

Sources for Hawthorne's Treatment of a White Mountain Legend

David S. Ramsey

Litera scripta manet.

("The written word remains." Latin proverb)

Oral tradition is the foundation of literature.

(N. Scott Momaday)

In "The Native Voice," Pulitzer laureate N. Scott Momaday observes that "American literature begins with the first human perception of the American landscape expressed and preserved in language" (6). As a novelist writing for a predominantly white audience, Momaday, a Kiowa/Cherokee Indian, is keenly aware that the craft which provided him with success and fame was an alien one, albeit one which could be appropriated to preserve and disseminate native ones. For while in Europe the history of written literature goes back thousands of years, and while even in that upstart and mongrel of a language, English, one can trace a literature of well over a thousand years (and thereby provide "British" literature a sufficiently long pedigree), in America the written word is but a relatively recent import. Yet if the written literature of the British colonies which became the United States was like a tadpole that had recently sprouted legs, a creature in process that could only peep out above the water upon the land it was eager to claim and croak about, but could not, for want of sufficiently developed lungs, it was not the case that America had yet no lungs, no voice, no stories, and no literature. The primacy of the written word in literature may be a given because the very word "literature"—from the Latin *littera*, "letter"—implies a written text; and the primacy of the written word in literary study has certainly been given theoretical cachet through the work of Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and the literal *literalizing* of metaphor; and more significantly, the primacy of the written word in literature may be given its prag-

matic due because it concretizes into artifact and relies upon the most developed of human senses, the sense through which we sight-brained creatures receive most of our information: vision. Yet if we consider “primacy” not in terms of privilege (whether theoretical or practical) but in terms of sequence, we are left with the inescapable primacy of oral literature and the doubly inescapable primacy of Native American oral literature over Euro-American written literature. But come the tadpoles did, and finding their lungs and land legs, croaked ever so loudly in ever so increasing swarms, that the native voices would seem to have been completely drowned out.

The native voices do remain, however, both in active oral traditions and in equally active written traditions. And allowing for the paradox of the survival of native oral traditions through printed texts, often recorded by non-aboriginals, these voices have become woven into the fabric of American literature, sometimes appearing in the most unlikely of places, like the golden threads that embellished the scarlet letter of Hester Prynne.

In 1832, Nathaniel Hawthorne was a young man in a young country, a writer eager for American materials to celebrate and croak about. The historical romances of Sir Walter Scott were all the rage in both Europe and America, and the young American Republic paradoxically looked to the Old World for models on how it could establish a cultural identity independent of European themes and materials. In a review of Cooper’s *The Spy*, W. H. Gardiner had called in 1822 for American writers to sing of their country as Scott had sung of his, and he offered what he considered the three most promising American historical resources: the colonial period, the Indian wars, and the Revolution (255-57).¹ Hawthorne was to make good use of the first of these, as *The Scarlet Letter*, the Puritan-era background to *The House of the Seven Gables*, and many of his tales attest. These other two American “matters,” however, did not strike the flint of Hawthorne’s imagination, at least not in a sustained and direct enough manner to kindle a significant amount of fiction. Hawthorne was interested, after all, more in *psychomachia* than in warfare, more interested in the conflict between head and heart than in the conflict between redcoats and bluecoats, or between “palefaces” and “redskins.” Still, the Hawthorne corpus does contain some important tales that do address the “Indian question” or involve Native American literary precedents: “Roger Malvin’s Burial,” “The Duston Family,” and “The Great Carbuncle.” This essay addresses the latter tale in an attempt to explicate the oral tradition that lay behind its composition and to identify

some features that Hawthorne used from this tradition that have previously been unrecognized by scholars.

