THE METAPHOR OF THE CIRCLE IN THE WRITINGS OF NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE AND LIVIU GEORGESCU

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Abstract

The metaphor of the circle alludes to the way in which the geometrical figure of the circle (which belongs to the mathematical domain) has been perceived in different fields such as literature, literary theory and criticism, philosophy or psychology. The aim of this article is both to illustrate the image of the circle as a metaphor which underlies the writings of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Liviu Georgescu and to point out its universality. Robert Friedman, Gaston Bachelard, Jacques Derrida and Georges Poulet are the names of the literary critics and theorists who studied the problematic of the circle as a metaphor; their theories and approaches help us to support our beliefs related to the status and the metamorphoses of the circle found in the writings of these two authors, especially in the romance *The House of the Seven Gables*, and, in the volume of poems *I Am Not Allowed,* respectively. All in all, our paper is based on the timeless image of the man who passes through life as if he would climb the knots of a spiral in his way from non-identity to self-identity, in order to be redeemed.

Keywords: circle, spiral, ascension, God, man, life, sin, redemption.

Any question finds its answer in what we call *the Big Book*, in other words in the Bible – the place where the man meets God. Therefore, even the *metamorphoses of the circle* can be explained by using two quotations extracted from this writing: "the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire" (Deuteronomy 4: 15) and "Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?" (1Corinthians 6: 14); they suggest the two central elements of the metaphor of the circle*:* the first one – the centre of the circle (*the midst* – the place where God stays) and the second one – its circumference, its evolution (the yoke is made up of two interconnected circles – symbols of man and of woman who are always related to each other).

The circle – the central point is not drawn - has been perceived as a sacred circle hoop, the ancient and universal symbol of unity, wholeness, infinity and feminine power; the circle with a dot – the central point is drawn - has been considered as representing the symbol of masculine force; moreover, their juxtaposition suggests the conjugation of male and female forces, therefore the image of the *round* human being, which blossoms into an (DNA) spiral; a spiral which is the symbol of the cosmic force (according to Carl Jung), the

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cycles of time and seasons, of birth, growth, death, and then rebirth cycles of life. And this roundness has been registered clearly into many literary documents.

For illustration, **the central point** of the circle seen in Nathaniel Hawthorne's romance *The House of the Seven Gables* is represented, as the title suggests, by the religious idea of the ancestral sin, of the genetic evil. The house is the symbol of a family or of generations belonging to one family which connotes the idea of something "genetic"// heritable; number seven is associated with the creation of the world – the seven days-, of Man by God; the pyramidal form of the gables put the case that in the human world everything is subordinated to the idea of ascension: human beings have to pass some stages, from the lowest one (from the basis of the pyramid) to the highest one (to the top of the pyramid) in order to touch a common objective (to be the best in one field, to reach redemption, etc.). All in all, this title hints that readers would depart in their adventure, would begin to form Hawthorne's circle by observing the spiral ascension from the genetic evil within one man's evolution in life.

The Circle as Metaphor of Narrative and Cultural Boundaries

- **The Circle of Hawthorne's Glance: *Being is Round***

Robert Friedman in his book on *Hawthorne's Romances: Social Drama and the Metaphor of Geometry* is concerned with the question of how geometric representations become metaphors of narrative and cultural boundaries in Hawthorne's fiction. Indeed, Hawthorne's Puritan explanations of the Bible and the relation of heaven and earth should have manifested through geometric forms. His Puritan ideas added to his transcendentalist ideas and facilitated the naissance of such geometric shapes as the circle, the vortex, or the parallelogram. Geometry has been and remains today a system of forms that assists in our understanding of the world around us. It also helped the ambiguous and ambivalent Hawthorne in his attempt to reconcile past and present, time and space, head and heart, heaven and earth, etc. "without impairment of either" (Miller, qtd. in Friedman 11).

Individuals are seen as circles or "spheres" that are in direct communication with each other through the same divine substance that is God and through sympathy that is understanding. Hawthorne's characters are shapers of his artistic vision. As human being we can understand the world only when we love and aspire. Each individual sphere is divided into a visible/outward sphere and an invisible/inward sphere. The inward sphere is the meeting place of all dual forces (material/spiritual, light/dark, etc.). Each man has his own way of looking at things. Everything is interpretable differently. The more circles we build

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around us through experimentation, the more we climb up the spiral towards moral perfection. The circle image (in which the beginning coincides with the end) is used by Hawthorne to demonstrate his obsession with circularity, to come round to the beginning. The final whole circle/sphere arises, through sympathy, from the final meanings (smaller concentric circles) of individual spheres.

