Puritans as exemplar for the founders of American democracy. In this regard, Dorothy Ross' remarks on the recurrence of providentialism in Revolutionary America affirms Vico's approach to the correspondence between the past and present modes of constitutive knowledge:

*The success of the Revolution and the establishment of republican government in the Constitution were largely understood in America as events in Christian*

*and republican time. Protestant Americans had available in the history of New England a Christian paradigm to which the establishment of the new nation could be assimilated. Reformation prophecy allowed the millennium to be seen as a progressive historical period into which the reformed world was about to enter, and the Puritan errand had moved the scene of that hope to the New World. When independence was won, fervent Protestants identified the American republic with the advent of that millennial period, which was to usher in the final salvation of mankind and the end of history. America thus represented a radical break in history and a radical breakthrough of God's time into secular history. The country's progress would be the unfolding of the millennial seed, rather than a process of historical change. (Ross, 1984: 911-12)*

As illuminated by Ross's emphasis on the difference between the finitism of millennialism and progressivism of secular historicism, both of which were, indeed, originally teleological; epistemological fusion of the theological and secular backgrounds of thought within the revolutionary rhetoric of America prevailed in the republican historical sense:

*In republican historical perspective, too, the successful establishment of republican government appeared as a radical break in the old cycles of history. The "country" republicanism that most deeply influenced Americans sought above all to protect republican values from the corrosion of time, and after the Constitution this goal appeared within reach. By creating a new kind of democratic republic, America appeared to have solved the ills that had always destroyed republics in the past. The cyclical view of history in classical republicanism began to give way to the possibility of perpetual life. (Ross, 1984: 911-12)*

Evident in the rhetorical appeals of Revolutionary America and the early republicanism of the United States, nineteenth-century American historicism was disregarding the dialectical evolution of historicism from its German Idealist origins towards neo-Kantian prospects in European schools of thought, which defied the unchanging universal criteria of the absolute and recovered the underestimated status of human conduct in the historical sense. Thus, American historicism prevailed its stance in accord with the

early Romantic school. As a newborn democracy with distinctive conditions and boundless prospects concerning the liberties guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution, American exceptionalism offered an unmatched revolutionary spirit compared to the political and social conjuncture of the French Revolution and its regressive aftermath in nineteenth-century Europe. Hence, as Ross suggests, far away from the European disillusionment with the inadequacies of Kantian thought, which proceeded with the advancement of earlier phases of modernity, nineteenth-century American intellectual background of historicism laid its foundations on the notion of *Manifest Destiny*. Associated with the pre-Revolutionary spirit and identified with the self-autonomous Puritan character of the colonial beginnings, the belief in the *Manifest Destiny* of the nation responded to the cultural anxieties of the provincial and pre-industrial America. Dwelling in a rhetorical alignment with the Reformed idea of calling, thus, *Manifest Destiny* proposed a futuristic prospect for the U.S. as a territorially expanding and technologically progressing nation, while also connecting the immediate presence with a founding past. From the very beginning, then, American political thought was hindered by a persistent sense of past and a chaotic present that loomed the unprecedented fears of fall and decay from the Republican principles in the Antebellum America. Nevertheless, although late nineteenth-century American historicism confirmed the momentum of the Hegelian thought towards a dialectical and progressive sense of history, it pertained to most of the German Idealism-oriented prospects, resonated with Kantian essentialist tenets in Hegelianism.

Rereading the motifs of apology and futurism in "The Custom-House" with reference to the highlighted assets of nineteenth-century historicism unfolds Nathaniel Hawthorne's sense of angst and his consequent restless urge for an absolute that came out as an assurance in the finitism of American future. In tune with his contemporaneous American Renaissance authors and artists who were highly engaged in the metaphysics of German Idealism, Hawthorne's redemptive retrospect of his Puritan ancestry



not only revived the founding Reformed ethos of the pre-Revolutionary spirit but also confirmed the providentialism of the republican rhetoric for coming to terms with the immediacy of the cultural anxieties of Antebellum America. Thus, concerned with his own unresolved inner struggles depicted by his secluded experience in Salem Custom House, his prologue to *The Scarlet Letter*, reveals Hawthorne's Romantic authorial ethos and motivation for inventing his historical romance with ahistorical narrative traits and thematic elements, retaining his apologetic and futurist tone ingrained within the legacy of nineteenth-century historicism.

### 3. THE LEGACY OF NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE AND "THE CUSTOM-HOUSE"

"The Custom-House" has provoked lengthy studies in Hawthorne scholarship concerned with the author's artistic highlights he had already established with his preceding 1846 essay "The Old Manse." As he himself emphasized the connectedness between his 1850 prologue, "The Custom-House" for *The Scarlet Letter* and his earlier sketch on his time in the Old Manse, Hawthorne's self-expressive literary figure seems to represent the artistic mold of most of his writing. In her article, "From 'The Old Manse' to 'The Custom-House': The Growth of the Artist's Mind," Roberta F. Weldon compares Hawthorne's turns of mood from the happier and secluded sanctuary of the Old Manse to the unbearable decaying institutional boredom of the times he spent in Salem Custom House, where he was appointed as a surveyor of customs:

*The reason Hawthorne describes one world as a place of life and creative growth and the other as the locus of suspended existence and infertile decay is clear. Each locale represents a different perspective on the key question of the artist's relationship with the world. At the Old Manse he is almost able to attain the perfection of solitude, while at the Custom House he is locked in isolation and personal disintegration.* (Weldon, 1978:39)