Responding to the call for a national literature which had been building in crescendo during his college years, Hawthorne put together his first collection of short stories, *Seven Tales of My Native Land*. This collection never saw the light of day, but it did see the light of fire: it was withdrawn from submission and largely destroyed in 1826 by a Hawthorne frustrated with his own work and with his would-be publisher's taking too long with his manuscript. Another intended collection, *Provincial Tales*, was also never published, though many of its short stories were published in Samuel Goodrich's *Token* of 1832. With two strikes, it seems that what Hawthorne most needed was a walk. At the time, one of the most popular forms of literature both in Europe and in America was travel literature, and like many writers, from Alexis de Tocqueville and Washington Irving to Jack Kerouac, Hawthorne took to the road to discover the America he sought to write about. Biography became literature: Hawthorne provided as a narrative frame to unify his third intended collection of short stories, *The Story Teller*, the wanderings and warblings of a young, itinerant narrator, Oberon, who was in many ways but a thinly-veiled persona of Hawthorne himself. In a letter to Franklin Pearce, a college friend who would later become President, Hawthorne maps out a journey that would take him throughout New England, New York, and into the southern parts of Canada: "I am very desirous of making this journey on account of a book by which I intend to acquire an (undoubtedly) immense literary reputation" (15: 224). A cholera outbreak foiled some of his plans, but Hawthorne did travel extensively, including to the White Mountains of New Hampshire, and his travels yielded both travel sketches and short stories. So far as an "immense literary reputation" was concerned, this journey did not bear immediate fruit (his publisher rejected it), but it did bear Hawthorne piecemeal, anonymous fame. Many of the tales written during this period were published in various magazines over the next several years, and finally many of them were reassembled for a different project, less the framing narrative, the *Twice-told Tales*, published in 1837.²

In one of Hawthorne's travel sketches based on his visit to the White Mountains in 1832, "Our Evening Party Among the Mountains," Hawthorne's narrator finds his quest for literary materials leading him and his fellow travelers into a conversation about Native American traditions. What especially sparks discussion is a tale from "the mythology of the savage" which held that an immense "inestimable jewel"

was suspended atop Mount Washington and was guarded by a spirit that “bewildered the adventurer” who longed to possess it. This legend of “the ‘Great Carbuncle’” was “communicated to the English settlers” and was “hardly yet extinct” in the nineteenth century. Hawthorne further observes that while he “could frame a tale with a deep moral” upon “the vain search for an unearthly treasure,” he would have a difficult time peddling it to a buying public:

The hearts of the pale-faces would not thrill to these superstitions of the red men, though we spoke of them in the centre of their haunted region. The habits and sentiments of that departed people were too distinct from those of their successors to find much real sympathy. It has often been a matter of regret to me, that I was shut out from the most peculiar field of American fiction, by an inability to see any romance, or poetry, or grandeur, or beauty in the Indian character, at least, till such traits were pointed out by others. I do abhor an Indian story. Yet no writer can be more secure of a permanent place in our literature, than the biographer of the Indian chiefs. His subject, as referring to tribes which have mostly vanished from the earth, gives him a right to be placed on a classic shelf, apart from the merits which will sustain him there.

(10: 428-29)³

Hawthorne would never write a sketch or tale based upon Indian biography, but he did develop the above Native American legend into a full, stand-alone tale.⁴

In his historical footnote to “The Great Carbuncle,” Hawthorne concedes that while Native America did in fact have something to contribute to an American literature, taste precluded him from offering it in its native garb:

The Indian tradition, on which this somewhat *extravagant* tale is founded, is both *too wild and too beautiful*, to be adequately wrought up, in prose. Sullivan, in his history of Maine, written since the Revolution, remarks, that even then, the existence of the Great Carbuncle was not entirely discredited. (9: 149, emphasis added)

Hawthorne’s reference to James Sullivan, an established historian, authenticates belief in his tale’s controlling symbol, but the allusion is not made in the same spirit as his fabricated provenance for the scarlet letter. Rather, it indicates a certain degree of discomfort with his subject, and this is understandable when we locate this story in the context of biography. Emerging from the period of Hawthorne’s most prolonged literary pilgrimage in the winter of 1832-33, when he was search-

ing for appropriate, solid material upon which to establish himself as a writer and celebrate America's resources, the spurious tale of a mythical gem might seem contrary to his purposes. Niagara, Ticonderoga, the Erie Canal, the White Mountain Notch—these were substantive and offered the travel writer/romancer sure footing upon which his eye, imagination, and pen could depend. But the Great Carbuncle? It already begins adrift in the "fairy precinct," and any romance built upon it could have no hope of the moorings necessary for his readership to otherwise suspend disbelief.