"Being is round," says Bachelard (1964). Derrida adds the initial and final immateriality or lack of meaning to this life circle: "We come from nothing and return to nothing. From the darkness of the womb to the darkness of the tomb (1987). Hence, the center of the circle is dark, opaque. Within the sphere, the characters' lives are like open circles or spirals. They follow an ascending and descending spiral in their quest/journey for self-identity. There is a continuous fluctuation between the outward circle and the inward circle and a permanent correspondence between object and subject in these circles. While not believing in human perfection, unlike Emerson, who was an advocate of 19th c American individualism, Hawthorne believed in the existence and connection with nature.

- **Hawthorne's *Cogito:* The Split between the Eye and the Gaze**

Jacques Lacan remarked that "I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides" (1978). This division between the inner SELF (the eye) and the OTHER (the gaze) stands at the core of Hawthorne's artistic vision. Every universal truth implies other truth. The viewer becomes a transparent ball. The viewer's eye thus is the first circle. He starts being seen by several gazers, from a multitude of angles, from the circumference of the circle. Each individual gaze might function as a mirror and completes the portrait of the viewer and contributes to his self-awareness and identity, i.e. fulfills the whole sphere.

The circle frames Hawthorne's vision and it is a symbol of boundary and transgression. A transcendentalist himself, Hawthorne was familiar with Emerson's interpretation of the circle. Emerson saw nature as a transparent ball with no fixtures and no permanence. Man refuses enclosures or limitations as well. There is a continuous movement, clash, overlap and balance if we appeal to our consciousness, i.e. the abode of moral truth. Therefore, there is no pure virtue or evil. Throughout his life, man experiments endlessly. Every man wants to open new doors, believes in greater possibilities. He refuses to submit to generalizations and believes in the power of self-discovery. There is no end in nature but every end is a beginning. There will always be good and evil, dark and light, sunrise and sunset.

The life of a man is seen as a self-evolving circle, which from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles and that without end. There is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning. The heart refuses to be imprisoned; we have

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no enclosing walls, no circumference. We all stand waiting, empty, knowing that we can be full. Men cease to interest us when we find their limitations. The only valuable thing is not to submit to generalizations, to believe in the power of self-discovery. This eternal search for perfection is what man tries to encompass with both hands but which he can never do, i.e. attain full-circle circumference. This symbolizes the unreachable moral truth. Our incessant desire, as human beings, is to draw newer and larger circles around us, to do something without knowing how and why. "A man never rises so high as when he knows not wither he is going," said Oliver Cromwell.

- **The Ascending Spiral Curve in *The House of the Seven Gables***

Hawthorne's journey starts and ends on a threshold within the Puritan community. In *The House of the Seven Gables*, the threshold is the house itself. Clifford and Hepzibah are two brothers, nicknamed "the two owls" because of being enclosed in a circle of seclusion with few people who dare to cross the threshold of their house. They freeze their world into this small domestic circle which they are afraid to leave. They shield in a way from the mockery of a moralistic and cold society. The story retells their travel in a circle (instead of a straight line), away from and back to the house. Hawthorne's spiraled vision views man as a sinful creature that can climb up the life spiral and achieve self-identity through love and educational function of sin. Clifford and Hepzibah try to fulfill their circle through love. "There is nothing but love, here, Clifford," she added – "nothing but love! You are at home", says Hepzibah on her brother's return home. (111)

The significance of the ascending spiral curve as a sign and symbolic image is drawn attention to by situating Clifford's speech at the climax of the romance. Clifford and Hepzibah are irresistibly drawn to the railroad in their flight from the house, and Hawthorne suggests that the railroad acts as an agent of fate in drawing them out of the dead past of the house into the living present that is mobile and dynamic as the railroad. By getting on the train they make the contact with "the great current of human life" (272) that had been so attractive, and fearful to Clifford. However, dislocation results from the perspective of the railroad: "Everything was *unfixed* from its age-long rest, and moving at whirlwind speed in a direction opposite to their own" (273, emphasis mine). Clifford's sensitive nature responds to the animation of life on the train but Hepzibah cannot escape from the house. Clifford is capable of trying to run from the past (the house) and evil (the death of the Judge) but he has no sense of a goal or an objective. He is merely running without a purpose or direction. However, he tells his sister that he is not mad and that "for the first time in thirty years [his] thoughts gush up and find words ready for them". "I must talk, and I will!," he concludes. (266). He feels free to experiment, to build a new circle around his so far bare existence: "We can dance now! We can sing, laugh, play, do what we will" (266). He is as "transparent as the water from Maule's well" (283), ready to experiment. "He would hardly be restrained

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from plunging into the surging stream of human sympathies… he required to take a deep, deep plunge into the ocean of human life, and to sink down and be covered by its profoundness, and then to emerge, sobered, invigorated, restored to the world and to himself". (174, 175) He starts climbing up the ascending spiral curve.