Likewise, Carlanda Green's "The Custom-House: Hawthorne's Dark Wood of Error"

associates Hawthorne's significance with that of Dante's spiritual journey, where he followed the path of the masters of epic poems in his self-discovery along his own inferno of the Puritan past:

*Whereas Odysseus made his trip to discover his own fate, Aeneas to discover the future of the Roman nation, and Dante to find the fate of the mortal soul, Hawthorne makes his journey to find his own artistic fate. That is not to say that Hawthorne went into the Custom-House with such a question in mind, any more than Dante, Aeneas, or Odysseus knew what they would learn from their experiences. It is to say, however, that in Hawthorne's aesthetic re-creation of his experience the Custom-House, he rediscovers his identity as an artist.* (Green, 1980:184-185)

As both Weldon and Green focused on the connectedness between Hawthorne's literary stance and his bewildering experience with the politics of his time, "The Custom-House" appears as a personal manifesto foregrounding the narrative and thematic significance of his *The Scarlet Letter*. Hence, regarding his legacy in American Renaissance, Hawthorne set the characteristics of the national literature by his assumably limited autobiographical voice, through which he tried hard to balance his privacy and textual self in tune with a peculiar subjectivity projected by the neo-Platonic and German Idealist assets of Romanticism. Bearing the same burdens as his peers in the Antebellum, who highlighted a distinctive American identity in their writings, while at the same time reflecting the dangling political atmosphere; Hawthorne's writing reflected the prevalent aspects of nineteenth-century American historicism. Thus, while Hawthorne's redemptive tone represented his haunting ancestral history, his romantic effort in penning the inner psychology of crime and punishment and the corresponding outer conditions of Puritan society in his own Antebellum times confirmed to the resonating "cycle of anxiety and assurance," which Dorothy Ross defined as the engine of republican and evangelist rhetoric in American historicism:

*The jeremiad and the republican rhetoric of corruption formed an alliance, and the cycle of anxiety and assurance they jointly set in motion could be self-*

*perpetuating. During the 1820s and 1830s, a new generation, anxious about its ability to sustain the virtuous republic of the founders, eased its qualms with a new burst of evangelical piety and nationalism that sealed America's millennial identity. (Ross, 1984:913)*

Hawthorne's rhetorical *anxiety* recurred in his apologetic tone, through which he attempted to review the historical conditions of seventeenth-century New England, while his *assurance* in the futurity of his nation promised to ". . . relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow" (Hawthorne, 1994:34) as he ended the first chapter of *The Scarlet Letter*.

In his "Hawthorne's Counterfeiting History in *The Scarlet Letter*," Lee Trepanier states that sharing the burden of such contemporaneous issues with his fellow American Renaissance authors and artists, Hawthorne's disillusionment with the insufficiency of the politics concerning the controversy of slavery was doubled with his haunting past:

*For Nathaniel Hawthorne, the burden of history particularly weighed heavily upon him, for one of his ancestors had participated in the Salem witch trials—another original sin, to which the nation had been party. Hawthorne also confronted the contemporary controversy of slavery from his involvement in politics, such as in the 1852 presidential campaign for Franklin Pierce, when afterwards he saw his friend, as president, unable to deal effectively with the sectional controversy over slavery. The mistake of Salem and the controversy of slavery were part of Hawthorne's personal and political past that had created a burden that he was to cope with in the present. Whether escape would be possible was the continuing question in Hawthorne's literature as he devised a new literary form to explore this possibility: the counterfeit history, or more commonly known, the allegorical romance. (Trepanier)*

Highly relevant to Hawthorne's responsive appeal to American historicism in his prologue, Trepanier's point is remarkable for he suggests binding elements between the author's idiosyncrasy and his seclusion from political activism into redemptive inner struggles. Moreover, referring to Edgar Allen Poe's criticism of Hawthorne, Trepanier asserts that

while Hawthorne's ahistorical vision of the colonial Salem in *The Scarlet Letter* provided him an escapist fictional setting, the aesthetic possibilities restrained by his choice of allegorical romance were hindering his excellence:

*Poe specifically criticized Hawthorne's literature for its "mystic" or "allegorical" qualities. . . . Hawthorne's use of allegory for Poe was that it had failed to create an aesthetic distance for the narrative voice because allegorical writing was inherently moralistic. For Poe, the writer should create literature as an "ever-present force of imagination" characterized by "its own hue" and "its own character" instead of crafting a didactic presentation of "morals" attached to narrative. (Trepanier)*

Nonetheless, Trepanier appreciates Hawthorne's invention of allegorical romance as his fictional niche, where he chanced to recover from his haunting past while projecting a promising future by matching "the sainted Anne Hutchinson's" cause with Hester Prynne's self-reflexive struggles transgressing the moral vision of Puritanism.

Although Herman Melville himself despised allegory in his fiction in agreement with Poe, what attracted him most about Hawthorne was his personal seclusions from the darkening forces of his own past and present. In his, 1850 essay, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," Melville reviewed Hawthorne's short story collection, *Mosses from an Old Manse*, and highlighted the rendering force of his self-torturing struggles with his ancestral past:

*Whether Hawthorne has simply availed himself of this mystical blackness as a means to the wondrous effects he makes it to produce in his lights and shades; or whether there really lurks in him, perhaps unknown to himself, a touch of Puritanic gloom, --this, I cannot altogether tell. Certain it is, however, that this great power of blackness in him derives its force from its appeals to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free. For, in certain moods, no man can weigh this world, without throwing in something, somehow like Original Sin, to strike the uneven balance. At all events, perhaps no writer has ever wielded this terrific thought with greater terror than this same harmless*