Perhaps it is partly for this reason that Hawthorne decided to ground his tale through characterization, for his adventurers all represent stock types whom a nineteenth-century audience could readily identify, often with Bunyanesque names to make the unlikely and unpromising progress of these pilgrims allegorically clear from the beginning: the aged Seeker, who has quested after the gem since youth; the Cynic, who wears darkened spectacles and came 3,000 miles only to prove the carbuncle a "humbug;" Dr. Cacaphodel, the alchemist who wants to reduce the jewel "to its first elements;" the merchant, Master Ichabod Pignort, who plans to sell the precious stone to the highest bidder; the "bright-eyed" maudlin London poet, who wants the carbuncle's radiance to make his poetry "gleam brightly;" the Lord de Vere, who wants the gem to illuminate his ancestral castle, shining on armor and escutcheon to keep "bright" his family's heroism; and finally the handsome, newly wed young couple, Matthew and Hannah, who seek the stone to provide light in their humble cottage, enabling them "'to see one another's faces'" at night (9: 153-57).⁵

Insomuch as Hawthorne's primary source for this tale was probably oral folklore, a full accounting of what Hawthorne knew about this legend—and therefore, of what he thought was "too wild" and "extravagant"—is impossible to reconstruct from textual sources. We are nonetheless fortunate to have at least a partial record from the couple whom Hawthorne likely relied upon most heavily: Ethan Allen and Lucy Crawford, Hawthorne's guides and hosts at their Franconia Notch inn when he toured the White Mountains in 1832. In a letter to his mother dated September 16, 1832, Hawthorne writes:

I cannot find time to tell you all my adventures. I passed through the White Hills and stayed two nights and part of three days in Ethan Crawford's house. Moreover, I mounted

what the people called a “plaguey high-lifted crittur” and rode with four gentlemen and a guide six miles to the foot of Mt. Washington. (15: 226)

Hawthorne here indicates an appreciation for the local dialect, and he had good reason to be a careful, studious listener. Ethan Allen Crawford was a renown storyteller, and he kept an album to which visitors contributed their own adventures and poetic insights, adding to the White Mountain lore that they would hear at the Crawfords’ hearthside. For the adventures of the Great Carbuncle, however, the Crawfords were a veritable fount of first-hand information, and it is likely that when Hawthorne stayed with them he heard Ethan recount the story of an expedition after the famous stone that his father, Abel Crawford, took part in. One of Crawford’s later guests noted the skillful narratorial performance of his host when he was regaled with White Mountain lore:

Mr. Crawford’s many adventures among these mountains should be heard from his own lips to be fully appreciated. As told by another they lose the advantage of his own giant figure, emphatic gesticulations, and quaint original style. (Willey 83)

This oral source for Hawthorne was fortunately preserved: written down and published by Crawford’s wife, Lucy, but using the first person “I” as Ethan. Although Lucy Crawford may be playing the role of modest, retiring wife by erasing her authorial presence, in her preface Lucy offers that the story she presents is told in Ethan’s “own language.” This may also explain why Crawford’s account of the carbuncle myth is relatively slight: she relates her husband’s “misfortunes and adventures, briefly as possible, it always being a rule with him to make short stories and not go a great way round to effect a small thing.” Although not published until 1846, some 14 years after Hawthorne’s short story was possibly written, Crawford’s *History of the White Mountains* simply reproduces in print the lore that Ethan and Lucy Crawford had been passing along verbally for years, and which they in turn had lived or received verbally down through the generations of settlers and native Abenaki Indians. The most relevant passage from Crawford’s *History* is as follows:

It has been supposed by some that there were valuable mines some where about the mountains. I have searched for these also, but found none. I recollect a number of years ago, when quite a boy, some persons had been up on the hills and said they had found a golden treasure, or carbuncle, which they said was under a large shelving rock, and

would be difficult to obtain, for they might fall and be dashed to pieces. Moreover, they thought it was guarded by an evil spirit, supposing that it had been placed there by the Indians, and that they had killed one of their number and left him to guard the treasure, which some credulous, superstitious persons believed, and they got my father to engage to go and search for it; providing themselves with every thing necessary for the business and a sufficient number of good men and a minister well qualified to lay the evil spirit, they set out in good earnest and high spirits anticipating with pleasure how rich they should be in coming home laden with gold; that is, if they should have the good luck to find it. They set out, and went up Dry river, and had hard work to find their way through the thickets and over the hills, where they made diligent search for a number of days, with some of the former men spoken of for guides, but they could not find the place again, or anything that seemed to be like it, until worn out with fatigue and disappointment, they returned; and never since, to my knowledge, has anyone found that wonderful place again, or been troubled with the mountain spirit. (106-07)

Crawford's narrative provided Hawthorne with a precedent for focusing on the colonists' experiences, not the natives', in his treatment of the carbuncle story. And it should be noted that while Hawthorne's sketch and tale refer to a native "superstition" or "myth," Crawford himself does not employ these terms: indeed, his account is given as a factual, autobiographical experience, not as some American gothic ghost story. Still, Crawford does provide important features that would make for great gothic fare but which Hawthorne avoids: the guardian was none other than the ghost of an Indian slain by his fellows to keep their treasure from falling into the hands of others—presumably the white men. More significantly, Crawford reveals that real-life adventurers were still taking the Indian lore seriously enough to warrant their bringing along a minister to exorcise the evil guardian. That Hawthorne sets his story in Puritan times, an era haunted by fear of witches and Indian "deviltry," makes his characters' dismissal of the legendary spirits all the more unsettling and suspect—an anachronism (intentional or not) that draws attention to their inability to comprehend the dangerous quest they had undertaken. And like Crawford, who confesses to have also searched for the fabled treasure in vain, in spite of nearly two centuries of warning and failure by earlier adventurers, including his own father, Hawthorne's narrator ends his story with the admission that he, too, "was lured, by the faith of poesy, to be the latest pilgrim of the Great Carbuncle" (9: 165)—this, in spite of his own tale's warning and the disastrous fate of some of his characters.

Hawthorne refused to admit into his tale an Indian ghost, and he may have found another feature of the folklore—Indian sagamores and their literal transformation into stone—too “extravagant.”⁶ Yet if Hawthorne’s tale passed over Native American characters, it does not overlook their fate. These sagamores turned into stone may have provided Hawthorne with the description and fate of one of his Euro-American adventurers: the Seeker. As perhaps the only character to derive from native sources, the Seeker is appropriately “Indianized”—“clad in the skins of wild animals” and keeping “the deer, the wolf, and the bear” as “his most intimate companions” (9: 150-51). Having exhausted his life in his quest for the gem, and intent on bearing it with him to his grave—an intention that protects the gem from being peddled, pulverized, or poeticized as effectively as the native guardian(s)—the Seeker figuratively becomes as adamant as the gem itself when his quest is completed:

At the base of the cliff, directly beneath the Great Carbuncle, appeared the figure of a man, with his arms extended in the act of climbing, and his face turned upward, *as if to drink* the full gush of splendor. But he stirred not, no more than if *changed to marble*.