The wildness of his reactions and the hopelessness of his situation become obvious when Clifford begins to discuss the advantages of a nomadic way of life. He argues that life on a train is preferable to life in a house because it is consistent with his view of history and with man's natural (prehistoric) way of life. Man is in motion both because progress (following the path of a spiral curve rather than a straight line) is inevitable and because wandering from place to place is natural. With the invention of the train all the disadvantages of a nomadic way of life are removed, so man will resume his wandering. "You are aware, my dear sir [he says], you must have observed it in your own experience – that all human progress is in a *circle*; or, to use a more accurate and beautiful figure, in *an ascending spiral curve*. While we fancy ourselves going straight forward, and attaining, at every step, an entirely new position of affairs, we do actually return to something long ago tried and abandoned, but which we now find etherealized, refined, and perfected to its ideal. The past is but a coarse and sensual prophecy of the present and the future." (276, emphasis mine) Significantly, when Clifford and Hepzibah leave the train, the revolutionary ideas are forgotten and Clifford is once again a sick old man dependent on his incompetent sister. Shivering from head to foot, he asks Hepzibah to take the lead as she used to do before. Being is round. The end is the beginning transformed; life is an ascending spiral curve. They make the full circle and return from where they have left: the House. Clifford is again **"**an elderly personage", "trying to grapple with the present scene", "a material ghost"**,** as he is introduced to us in the first pages of the book (108, 109, 110)**.** He admits failure with deep sadness: "It cannot be, Hepzibah! – it is too late … We are ghosts! We have no right among human beings – no right anywhere but in this old house…" (178).

The circumference of the circle which underlies Liviu Georgescu's volume of poems "I Am Not Allowed" (translation mine) is represented by the eternal couple of antonyms life-death, in fact by the spiral image of man passing through life, from his birth – with the ancestral sin – to his death. *I Am Not Allowed:* What? To step inside Heaven; When? After death; Why? Because I could not be exempted from sinning. On the whole, Georgescu departs from the gospel truth that we are born with the ancestral sin and it is our choice to get rid of it or not. Therefore, our salvation depends on the intensity of our will, of our ambition to live in Heaven, near God. Unfortunately it seems that we do not find the necessary strength to do this.

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The Circle as Metaphor of the Divine Interdiction

- **Georgescu's Circle: *The Black Apples Slither through the White Dust*** (translation mine)

The autumn of 2008 invited the readers of contemporary Romanian literature to taste from the new volume of poems written by Liviu Georgescu and entitled "I Am Not Allowed" (translation mine). One idea: life seen from a religious perspective, from Genesis to death; one punt: the paradox in parallel with the dichotomy and the antinomy (space vs. time, transitory vs. infinite, sin vs. freedom, white vs. black, belief vs. reality, real vs. ideal, Ego vs. Alter-ego); one artistic vision/ matrix of thinking: the geometrical shape of the circle – this is a short summary of Georgescu's volume of poems.

The last feature is the one which activates the reading of the texts most. This happens due to its shape, represented by the circle seen either as a geometrical shape, or as a constituent form of a sphere or a spiral. Irrespective of its posture, the circle can be found, on the one hand, as a spatial and temporal figure inside the texts and, on the other hand, as a technique of structuring the volume.

Firstly, "*the eternal roundness – a flower touches you finger and denudes itself into the memory, blurs the calico"* (11, translation mine) - shows "*How we are: life* is based on a *circular twirl"* of the transformation (47, translation mine), through which passes any "*Phoenix bird redounding upon the history's horologes"* (58, translation mine) in a "*Quantic Rhythm II"* (62, translation mine). All in all, the universe and everything it integrates, material or immaterial, concrete or abstract, is created according to the shape of the circle, whose extension and stratification lead to a spiral; this spiral is "made" by the human being who is searching for and is trying to set his own identity.

The collocation (re)found in many poems ("Steps in Ambush"*,* "Through Endless Snows the Red Armies" – translation mine) "the black apples slither through the white dust" (translation mine) encompasses the key of Georgescu's coiled vision: born with the ancestor sin, the man is given the chance to purify himself through the mystery of the saint baptism; he *slithers,* he climbs the spiral of life in his way towards salvation, but it depends only on himself to what extent he would reach it. There is a kind of *anabasis* of the bewilderment, of the conscious and unconscious at the same time, which occurs in an alert rhythm. From this ascension only the powerful ones can carry the day safe and sound and nobody is *allowed* to back out.