*Hawthorne. Still more: this black conceit pervades him, through and through. You may be witched by his sunlight, --transported by the bright gildings in the skies he builds over you;--but there is the blackness of darkness beyond; and even his bright gildings but fringe, and play upon the edges of thunder-clouds.-- In one word, the world is mistaken in this Nathaniel Hawthorne. He himself must often have smiled at its absurd misconceptions of him. He is immeasurably deeper than the plummet of the mere critic. For it is not the brain that can test such a man; it is only the heart. You cannot come to know greatness by inspecting it; there is no glimpse to be caught of it, except by intuition; you need not ring it, you but touch it, and you find it is gold. (Melville)*

In his comprehensive analysis of Hawthorne's impact on American literature, *The School of Hawthorne*, Richard H. Brodhead introduces "fiction of prophecy" as an allying authorial ethos between Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville. Commenting on Melville's essay "Hawthorne and His Mosses," Brodhead claims that "He (Melville) ends his essay prophesying, on the basis of Hawthorne, a plural incarnation of genius, a general infusion of literary -spiritual power that could live in him as well" (Brodhead, 1986:29). Thereby, to Brodhead, Melville's appreciation of Hawthorne extends beyond his rightly authorial ethos towards a founding spirit with which Melville "asserted his own literary-prophetic vocation" (29). Brodhead also adds that, ". . . in reality Melville borrows the millennial rhetoric of 1840s American nationalism to announce the actual practicability, in the contemporary American world, of that spiritually potent authorship he has just dreamed" (28). Renown to his modern readers as among the leading mavericks of political dissidence in his age, Melville's urge for allying himself with the "literary-prophetic vocation" of Hawthorne is as striking as his "borrowed millennial rhetoric of 1840s" in his "Hawthorne and His Mosses." Indeed, Melville's skepticism of the absolute-oriented mindset of his epoch; his elaborate appeal to the deluded Romantic perception of nature; and his defying tone against transcendentalism in his 1851 novel *Moby-Dick, or the White Whale* have been reviewed as his distinguishing authorial stance since his rediscovery by the New Critics in early

twentieth century. Besides, his efforts to identify himself with Hawthorne's legacy betrays his recurring suspicious point of view on the over-aggrandized futurity of America in his sea novels. Nevertheless, this apparent duplicity of Melville alone evidences the confusing political strains of the Antebellum era, through which Hawthorne's delusions, too, should be judged. As observed in most nineteenth-century American authors, Hawthorne's genuine urge for national literature alongside the anxieties of his age marks him among the established literary figures of the American Renaissance.

#### 4. APOLOGY AND FUTURISM IN NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE'S "THE CUSTOM-HOUSE"

As aforementioned, the turbulent era of the Antebellum and its corresponding appeal to nineteenth-century American historicism were the concerns of the leading contemporaneous American intellectuals and litterateurs. Renowned for his advocacy of democratic republicanism and critique of Whigs-republicanism, Nathaniel Hawthorne was impatient with the successive conditions of post-Revolutionary and Antebellum America as he reflected in the prologue, "The Custom-House" for his 1850 novel, *The Scarlet Letter*.

Despite his commitment to political reforms, though, Hawthorne was equally anxious about the failures of both the Whigs-oriented republicanism and democratic republicanism, especially on the controversy of slavery. Already distracted with the total duplicity of the Antebellum politics, the Whig-republican environment of Salem Custom House was amongst the foremost hindering forces on his psychology during his three-year appointment as surveyor of customs. Moreover, as the ancestral abode of his Puritan forefathers, renowned for their share of the persecutions of the Quakers and Salem witch trials, Salem stimulated Hawthorne's redemptive connection with the past. Indeed, his constant sense of angst for the disintegrating forces of his contemporaneous times catalyzed an apologetic turn to remind his readers the providential ethos of the early founders. For example, his apologetic sense is

most explicit in the initial part of his prologue, explaining his nostalgic attachment to Salem:

*The sentiment is probably assignable to the deep and aged roots with which my family struck into the soil. It is now nearly two centuries and a quarter since the original Briton, the earliest emigrant of my name, made his appearance in the wild and forest-bordered settlement, which has since become a city. And here his descendants have been born and died and have mingled their earthy substance with the soil; until no small portion of it must necessarily be akin to the mortal frame wherewith, for a little while, I walk the streets. In part, therefore, the attachment which I speak of is the mere sensuous sympathy of dust to dust. Few of my countrymen can know what it is; nor, as frequent transplantation is perhaps better for the stock, need they consider it desirable now.* (Hawthorne, 1994:5)

As an apt expression of his reverence for his ancestral founders of Salem, to whom he is attached with “*mere sensuous sympathy of dust to dust*”; Hawthorne’s angst unfolds with his estrangement amongst his “*countrymen*” to whom “*frequent transplantation is perhaps better for the stock.*” His disdain for the uprootedness targets the time-bound decay of aristocratic republicanism facing the massive, devastating cultural changes of his age.

Thus, following his appreciation of the Reformed ideal of the colonial founders, identical to his sense of rootedness that his forefathers had “*struck into the soil,*” Hawthorne despises the inadequacy of early aristocratic republicanism, which failed to respond to the controversies of the Antebellum, by admitting that his nostalgic appeal with a Salem story had a healing force offering a sanctuary aligned with his art of fiction in resisting the momentous darkness of his present:

*The figure of that first ancestor, invested by my family tradition with dim and dusky grandeur, was present to my boyish imagination, as far back as I can remember. It still haunts me and induces a sort of home-feeling with the past, which I scarcely claim in reference to the present phase of the town. I seem to have a stronger claim to a residence here on account of this grave, bearded, sable-cloaked, and steeple-crowned*

*progenitor, - who came so early, with his Bible and his sword, and trode the unknown street with such a stately port, and made so large a figure, as a man of war and peace, - a stronger claim than myself, whose name is seldom heard and my face hardly known. He was a soldier, legislator, judge; he was a ruler in the Church; he had all the Puritanic traits, both good and evil.* (5)

Evident in his comparison between the rooted stance of his colonial forefathers and the uprooted ethos of the Antebellum Salem, Hawthorne’s impatience for his regressive present precedes his apologetic tone for his own ancestral colonial past.

