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The Patterns of Self-Mirroring in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*

Self-referential, appealing to the reader's awareness and acceptance of a certain literary convention, Hawthorne's romance repeatedly invokes the imagery of the borderland between the factual and the fictitious and of the theatrical performance in which actors embody the ideas haunting the artist's mind and function within an actual temporal context in the presence of the receptive, responsive audience. Appearing in various places in *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of the Seven Gables*, theatrical imagery dominates *The Blithedale Romance* – "essentially a day-dream, and yet a fact" (Hawthorne 439) – where the narrator comes upon the stage under the disguise of one whom he chooses to call Miles Coverdale. He views his role in the drama in terms of progressive self-disclosure, the revelation of the dangers which the artist of the borderland is prone to.

Established by Hawthorne in the Preface to *The Blithedale Romance*, the metaphor of the theater opens Coverdale's narrative: he remembers the performance of the Veiled Lady under the exhibitor's "skillfully contrived circumstances of the stage effect" (441). It then assumes in the text a variety of forms – veils, masks, pastorals, masquerades, *tableaux vivants*, droppings and risings of the curtain – determining Coverdale's way of thinking about reality, becoming a sort of reality in itself, from which he finds himself incapable of escaping. "My wanderings," he says at a certain point, "were confined within a very limited sphere" (554). That sphere is Coverdale's "mental stage" with its "knot of characters" revolving around "a knot of affairs" which are "greatly assisted by my method of insulating them from other relations" (531). Readers of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of the Seven Gables* are well familiar with the method. Were we "to put a friend under our microscope," Coverdale speculates on the unhealthy character of his "mental occupation," we would thereby "insulate him from many of his true relations, magnify his peculiarities, inevitably tear him in parts and, of course, patch him very clumsily together again" (479). As result of such an examination we would create a creature wearing the frightening "aspect of a monster." In effect, each of the actors in Coverdale's "private drama" – Zenobia, Hollingsworth, Priscilla, Westervelt, Moodie – reveal some monstrous features, isolated, deformed and exaggerated, expressive of the experimentor's dehumanizing tendency "to pry with a speculative interest into people's passions and impulses" (530) and, as he says of his examination of Hol-

lingsworth, "exemplifying the kind of error into which my mode of observation was calculated to lead me" (480). Coverdale's microscope, as it is not infrequent with the optical devices appearing in Hawthorne's works (e.g., the magnifying glasses of the diorama in "Ethan Brand") turns into an instrument of self-examination.

Unlike Holgrave, who amid "personal vicissitudes… had never lost his identity" (349), Coverdale is trying to establish his identity amid characters who stand forth in his imagination as "indices of a problem which it was [his] business to solve" (479). The problem is ultimately Miles Coverdale himself. His voyeurism is essentially narcissistic. His retirement into the imagined, ideal community of Blithedale and his imaginative separation of Hollingsworth, Zenobia and Priscilla from the rest of that community are progressive steps in what he calls in "The Wood-Path" "withdrawal towards the inner circle of self-communion" (491). Coverdale is the artist who seeks self-definition and some purpose for his life in defining characters of others (who thus become creations of his mind), the motives of their existence and mutual relationships. He views himself both as the master of the scene, and his performers' conscience ("I was irresistably moved to step over the intervening branches, lay my hand on his shoulder, put my mouth close to his ear, and address him in a sepulchral, melodramatic whisper: 'Hollingsworth! Where have you left Zenobia!'" (555)), one who, by anticipating or envisioning it, is responsible for the tragic finale of the drama ("I began to long for a catastrophy… Let it all come!" (532)) and, at the same time, as merely a medium without his own will, one who is doomed "to live in other lives," depend for his existence on the imaginative beings emerging from his experimental observations ("Hollingsworth, Zenobia, Priscilla! These three have absorbed my life into themselves." (533)).

Coverdale draws "a knot of characters" into his inner sphere, his dissecting and patching mind, and himself becomes entrapped within the sphere of their influence. His characters "encroach upon [his] dreams" (529). In a well-known scene when he returns to Blithedale from town, he encounters in the woods (the image of the self) a group of masqueraders who:

> joined hands in a circle whirling round so swiflty, so madly and so merrily, in time and tune with the Satanic music, that their separate incongruities were all blended together, and they became a kind of entanglement that went nigh to turn one's brain with merely looking at it… (563)

Recognizing Coverdale, who was looking from his "upper region," "the whole fantastic rabble forthwith streamed off in pursuit of me, so that I was like a mad poet hunted by chimaras" (563).