(9: 162, emphasis added)

All of Hawthorne’s pilgrims expiate their folly one way or another, and half of them do so by transferring their desires to worthless objects. Besides the young couple, who alone survive in one piece after seeing the carbuncle because they develop the simple wisdom to “reject a jewel which would have dimmed all earthly things,” the only two to succeed in finding the carbuncle are the Seeker, who is petrified, and the Cynic, who is blinded when he finally takes off his darkened spectacles to fix “a bold stare full upon the ruddy blaze of the Great Carbuncle” (9: 165, 163). This sequence, from stone-dead (as if) in the act of drinking, to blind on account of a powerful flash, derives from the biographies of actual, specific persons whom Hawthorne probably heard Crawford tell of or whom Hawthorne may have read about in the inn’s guest album. Close examination of materials surrounding the history of the White Mountains, then, reveals some of Hawthorne’s character as more than types, though it does complicate (if not frustrate) our genealogy for the Seeker by presenting two possible sources: Native American and Euro-American. In any case, these sources come from the oral tradition and have been overlooked by scholarship, possibly because these sources were not connected to

the folklore of the carbuncle itself but to then-recent White Mountain history, and it was Hawthorne who introduced these in his treatment of the legendary jewel.⁷

In her *History*, Lucy Crawford tells us that one of the laborers working on the road through the White Mountain Notch in 1828 had a fatal seizure when he left the house in the middle of the night to drink from a nearby stream: “while *in the act of drinking* he was taken with a fit,” and his fellows found him the next morning “lying *dead and stiff*, with his face in the water.” The death of this young man brought a heavy burden upon his friends, who depended upon him to help support their aged, blind mother. Crawford explains:

I think *her blindness was caused by a shock from lightning*, which had affected her eyes, and *they could not restore her sight, although some skilful [sic] physicians had tried*. (122-23, emphasis added)

Crawford draws from the young laborer's death a lesson on “the uncertainty of life and the importance of being prepared to meet death” (123)—a guiding moral that paradoxically animates the Seeker to seek his death, knowing as he does that only in his quest does he remain alive, and that success will bring him death: “The pursuit alone is my strength—the energy of my soul . . . ! Were I to turn my back upon it, I should fall down dead” (9: 154). And like the poor woman blinded by an immense flash of lightning, the Cynic, too, tries all he can to restore his eyesight in vain—wandering the world in seek of a cure, pilgrimaging to Saint Peter's in Rome, and finally perishing in the great fire of London. These parallels of cause and effect, of sudden death and statue-like quaffing pose, of sudden blindness brought on by the awful, terrible flash of Nature's power—juxtaposed in Crawford's *History* (as the relationship between people) and proximate in Hawthorne's tale (as the Seeker and Cynic's doom for beholding the Great Carbuncle)—are rather dramatic and striking, and they suggest specific, previously unrecognized contributions of Ethan Allen or Lucy Crawford's voice in Hawthorne's text. Undoubtedly, there are many more instances, and much more substantive, of the influence of the oral tradition on one of Salem's most famous men of letters, but the spoken word is ephemeral, and the oral tradition thereby difficult to document. Even so, we can assuredly move beyond these more recent, non-native precedents for Hawthorne's Seeker and Cynic to recognize in the Crawfords' voices, and in turn in Hawthorne's, the always-already-present voice of a Native American oral tradition.

While nineteenth-century critics largely praised “The Great Carbuncle” (Longfellow in 1837 declared it his “especial favorite” of the *Twice-told Tales*), one reviewer for the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1853 was puzzled that Hawthorne didn’t avail himself of “a more intelligible cipher”: “What . . . is the moral, what the spirit, what the meaning of ‘The Great Carbuncle’?” (qtd. in Crowley 59, 295). Hawthorne’s cast of characters reveals that the meaning of the carbuncle is very much dependent upon the personality and mindset of the each person: it invites multiple readings and precludes reductive closure as effectively as it precludes capture. Though its physical beauty or value may be construed as nearly universal, it possesses an alterity that requires interpretation to remove it from the alien and make it appropriable in meaning—a meaning, ironically, which lay in its refusal to be appropriated. Perhaps this refusal rests in the fact of it being not at all foreign, but native and inseparable from the land itself, with rights of its own, not to be denied. What is in fact foreign is Hawthorne’s *dramatis personae*, offering a microcosm of European and Euro-American characters and mapping out a social space upon ground from which the native presence has seemingly been erased. What strikes us at first as a rather unlikely, heteroglossic meeting of social class and position atop Mount Washington is belied as a cultural monologue when confronted with the palimpsest of America, in which a paradoxically alien, because truly native, presence endures. Ironically, the very existence (and indeed success) of Hawthorne’s tale depends itself not upon failure but upon success, upon successfully appropriating the legend or cultural treasure of a native people whose lands were also appropriated. Indeed, if we read the narrator’s decision to embark on a quest for the carbuncle himself as a metafictional confession in which art and life reflect one another, we recall that Hawthorne was in fact a pilgrim after literary treasures: a kind of poetic Pignone, he endeavored to peddle his creations to an admiring public. The story of “The Great Carbuncle,” in other words, *is* the Great Carbuncle, and Hawthorne has artfully absconded with his wanted treasure, capturing and fixing in print an oral tradition of that which could not be captured.