While he is unaware of the rejuvenating creative powers yet to come with his discovery of the scarlet letter in the archives of the Custom House, the author’s prolonged descriptions and portrayals of the depressing Whig-republican figures of custom officers and the identical emblematic outer and inner decoration of the building depict his endurance to the time-worn marginalized ethos of the Antebellum Salem since its handover to the rule of aristocratic republicanism. Before finalizing the three-year term appointment at Salem Custom House following his dismissal with the next elections, Hawthorne is inspired by his coincidental encounter with the riddled image of the scarlet letter amongst the archival documents abandoned since the decease of his colonial predecessor, Jonathan Pue, ‘*the Surveoyor of his Majesty’s Customs*’: “*There was something about it that quickened an instinctive curiosity, and made me undo the faded red tape, that tied up the package, with the sense that a treasure would here be brought to light*” (20). With his innate dark Romantic faculties conjured for the invention of Hester Prynne’s story, Hawthorne’s apologetic revisit to the penal culture of the colonial Salem released him from the burdens of the ancestral past and the strains of his Antebellum America. Admitting his unrestrained fictional appeal to his Salem story, Hawthorne says that:

*I must not be understood as affirming, that, in the dressing up of the tale, and imagining the motives and modes of passion that influenced the characters who figure in it, I have invariably confined myself within the limits of the old Surveoyor’s half a dozen sheets of*

*foolscap. On the contrary, 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 content for is the authenticity of the outline. (22)*

As clearly stated by the author himself, for reasons explicable according to his ideological backdrop, he sanctified his heroine Hester Prynne for a delayed future, when her wisdom and self-esteem will be appreciated most with her self-reflexive enduring character, transcending the moral boundaries of Puritanism. Relevantly, Hawthorne's heroine comes out as a monument of individualism not only because she chooses to stay in the colony and endure the moral burden of her punishment, but also because her integrity and self-righteous upright endeavors to sustain a presence in Salem challenge the moral duplicity of the community. On the other hand, by allying his adulteress with martyrdom; the avenging husband with the demonizing powers of science; and the apostolic clergy with a self-deceptive sacrilege in his slow decay, Hawthorne could not transcend the limits of his moral vision. From our modern perspective, these character traits are equally oppressive as the morality of seventeenth-century Calvinism. Therefore, he could neither embrace the future nor could he resolve his fight with his haunting past. Furthermore, through this peculiar resemblance between Hawthorne himself and his heroine, both of whom decided to stay in Salem and attach themselves with the innate "touch of Puritanic gloom," as Melville mentioned in his "Hawthorne and His Mosses"; Hawthorne's revival of his forefathers' times reflects more of his unresolved anxieties of his times than his inner struggles with the ancestral past. Ironically, despite his opponent stance against the failures of aristocratic republicanism of the Antebellum, regarding its unchanging constitutionality and futile institutionality; Hawthorne's approach to the colonial past as an exemplar phase of struggles concerning the freedoms versus order dichotomy sounds similar to the providentialism of early republican historicism, which revived the founding ethos of self-autonomous colonial Puritanism onto newly born Independent American democracy, thereby sustaining the millennial prevalence of the nation. This timeless appeal to the founding ethos of the

colonial Reformed polity observed in his narrative tone, therefore, evidences the reassessments of the recent scholarship on nineteenth-century American historicism mentioned in the first section.

To begin with Hawthorne's initial autobiographical treatise with the reader, whose assumably responsive sympathy for the binding power of a textualized self seems to inspire the author's motivation for talking about himself; an explicit precept of Romantic selfhood, as a projection of the concurrent aspects of the particular and the universal experience, pervades the historical and fictional connectedness between the "The Custom-House" and *The Scarlet Letter*:

*The truth seems to be, however, that, when he casts his leaves forth upon the wind, the author addresses, not the many who will fling aside his volume, or never take it up, but the few who will understand him, better than most of his schoolmates and lifemates. Some authors, indeed, do far more than this, and indulge themselves in such confidential depths of revelation as could fittingly be addressed, only and exclusively, to the one heart and mind of a perfect sympathy; as if the printed book, thrown at large on the wide world, were certain to find out the divided segment of the writer's own nature, and the complete his circle of existence by bringing him into communion with it. It is scarcely decorous, however, to speak all, even where we speak impersonally. But - as thoughts are frozen and utterance benumbed, unless the speaker stand in some true relation with his audience - it may be pardonable to imagine that a friend, is listening to our talk; and then, a narrative reserve being thawed by this genial consciousness, we may prate of the circumstances that lie around us, and even of ourself, but still keep the inmost Me behind its veil. (Hawthorne, 1994:1-2)*