The reader is encouraged to think of the insulated characters of *The Blithedale Romance* as illustrative of ideas, views, attitudes and impulses of which the artist's "mental stage" is made up. Silas Foster represents the actual, the real, the substantial. While, leaning against the tree, he watches the group of masqueraders, he does "more to disenchant the scene with his look of shrewd, acrid Yankee observation, than twenty witches and necromancers could have done in the way of rendering it weird and fantastic" (563); he unmasks the artificiality, the impracticality, the lack of solid grounding in the Blithedale enterprise as well as the foolishness of Coverdale's customary position in his "hermitage." His common sense functions as a corrective to uncontrolled imaginative freedom. It exemplifies Coverdale's declared "tendency towards the actual," his rejection of the vision of the world as "an unsubstantial bubble" (522). Yet, a representation, an exemplification, Silas Foster is himself seen in the narrative wearing a grotesque mask; he is not so much a living character as a projection of a certain isolated, exaggerated attitude towards life. His behavior in the scene when the participants of the Blithedale masquerade are looking for the body of Zenobia, the self-appointed "tragedy-queen," is a monstrous display of unemotional common sense, matter-of-factness. It mirrors "terrible inflexibility," "rigidity," the lack of "lithe and graceful attitude" in Zenobia's deformed death-mask. Realism and the lack of imaginative playfulness are associated in Hawthorne's romance, the realm of moonlight giving the familiar scene the quality of the spiritual, with the physical corpse. Significantly, when Silas Foster's boat floats with Coverdale as a helmsman, "not a ray [of the moonlight] appeared to fall on the river itself" (576).

With his "cold and dead materialism," Professor Westervelt inhabits a still deeper and darker layer of Coverdale's mind (the two converse in the forest and Westervelt addresses his interlocutor as "friend"). Coverdale detests the sinister mesmerist "all the more because a part of my own nature showed itself resposive to him" (499). The reader recalls the comment on Coverdale's character made by the fiendish fiddler, one of the masqueraders: "He is always ready to dance to the Devil's tune" (563). Both Coverdale and Westervelt are "exhibitors." Bearing affinity with demonic figures appearing throughout Hawthorne's works, Westervelt embodies the threat of the artist's potential doom as result of the unpardonable sin of violating and annihilating the individual soul, enslaving it on his "mental stage," gaining not only insight but also absolute possession over the will and passions of the victim of his exploitative power. Coverdale recognizes the effect of Westervelt's sceptical and sneering view upon his "mental vision." He looks through Westervelt's eyes at Hollingsworth, Zenobia and Priscilla and discovers that contact with the extreme coldness, cynical materialism, robs each of them of "the essential charm," degrades, debases and deforms, "smothers what it can of our spiritual aspirations and makes the rest ridiculous"

(499). Zenobia attacks the Westervelt sphere in Coverdale's mental vision when she speaks of his dangerous interference with "earnest human passions," his cold-blooded criticism and "monstrous scepticism." Theodore, from Zenobia's legend, is closely affiliated with Coverdale-Westervelt. He is seen gaining admittance into the Veiled Lady's "private withdrawing room" – the sanctity of one's inner being – led not by "holy faith" but "scornful scepticism and idle curiosity" (505). Like Coverdale and Westervelt in the woods, Theodore shows a propensity to burst into laughter.

Hollingsworth wears the fiendish mask of Hawthorne's man of a single idea and man of iron. Monomaniacal preoccupation with the project of reforming criminals makes him incapable of perceiving evil and destruction in his own ruthless, tyrannical manipulation of others. His isolation at Blithedale is comparable to that of Ethan Brand, Rappaccini, or Chillingworth. In Zenobia's passionate denunciation of his character, Hollingsworth is a "monster," "a cold, heartless, self-beginning and self-ending piece of mechanism" (567). Coverdale views his friend as a "dragon," an incarnation of "all-devouring egotism" and of the will to dominate. Although he detests and finally withstands the influence, a part of his nature shows itself responsible to the "irresistible force" of Hollingsworth's "magnetism." But one gesture of his hand would have drawn him into the sphere of Hollingsworth's overwhelming energy. Coverdale himself is accused of a sceptical attitude "in regard to any conscience or any wisdom, except one's own: a most irreverent propensity to thrust Providence aside and substitute one's own self in its awful place" (539-40). Hollingsworth's depreciation of the Blithedale ideals ("I grasp it in my hand, and find no substance whatever"; 517) confirms Coverdale's doubts concerning his own position in the community. Most importantly, in destroying the dream-like texture of the artist's existence, submission to Hollingsworth's scheme would fill out the moral void of Coverdale's life by giving it a new sense of definite purpose. Nothing could seem more attractive and tempting for the poet who wakes up each morning to "feel the langour and vague wretchedness of an indolent and half-occupied man" than the promise of "strength, courage, immitigable will, – everything that a manly and generous nature should desire!" (518). In "A Crisis," the artist's soul is at stake. As Nina Baym wrote of Hollingsworth's role in relation to Coverdale: "he is an alter ego, an admired version of the self, energetic, forceful, attractive and purpuseful to an extreme" (Baym 547). He reveals the artist's lack of and desire for authority. Ironically, because Hollingsworth represents the power of the self *in extremis*, he becomes, as it were, his own victim, a self-devouring monster. The intensity of his existence brings about its own undoing. Coverdale wonders whether the strength of Hollingsworth's purpose is not "too gigantic for his integrity" (Pearson 518) and towards the end of his narrative vision he observes the "dragon" seeking support and protection from the "maiden" Priscilla.

