

Nathaniel Hawthorne between

Literature, Russian Literature



NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE BETWEEN TRADITION AND INNOVATION Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) was the first American writer of novels dealing with psychological and social issues. Moreover, he is, together with Edgar Allan Poe, an innovator of the American short story. The key-elements in Hawthorne's work are the reflection and, at the same time, the criticism of the Old Puritanism's exaggerations, the obsessive preoccupations related to cases of conscience. In Hawthorne's short stories there can also be detected a fascinating touch of the fantastic and the supernatural similar to Poe's, yet different from the morbid horrifying aspects traced in his contemporary work. Hawthorne's career coincided with Romanticism's decline years. In Europe, his contemporaries Dickens and Thackeray cast upon literature the new light of critical Realism. The social movements were shaking pre-established values. Darwin and Huxley's revolutionism was crushing the religious myths. The civil war was extending throughout the whole America. Hawthorne's vision was darkening more and more until he could no longer decipher the gloomy caverns of the human soul. His detachment from reality made the critics talk about him under the most paradoxical emblems. " He was defined as both a Puritan and a rebel against Puritanism, both a Romantic writer and an anti-Romantic one, Transcendentalist and critic of Transcendentalism, social-humanist writer and introverted aesthete, aristocrat and democrat, realist and idealist" (Rowe, 1990, 53). And Hawthorne was indeed a paradoxical figure. He considered himself a Puritan, but he never went to church and he despised the theological writings. He considered himself a solitary person, but he was extremely convivial with his colleagues while an office worker on the Custom House in Boston or in

Salem. But, despite his struggling efforts of getting rid of his alter ego through exorcism in literature, Hawthorne could not escape the obsession of the cold aesthete, of the scientific investigator or the anatomist of the soul already "shaped" into the "Lonely Chamber", where he had spent twelve years totally cut off from life, after graduating the Bowdoin College. Here he would animate the strange characters of his short stories, each of them a projection of himself — the fruitless aesthete, the helpless bystander, the cold examiner of the human soul. Hawthorne's dominant philosophy is his own variant of Transcendentalism, related less to religious mysticism and more to the mingling between the seen world and the unseen one, and preferably expressed through allegory, parable and symbol. Sharing the American Transcendentalist doctrine theoretically exposed by his contemporary Emerson, Hawthorne offered a literary expression to most of its features, except for its absolute optimism. Twice-Told Tales include allegories, parables and fairy tales full of tragically mysterious or fantastic elements, but imbued with morality of love for truth and beauty. The recurrent themes are guilt and the preserving of mystery, the moral and intellectual vanity proving Hawthorne's constant preoccupation for the effect of Puritanism. The Scarlet Letter reflects the authorial preoccupations with motives such as sin and guilt or the hiding of a disreputable secret. The excesses of moral intolerance, typical for the age, are presented as the source of tragedy undergone by three characters: the cheated husband Chillingworth, the adulterous wife Hester Prynne and her lover Minister Arthur Dimmesdale. But above all, Hawthorne's preoccupations are fundamentally moral — not moralizing. At the same time, we may trace the

traditional and contemporary Puritan elements in the same environment in which Hawthorne spent most of his life detecting and embracing different traces sometimes even litigious. The multiplicity of the Hawthornian outlooks and intentions could lead but to a multiple vision over his characters, namely some realistic and often modern ones. For all these, Hawthorne's masterpiece *The Scarlet Letter* provides the most conclusive proof. He called his book a Romance but its implications are not entirely Romantic. The writer also celebrates nature (a recurrent theme with Romanticism), the self that might be recovered from it and the "vital warmth" coming from the "electric chain" of true humanity. Moreover, Hawthorne once defined as a Romantic science his short stories and novels (or "romances") are marked by a concern with the American past with the role of the imaginative artist in a materialistic society. In *The New Adam and Eve* for example, we are presented a motif of the bible, of humanity's past though the Hawthornian style is detected by casting a new light of interpreting things, thus affirming the virtues of imagination. It is the Puritan reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible which informs of Hawthorne's developing his genius by seeking and, finally, finding the "non visible"; hence he becomes a rummager for the hidden secrets well buried into darkness, for that obscure print of *Fatum* which is the "Unpardonable Sin". Making a spiritual analogy between Hawthorne and Goethe, the critic Stanly Geist asserts that "while the father of German modern literature died begging for more lightness, the father of American modern literature died begging for more darkness". As a writer of fiction, Hawthorne refused to set himself apart from his age, or to stand out in his age. He was content to be the connoisseur of its moods —

the psychological, moral, historical — and to leave to others the task of articulating the age's ideas. He took a dim view of works, whether by Puritan theologians or by their nineteenth-century avatars, explicitly designed to solve "the riddle of the universe"(Porte, 1991, 132). Bibliography: Robert S. Levine, *Conspiracy and Romance*, Collier Macmillan, New York, 1989 Joel Porte, *In Respect to Egotism. Studies in American Romantic Writing*, Cambridge University Press, 1991 Joyce A. Rowe, *Equivocal Endings in Classic American Novel*, Chicago University Press, 1990