Hawthorne's elaborate attempt for distinguishing between his textual self and his inexplicable selfhood, which he hoped to preserve as his "inmost Me behind its veil" (2), explains why he, himself is surprised as another "autobiographical impulse should twice" in his "life have taken possession" of him "in addressing the public" (1) following his time in the Old Manse. Thus, dwelling on a peculiarly Romantic subjectivity, which presumed an intuitive manifestation of a

metaphysical absolute, Hawthorne foregrounds the reliability of his account of "The Custom-House" as a prologue to his assertions of the timeless legacy of the colonial New England with its foundational experience of freedom versus order. To quote from Immanuel Kant's metaphysical remarks on perception and the connectedness of experience from his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), to him, "*Judgment in general is the ability to think the particular as contained under the universal. If the universal (the rule, principle, law) is given, then judgment, which subsumes the particular under it, is determinative as transcendental judgment it states a priori the conditions that must be met for subsumption under the universal to be possible*" (Kant, 2001:504). A disciple of German Idealism, Hawthorne, too viewed the sense of time, place, and being from a metaphysical essence; and his historical sense was not challenged by the paradigm shifts on going with Neo-Kantianism, as aforementioned by Dorothy Ross' comments on the belated ascendancy of progressive historicism in America.

Hence, Hawthorne's insistence on the absolute interplay between his Puritan past and his regressive present inspired his creativity, through which he hoped to recover from the haunting legacy of his forefathers while at the same time preserving his faith in the futurity of his nation. By supposing a vibrant ideological display between his Puritan past and Revolutionary present, he combines the Reform idea of providentialism and the futurism of secular prospects of historicism, as Shalhop and Ross argue with their focus on the appeals of early aristocratic republicanism towards millennialism. However, regarding his adherence to democratic republicanism, Hawthorne's appeal to millennialism despises the static, unchanging conservatism of aristocratic republicanism. As observed in his endurance to the Whig-republican atmosphere of Salem Custom House despite the presidential term of the democrats; Hawthorne's involvement in politics and his consequent disbelief in the reforming potential of his respective opponent party hindered his vision for a progressive America. Nevertheless, his self-torturing pessimism disappears with his discovery of the scarlet letter hidden and preserved from the decaying forces of time that his Custom House

and hometown of Salem had already yielded. In this respect, Hawthorne's historical appeal to his ancestral colonial past shares much of the ideological assets of nineteenth-century American historicism with its regressive raptures such as the persistent millennial assurance for the providential future of the nation.

Following his introduction with the foundational aspects of his ancestral past, Hawthorne portrays the inevitable decay of Custom House with its Whig-republican political environment and its advocate officers. The author's observations of the Custom House building and its constitutive figures are therefore significant for evidencing the prevalence of early aristocratic republicanism in a democratic era. Beginning with a comparison between Revolutionary and Antebellum silhouettes of Salem, he feels nostalgic seeing the perpetual decadence of his ". . . native town of Salem, at the head of what, half a century ago, in the days of old King Derby, was a bustling wharf, - but which is now burdened with decayed wooden warehouses and exhibits few or no symptoms of commercial life" (2). Across the view of the decaying wharf, he introduces the Custom House building as follows, "*From the loftiest point of its roof, during precisely three and a half hours of each forenoon, floats, or drops in breeze or calm, the banner of the republic; but with the thirteenth stripes turned vertically, instead of horizontally, and thus, indicating that a civil, and not a military post of Uncle Sam's government, is here established*"(2). Yet soon after the yielding civil identity of post-Revolutionary Salem, identified with the "banner of the republic," Hawthorne's depiction of the hovering federal eagle at the entrance of the building enhances the impression of a military republic with its contrasting image of the federal enforcement:

*Over the entrance hovers an enormous specimen of the American eagle, with outspread wings, a shield before her breast, and if I recollect right, a bunch of intermingled thunderbolts and barbed arrows in each claw. With the customary infirmity of temper that characterizes this unhappy fowl, she appears, by the fierceness of her beak and eye and the general truculency of her attitude, to threaten mischief to the inoffensive community; and especially warn all*

*citizens, careful of their safety, against intruding on the premises which she overshadows with her wings. Nevertheless, vixenly as she looks, many people are seeking, at this very moment, to shelter themselves under the wing of the federal eagle; imagining, I presume, that her bosom has all the softness and snugness of an eider-down pillow. But she has no great tenderness, even in her best of moods, and sooner, or later, - oftener sooner than late, - is apt to fling off her nestlings with a scratch of her claw, a dap of her beak, or a rankling wound from her barbed arrows. (3)*

As evidenced from the description of the federal eagle, the narrative tone of Hawthorne dreads the potentially persistent rule of federalism by which he himself feels targeted, being the temporarily appointed surveyor of customs at Salem Custom House by the opponent democratic party. The embracing yet aggressive mood of the eagle represents the anxiety of uncertainty in the Antebellum America. In his "The Scarlet Letter: Through The Old Manse and The Custom House," James M. Cox points out the psychological effect of the hovering image of the federal eagle upon Hawthorne as an equally distracting and inspiring source:

*Yet there is a vengeance in Hawthorne, for he has suffered decapitation—to use his indulgent metaphor—at the hands of his country, and has thus felt the predatory impulse of the American eagle, emblem of his nation's freedom. In that rejection, he can feel sympathy for his Puritan forebears who were themselves rejected by the history which produced America. Yet whatever sympathy he feels for them is tempered by his knowledge that they too had rejected those before (or above) them and those after (or below) them—had really decapitated a king in England and had scourged dissenters in New England, and would condemn him as no more than an idle scribbler. Thus if he is rejected by the present, he knows that he would be even more fiercely rejected by the past. Yet because he can feel their eyes upon him, he admires the stern morality of his forefathers, the Puritans, and willingly takes the shame of their guilt upon himself. That is the fine balance vision. For every criticism he directs outward upon the Custom House, his country, and his ancestral past, he directs an equal criticism upon himself. This self-judgment, instead of paralyzing him, enables him to feel a bond of sympathy for the*