Notes

¹ On Hawthorne’s response to this nationalist call, see Doubleday, “Hawthorne and Literary Nationalism.”

² For Hawthorne's travels during this quest for materials, see Weber, "Hawthorne's Tour of 1832." On Hawthorne's early intended collections of short stories, see Adkins; Weber, *Die Entwicklung der Rahmenerzählungen*; and Easton 11-97.

³ At the time that Hawthorne was writing, the most extensive biography of Indian chiefs to be published was Samuel Gardner Drake's *Indian Biography* (1832), which he would later check out from the Salem Athenaeum (see Kesselring 49). Hawthorne's language ("Indian character . . . traits"), however, indicates that he is thinking of the most popular and beloved of professional American men of letters, Washington Irving, who published "Traits of Indian Character" and "Philip of Pokanoket" in the *Analectic Magazine* (1814) and then included them in his popular *Sketch Book* (1819).

⁴ Both travel sketch and tale were likely written in the winter of 1832-1833 and intended for *The Story Teller* (aborted in 1834). "Our Evening Party" was first published in the *New England Magazine* of 1835 and years later collected in *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846). The tale was first published anonymously in 1836 in Samuel Goodrich's *Token and Atlantic Souvenir* (like many gift annuals given at Christmas time, it is dated for the following year, 1837). It was first published under Hawthorne's own name in his *Twice-told Tales* (1837).

⁵ An inveterate allegorist, Hawthorne was particularly fond of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. "The Great Carbuncle" can certainly be read in this tradition (see, for example, Johnson); it has nonetheless also been judged a "relatively poor allegory" (Doubleday, *Hawthorne's Early Tales* 150).

⁶ Crawford's *History* does not include this trope, found both in classical literature (Medusa) and the Bible (Lot's wife), but it seems to be part of the extant folklore. In 1882, one historian writes:

It is true that the Indians did not hesitate to declare that no mortal hand could hope to grasp the great fire-stone. . . . Several noted conjurors of the Pigwackets, rendered fool-hardy by their success in exorcising evil spirits, so far conquered their fears as to ascend the mountain; but they never returned, and had, no doubt, expiated their folly by being *transformed into stone*, or flung headlong down some stark and terrible precipice" (Drake, Samuel Adams 116-17, emphasis added).

Hawthorne would later use this trope more literally in "The Man of Adamant" and "Ethan Brand;" see *The Snow-Image and Other Twice-told Tales* (11: 161-69, 83-102).

⁷ Hawthorne scholarship has recognized the influence of Crawford, but it has limited itself to the few pages of Crawford's *History* in which the search for the carbuncle is discussed. See, for example, Doubleday's excellent study, *Hawthorne's Early Tales* 145-51, which also cites Scott's *Pirate* as an influence. Hawthorne himself mentions Sullivan's *History*, and there are numerous other likely and possible textual sources (including Ludwig Tieck's *Der Runenberg*). These are beyond the province of this current study, however, which is concerned with the oral tradition that Hawthorne heard while he was in the White Mountains.

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