Like Hollingsworth, Zenobia is a challenge to Coverdale's neutrality. She seems to demand absolute acceptance or rejection. Mysterious, darkly beautiful, sensual, proud, self-confident, restless, radiant with energy, she stands for individualism and freedom. Her role at Blithedale is a display of the romantic self – extreme and, therefore, again monstrous and marked for tragic ends. Theater is Zenobia's "proper sphere" and the Blithedale experiment sets the stage for her greatest, most spectacular role (the manner of her suicide is meant to provide the final episode for that role). In the convention of the theater, Zenobia is seen as an epitome of the unrestricted, the unconventional, the intensely sexual. The theatrical "entrance of Zenobia" on the first night which the "knot of dreamers" spends at Blithedale "caused our heroic enterprise to show like an illusion, a masquerade, a pastoral, a counter-feit Arcadia, in which we grown-up men and women were making a play-day of the years that were given us to live in" (451). Upon the stage comes an actress who "has lived and loved," "womanliness incarnated" (466). Putting on her romantic, tragic mask, she reveals the significance of emotion, passion. Cut off from these, imagination remains idle and stagnant, lacks energy and truth, exhibits none of the natural vigor or the joy of commitment which should characterize creative activity. Zenobia's presence is an attack upon Coverdale's aloofness, inability to acknowledge sensuality, impulse and longing as the essential substance of mature human life and mature artistic creation. Her exotic flowers may be viewed as a symbol of the synthesis of the natural, the sexual, and the artistic. Zenobia's coming to Blithedale is a return to deeper, more vital forces than those determined by the constraints of the ordinary world and institutionalized life of society (in the town, the brilliance of the flower fades and it begins to look like an imitation). In her craving for a romantically conceived intensification of the sensuous and the emotional, for intellectual freedom and the right for full self-expression, Zenobia becomes anti-cultural. Coverdale notices that "her poor little stories and tracts never did half justice to her intellect… I recognized no severe culture in Zenobia; her mind was full of weeds" (464). In Coverdale's estimate, she turns against the accepted norms and conventions and cannot find adequate form to express the richness of her individuality. Herself a muse of true, original, creative energy, Zenobia in the gaze of her male observers is incapable of creating literature.

Finally, there is Priscilla, Zenobia's opposite – passive, non-competitive, shadowy, visionary. She is an embodiment of the ideal generated within man's imagination, the product "man has spent centuries in making." Coverdale compares Priscilla to "a leaf floating by her own choice or plan" (538). And Priscilla, as if to demonstrate that she is unable to speak of herself in her own words, repeats after him: "I am blown like a leaf… I never have any free will" (540). Characterized by the Protean quality of "sudden transformations" and "ever-shifting variety," possessing no identity of her own, Priscilla

becomes a medium for the designs of others. Thus her role mirrors, in a way, the position of Coverdale in relation to the actors of the Blithedale drama – representations of ideas from the polarization of which he takes on his own identity. Coverdale – the artist regards himself as "something like a mesmerical clairvoyant," dimly aware of the future events and responsive to the influence of the conflicting forces which operate within his mind, assuming shapes of the characters of *The Blithedale Romance*. His declaration of love for Priscilla in the sentence which ends his narrative is not so much an expression of a definite attitude towards life as an identification with a certain fluid form which makes such an expression of attitudes possible. "I – I myself – was in love – with – PRISCILLA" (585), is the statement of the end of Coverdale's narcissistic exploration in which between the emphatic "I" and the capitalized "PRISCILLA" Coverdale seems to put an equation sign.