*past; it tempers every line of Hawthorne's prose with a fine equilibrium between sympathy and judgment, between author and community, between present and past. (Cox, 1975: 441-442)*

Eventually, although Hawthorne resents the oppressive demands of the aristocratic republican character associated with New England, his obvious discontent with the current retreating image of Salem since the 1812 Battle of New Orleans, expresses his nostalgia for his hometown:

*Such occasions might remind the elderly citizen of that period, before the last war with England, when Salem was a port by itself; not scorned, as she is now, by her own merchants and ship-owners, who permit her wharves to crumble to ruin, while their ventures go to swell, needlessly and imperceptibly, the mighty flood of commerce at New York and Boston. (3)*

As Revolutionary Salem lost its vibrancy to new centers of commerce, the shipmasters of the old times were replaced by the 'smart young clerks':

*Here likewise, - the germ of the wrinkle-browed, grizzily-bearded, careworn merchant - we have the smart young clerks, who gets the traffic as a wolf-cub does of blood, and already sends adventures in his master's ships, when he had better be sailing mimic boats upon a mill-pond. (3)*

Entering the building, his description of the Whig-republican officers as "a row of venerable figures, sitting in old-fashioned chairs, which were tipped on their hind legs back against the wall" (4) identifies the idle and old look of the officers with that of the decaying republican outlook of the Salem Custom House. Often sleepy and without energy, then, "These old gentlemen - seated, like Matthew, at the receipt of custom, but not very liable to be summoned thence, like him, for apostolic errands - were Custom-House officers" (4).

Nonetheless, despite the present regressive look of his native town along with its constitutive character of the Custom House, Hawthorne confesses that he was attracted to the place with his ancestral roots. His sense of rootedness in the place, especially with his ancestral prominence in the colonial history of Salem, is indeed one of the binding aspects of his sense

of the past. Reading his sense of place from the lens of his ancestral past, he feels that his roots in colonial Salem provided him with an assurance of the futurity of the nation aside from the tensions of his ambivalent present. Remembering Derrida's criticism of Rousseau's notion of the subsequent presence of the past with the present, Hawthorne's sanctuary in his ancestral past represents a throwback from the uncompromising outside.

Consequently, with his authorial motivation, the impact of this ancestral alignment results in an apologetic narrative. However disappointed was Hawthorne with his forefathers' involvement in Anne Hutchinson's trial and the witch hysteria of colonial Salem, he endorses the historical picture of his ancestors with their "Bible and sword." This apologetic tone of Hawthorne is also evident in *The Scarlet Letter*, where he introduces the mindset of his cleric characters with detailed descriptions. Unless the reader is well-acquainted with the Reformed ethos of Calvinist Puritanism and its requirement of prophetic vocation for the clergy amongst the members of their congregation; the slow downfall of the apostolic Reverend Dimmesdale and his burdened conscience under his self-deluding, unspeakable sin, would have been obscure. On the other hand, by digging into the guilty conscience of the Reverend in his share of adultery with Hester Prynne, Hawthorne chances to judge the self-righteous and upright stance of his forefathers, who were undersigned for the execution of the Quakers and the witch trials in colonial Salem. Moreover, no matter how far it is from the historical reality; by juxtaposing the decaying soul of the Reverend and the martyred social status of Hester Prynne, the author's focus on the discriminative aspects of colonial penal culture based on class, gender, and race codes, reverses the stratified hierarchical relations of the early Calvinist New England. As Edgar J. McManus puts forward, based on the ratio of the body politic of the early ecclesiastical authority of Calvinist New England, class and gender codes of the punitive laws were designed to preserve the ascendancy of higher classes and their males, who were believed to be sanctified with their

elect status identified either with their material and vocational success (McManus,1993:38-39). Frederick Newberry, too, comments that,

*Had The Scarlet Letter never been written, many of us would never have been aware that in mid-seventeenth-century New England even Puritan divines were implicated in cases of adultery and that way-ward women faced the threat of being physically as well as socially stigmatized by a burning A. One of Hawthorne's particular gifts is that he not only brings such facts to light but also that from them he spins stories of such psychological and moral power that they have fascinated readers for generations and promise to do so for generations to come. (Newberry, 1987: 264)*

Thus, Hawthorne's coincidental discovery of the scarlet letter among the abandoned colonial archive of the Custom House aggrandizes the long-forgotten magistral regime of Puritanism. Far from the colonial history of criminal injustice and the pervasive cruelty of the corporal punishments of varying degrees such as, branding, whipping, admonition, gallows, bilboes, pillory, or badge of shame (McManus, 1993: 101-110); the mystified depiction of the embroidered scarlet letter appears as a badge of sanctified spirit:

*It was the capital letter A. By an accurate measurement, each limb proved to be precisely three inches and a quarter in length. It had been intended, there could be no doubt, as an ornamental article of dress; but how it was to be worn, or what rank, honor, and dignity, in by-past times, were signified by it, was a riddle which (so evanescent are the fashions of the world in these particulars) I saw little hope of solving. And yet it strangely interested me. My eyes fastened themselves upon the old scarlet letter and would not be turned aside. Certainly, there was some deep meaning in it, most worthy of interpretation, and which, as it were, streamed forth from the mystic symbol, subtly communicating itself to my sensibilities, but evading the analysis of my mind.*

*While thus perplexed . . . I happened to place it on my breast. It seemed to me, - the reader may smile, but must not doubt my word, - it seemed to me, then, that I experience a sensation not altogether physical, yet almost so, as of burning heat; and as if the letter were*



*not of red cloth, but red-hot iron. I shuddered, and involuntarily let it fall upon the floor. (21)*

Through the narrative perspective of the author, the image of the scarlet letter is not only detached from its reality but delayed for an obscuring intuitive vision away from the faculties of his mind. As he places the scarlet letter on his breast, his spiritual union with that of the bearer of the scarlet letter is complete. Thus, in contrast to the unproportionate descriptions and portrayals of the cleric characters in *The Scarlet Letter*, which offer the readers a historical picture of the Reformed mindset, the embroidered image of the scarlet letter deludes the factuality of the badge of shame as a penal practice in the colonial Salem. On the other hand, Hawthorne's sensation of the 'burning heat' on his breast can be regarded as an implication of the branding practice of colonial corporal punishments. Consequently, rereading Nathaniel Hawthorne from the philosophical and historical conjunctures of his epoch requires an elaborate focus on his symbolism and allegoric style as much as a quest on his deluded projections of nineteenth-century American historicism.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Nathaniel Hawthorne's apologetic portrayal of the declined ethos of the Calvinist colonial New England in his "The Custom-House" revives the fundamental assets of nineteenth-century American historicism as he associates the dialectical relationship between authority and transgression with the self-autonomous Reformed ethos of the founding colonial period. Evidenced with his comparison between the ascendancy of the Revolutionary Salem and the declined prominence of the Antebellum Salem, Hawthorne's revival of his colonial ancestral past is a reminiscence of the millennial appeal of early republican historicism, through which Revolutionary rhetoric projected the longevity of the time-bound constitutionality of early republicanism. In a likely manner with early republican historicism and its recall for the providential rhetoric of the colonial founders; the redeeming power of the apologetic and futurist tone in "The Custom-House" restores the legacy of American exceptionality onto which

Hawthorne projects the prominence of enduring Reformed Ideal. His fascination with the colonial past is a response to the overwhelming anxieties of the Antebellum era, which defied all forms of certainty and assurance in national futurity.

However, recent approaches to the legal history of colonial New England put forward a comparative reading of the records of penal practices as the primary source of meaning-production alongside works of literature. Furthermore, the contemporary focus on the penal history of the body as the most oppressive site of law and order illuminates the ways through which colonial New England's social order and penal culture had laid its imprint on the bodies imagined as deviant from the confines of the community. As a scholarly correspondence to the recent historicism on colonial studies, contemporary legal historians and critics have also reoriented their focus on cultural history. In this respect, Richard J. Ross's survey on the recent perspectives in the field is noteworthy as he suggests that "a work that could be done at the intersection of legal history with intellectual and cultural history" (Ross,1993:32) would illuminate the interwoven display of discursive practices of a given historical phenomenon. Concerning this contemporary epistemic turn towards inter-textuality, which searches for new ways to recuperate the misrepresentations of the colonial criminal and deviant bodies, Foucault's re-definitions of 'power-knowledge relations' have been fundamental in the related field of study. In his *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), Foucault dethroned the powerful status of *knowledge* that the Age of Reason had crowned as a neutral domain outside of the domain of power relations:

*... we should abandon a whole tradition that allows us to imagine that knowledge can exist only where the power relations are suspended, and that knowledge can develop only outside of its injunctions, its demands and interests. Perhaps we should abandon the belief that power makes mad and that, by the same token, the renunciation of power is one of the conditions of knowledge. We should admit rather that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it*

is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same power relations. (Foucault, 1975: 27)

With his perspective of 'power-knowledge relations,' Foucault's approach focused on "the political investment of body" and examined the operation of "the power and knowledge relations that invest human bodies and subjugate them by turning them into objects of knowledge" (28). By considering the techniques and symbolic qualities of corporal punishments, then, Foucault's concern was about studying how power-knowledge correlative operated in different historical periods "whether they seize the body in the ritual of public torture and execution or whether they are addressed to soul-..." (28). He compared eighteenth- and nineteenth-century penal laws and executions to modern penal institutions. Whereas the former was based on corporal punishments and public executions, the latter, the modern prison, changed its focus from the body and became interested in the soul and investigation of criminality rather than the factual peculiarity of the crime itself. According to Foucault, modern-day prisons provide what the modern 'power-knowledge relations' require from the criminal bodies, which is to retreat from the healthy and normal environment that conforms to power. On the other hand, earlier corporal punishments and public executions sustained the prevalence of power by displaying its terror in the public sphere. Thus, rather than dealing with how Western legal history progressed in time, Foucault emphasized how the domain and operation of power was indeed a hand-over, incessantly in a transition process, in which knowledge became the most insidious of site of oppression. In her study entitled "The Cultural History of the Corset and Gendered Body in Social and Literary Landscapes," Melis Mulazimoglu Erkal's remarks are noteworthy as she highlights Foucault's grandiloquent approach to the body as the most contested site of power relations:

*In a similar way, Foucault in Discipline and Punish (1975) argues that individuals are under constant*

*surveillance and regulation in ways that are often invisible, leading to normalization and acceptance of such systems. Docile body shows how individuals in their bodies/environments are subject to regulations, transformations, and improvements. In this context, body is regarded as the site of regulation and target of power. In hegemonic masculine social-space, corsetry is a significant device of clothing reinforcing this idea. (Mulazimoglu Erkal, 2017: 113)*

Concerning her analysis of the cultural constructions of the corset as a device for the surveillance of the gendered bodies; the conjuring transgressive power of Hester Prynne's scarlet letter over Hawthorne's dark Romantic vision marks the potential pervasiveness of the marginal-other that Foucault termed as the most assertive site of power relations, as much as it refers to the persistence of the *abject-other* in Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980) regarding her critique of the discursive constructions that aimed to oppress the uncontrollable assertions of the innately chaotic natural state attached to the female body.