Seeing his function in the book as a plastic form, a "carrier" of many ideas rather than an incarnation of a single one, Coverdale has earlier made a comparison between himself and the chorus in a classical drama:

> My own part in these transactions was singularly subordinate. It resembled that of the Chorus in a classic play, which seems to be set aloof from the possibility of personal concernment, and bestows the whole measure of its hope and fear, its exultation or sorrow, on the fortunes of others, between whom and itself this sympathy is the only bond. Destiny, it may be, – the most skillful of stage-managers, – seldom chooses to arrange its scenes, and carry forward its drama, without securing the presence of at least one calm observer. It is his office to applause when due, and sometimes an inevitable tear, to detect the final fitness of incident to character and distill in his long-brooding thought the whole morality of the performance. (496)

For the artist to be a "calm observer" and a commentator is to suffer his "colorless life to take its hue from other lives." In the last chapter of the book, when the drama is done, Coverdale steps forward, like Ishmael in the Epilogue of *Moby-Dick*, to begin his "confession": "It remains only to say a few words about myself" (583). It seems as if at that moment we could hear, for the last time his (or Westervelt's) scornful laughter. For, if we are truly willing to spare Coverdale the trouble, it is because so far we have never been left with the characters of *The Blithedale Romance* without the painful presence of the intervening, observing "I" who in turning over their "riddles" in his mind has been trying to comprehend himself and in exaggerating their features, exaggerating also his own "defects." Coverdale indulges in his characteristic, playful, bitterly self-ironic mood: "But what after all have I to tell! Nothing, nothing, nothing!" (583). After all he

had to tell the reader of Hollingsworth, of Zenobia, of Priscilla, there remains to say nothing, nothing, nothing. Possibly he might only say after Isabel from Herman Melville's *Pierre*: "of my own consciouness I cannot identify in myself". And, when towards the end of his confession he finds his life to be "all an emptiness," he is, in fact, defining himself as a potentiality of vision, the possibility of encompassing all views without taking any sides. Hence, his all-pervading irony which turns into self-irony, but also a suggestion of a chance for sympathy or even (narcissistic as it must remain) love.

Paradoxically, Coverdale, an extremely isolated figure, can hardly be seen otherwise than in relation to one of the "insulated" characters or, more precisely, in relation to that character's relationship to another character of the drama. Coverdale recognizes that the position of the artist as observer and commentator is invariably the position "between." The most striking example of an image referring to the narrator's condition can be found in the scene of the search for Zenobia's body when he says: "And there, perhaps, she lay, with her face upward, while the shadow of the boat, and my own pale face peering downward, passed slowly betwixt her and the sky" (577). Coverdale's "hermitage" and "observatory" on the pine tree ("about midway between the root and the topmost bough") is situated near the verge of the woodlands, that is between wilderness and cultivated fields, nature and civilization. It is a place, he observes humorously, both to meditate an essay for *The Dial* and to enjoy a cigar. In Boston, Coverdale stays at a hotel, which indicates his state of suspension between life at Blithedale and life in town, the "newness" and the "oldness." His room becomes again an observatory, like the arched window in *The House of the Seven Gables*, offering the possibility of "plunging into this muddy tide of human activities and pastime" (526). Coverdale resolves "to linger on the brink." He finds himself incapable of communing either with nature or with people. His failure corresponds to the failure of the Blithedale experiment as an attempt to create a land of harmony between material reality and spiritual aspirations, the world of nature in accord with the world of an ideal. There were moments, he says in "A Modern Arcadia" when he "used to discern a rich picturesqueness in the visible scene of earth and sky" and when Nature seemed to have been "taken by surprise and seen at unawares, with no opportunity to put off her real look." But "the clouds of earth, which we so constantly belabored and turned over and over, were never etherialized into thought… Our labor symbolized nothing" (477). *The Blithedale Romance* is an abortive romance. The balance between the familiar and the fairy-land proved to be an illusion unredeemed by the moonlight.

Unlike Ernest from "The Great Stone Face," Coverdale finds intellectual activity, poetic institutions, incompatible with the immediate, the physical, the external. To hover "between" does not mean to mediate. Through Westervelt's eyes he ironically sees him-

self as an "aesthetic laborer." But, as Hollingsworth says of him, he "is not in earnest, either as a poet or a laborer" (478). The position of suspension and neutrality involves "a charm" but when sustained for a long time, becoming a principle of one's existence, brings estrangement and frustration. It ultimately makes Coverdale, the object of Hawthorne's longest psychological experiment, a Wakefield of the "mental stage" – an artist and bachelor who by developing the habit of continually observing himself (through his "knot of characters") misses out on life and turns into another homeless outcast.

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