Overall, Foucault's defiant approach to the progressive sense of history in agreement with Jacques Derrida's critique of the absolute-oriented historicism of Romantic school of thought, his emphasis on the discursive practices of power is significant as he unveils the ideologically insidious strategies of historical representations of body. Furthermore, for his approach denounced the diachronically represented progressive schemes of historicism, the recent studies on the discursive alliance between the absolute-oriented sense of present of nineteenth-century American historicism and the resonating regressive colonial past has gained a new scholarly ground, unraveling the discursive offshoots of American historicism prevalent in our day.

In conclusion, Nathaniel Hawthorne's Romantic moral vision and his redemptive connection to his ancestral Puritan past prevail in the narrative perspective of "The Custom-House," disclosing a genuine artistic effort unmatched among his peers in American Renaissance. Alongside his prominence among the canonical authors of his age, Hawthorne's engagement with the Romantic

precepts that projected a metaphysical lens and its consequent appeal to intuitive reasoning, provided him with an absolute-oriented sense of time that helped to calm his anxieties concerning both his past and present. In tune with the philosophical assets of his contemporaneous American historicism, Hawthorne believed in the providential significance of his nation as much as he condemned his own failures and inner struggles. Hence, his apologetic and futurist tone in his "The Custom-House" ironically corresponds to the finitism and millennialism of the early Revolutionary republican historicism that recurringly endured through the devastating conditions of the Antebellum and Postbellum America. As the recent American historicism has asserted, belated progressive historicism in America stemmed from the long domination of aristocratic republicanism, which laid its foundations from the colonial ideal of Reformed polity and its constitutive institutions. In this respect, despite his opponent stance against aristocratic republicanism and its colonial offshoots revived in the Revolutionary and Antebellum America, Nathaniel Hawthorne's ancestral bonds were wide ajar when he was descending the inferno of his disintegrating nation, surrendering to the captivating decadence of his Custom House.

## REFERENCES

- BRADLEY, A. (2008). *Derrida's Of Grammatology*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- BROADHEAD, R.H. (1986). *The School of Hawthorne*. NY: Oxford University Press.
- COX, J.M. (1975). "The Scarlet Letter: Through The Old Manse and The Custom House." *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. Vol. 51, No. 3, pp. 432-447. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26435686>. Accessed on 25 August 2023.
- DERRIDA, J. (1976). *Of Grammatology*. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (trans.). Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- ERKAL, M. M. (2017). *The Cultural History of the Corset and Gendered Body in Social and Literary Landscapes*. *European Journal of Language and Literature*, 3(3),109-118. <https://doi.org/10.26417/ejls.v9i1.p153-153>. Accessed on 21 July 2023.
- FOUCAULT, M. (1974). *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*. A. M. Sheridan Smith (trans.). NY: Pantheon Books.
- (1975). *Discipline and Punish the Birth of the Prison*. Vintage Books.
- GREEN, C. (1980). The Custom-House: Hawthorne's Dark Wood of Error. *The New England Quarterly*. Vol. 53, No. 2, pp. 184-195. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/365169>. Accessed on 19 August 2023.
- HAWTHORNE, N. (1994). *The Custom-House. The Scarlet Letter*. NY: Dover Publications.
- KANT, I. (2001). Critique of Judgement. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Vincent B. Leitch, (ed). NY:W.W. Norton & Company, pp. 504 -582.
- KRISTEVA, J. (1982). *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Leon S. Roudiez (trans.). Colombia University Press.
- MELVILLE, H. (1850). "Hawthorne and His Mosses." *The Literary World*. [Hawthorne and His Mosses, by Melville, 1850 \(ibiblio.org\)](https://www.ibiblio.org) Accessed on 28 July 2023.
- McMANUS, E.J. (1993). *Law and Liberty in Early New England: Criminal Justice and Due Process, 1620-1692*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press.
- NEWBERRY, F. (1987). A Red-Hot A and a Lusting Divine: Sources for The Scarlet Letter. *The New England Quarterly*. Vol. 60, No. 2, pp. 256-264. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/365609>. Accessed on 11 August 2023.
- ROSS, D. (1984). Historical Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century America. *The American Historical Review*. Vol. 89, No. 4, pp. 909- 928. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1866398>. Accessed on 11 August 2023.
- ROSS, R. J. (1993). The Legal Past of Early New England: Notes for the Study of Law, Legal Culture, and Intellectual History. *The William and Mary Quarterly*, vol.50, no.1,1993, pp.28-41. [www.jstor.org/stable/2947234](https://www.jstor.org/stable/2947234). Accessed on 13 September 2017.
- SHALHOPE, R. E.(1982). Republicanism and Early American Historiography. *The William and Mary Quarterly*. Vol. 39, No. 2, pp. 334-356. <http://www.jstor.com/stable/1918756>. Accessed on 25 August 2023.
- TREPANIER,L.(2012). Hawthorne's Counterfeiting History in The Scarlet Letter. <http://anamnesisjournal.com/2012/01/lee-trepanier-2/#more-41>. Accessed on 20 August 2023.

VICO, G. (1999). *New Science*. NY: Penguin Books.

WELDON, R.F. (1978). The Old Manse to "The Custom-House": The Growth of the Artist's Mind." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*. Vol. 20, No. 1, pp. 36-47. Published by: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40754520>. Accessed on 25 August 2023.

WHITE, G.E. (1991). *The Marshall Court and Cultural Change 1815-1835*. NY: Oxford University Press.