Secondly, the round structure of the volume represents another argument which endorses the hypothesis according to which the artistic vision of the poet departs from the hypostases of the circle. By "Near Away" (translation mine) Georgescu opens his volume

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bluntly, beginning directly to configure his *plan* along with the first poem: he involves his readers in the unfolding of the movie of his life, displayed as clearly as it may be and having an end written after the bacovian "Lake Dwelling" (translation mine)*;* the final poem catches up the two tonalities in which there is written this "I Am Not Allowed"*:* either clear/ concise or enciphered. This option of the author is meant to explain *the cycle of sacrifice* or the cycle of life, because life often forces us to make sacrifices in favor of something else, i.e. to make a choice.

- **Georgescu's *Cogito: We Escape on the Spirals from all Sides*** (translation mine)

All these terms we have already talked about in order to describe Georgescu's latest volume of poems (the circle – as a geometrical form or part of a spiral -, God and man as a human being seen in his own evolution from non-identity to identity) are also the key terms of Georges Poulet's theory on human and literary experience entitled T*he Metamorphoses of the Circle*. Starting with the Middle Ages and ending with the Modern Epoch, he illustrates how the figure of the circle can be applied to the idea of divinity, to a writer's conscience and to his writings. Poulet explains that, from one point of view, the centre of the circle takes in the divine unity, from which radiate all its energies, and its circumference symbolizes the eternity of the divinity, which incorporates the Creation; then, he shows that, from another point of view, the centre of the circle can be considered as being formed by the Ego, which enlarges towards the periphery of the circle and determines its circumference. This Ego is strictly related to the author's *cogito;* this is the place where any literary writing finds its origin, literature being seen as a form of the conscience. Due to the fact that its matrix is represented by the circle, the events narrated by the author would begin from a central point – identified with the author's *cogito* and where God lies – and would undertake the shape of the evolution of this point: the circle.

Liviu Georgescu starts from the pre-established idea of God's existence as a creator (this idea is representing the centre of the circle), of whose credibility he is firmly convinced, and keeps an eye on the manifestation of creation, of man (on how the central point dilates and determines the circumference of the circle). All this time he is helped by autobiographical elements. Practically, the poet observes what Christianity presumes: to believe and not to doubt something you cannot see, but you can feel. It is highly important to remark that, in Georgescu's case, the circumference is the one which interests most, the manner in which it "evolves/ develops" the central point and less the centrality; in other words, the poet is more interested in what man does during his earthly life in order to exempt himself from sinning and to be accepted in Heaven and less interested in the meaning of the dichotomy between God and the ancestral sin.

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The evolution in space of the central point of the circle shapes the emergence of the spiral. This shape fits Liviu Georgescu's writings due to the paradox it presumes (it has already been pointed out that the poet often makes use of this trope): as a 3D image it allows the view of the two parallel points – the one from which the sector starts and the one in which the circle closes; in plane its two parallel points become superposed. *De facto,* we deal with the points that bound one stage of the human life (the equivalent of one knot of the spiral); the first one represents the starting point (i.e. the point of man's non-identity; man as a sinner who has to reach redemption) and the second one shows to what extent the man has advanced in developing his own personality (i.e. in configuring and finding his self-identity; in touching redemption).

Therefore, the circle is perceived as a perspective and not as an object, as being related to the spatial and temporal coordinates of the human life (depending on man's perception) and not as ready-made categories. This perspective belongs to the one who grows from the paradoxical central point (the point of both the unitary/ indivisible and infinite God); he is not a no account man, but the Ego itself ("Who Am I" alias *Who are we*). In fact, for Liviu Georgescu, any creation is preceded and generated by the manifestation of the *cogito;* thus, the circle - as a mental construction – becomes, according to Poulet's statement, *an image of the subjective conscience.* Again, it is important to notice that the artist does not insist upon the circle as a form, but on the circle existing in a continuous formation; therefore, each text whose substratum is represented by the figure of the circle is centered on presenting the expansion modalities of the circle and the genesis of the circumference, which leads to the configuration of a circle.

- **Georgescu' s *Ambush:If You Have Faith, You Can Step on Waters*** (translation mine)

The geometrical paradox of the circle is illustrated in the poem "Steps in Ambush" (88, translation mine), which shapes the biggest knot of the life spiral: the knot of passing through life itself. Starting from the collocation of the black apples which slither through the white dust, Liviu Georgescu attributes for its evolution the thicket and "the guileful laugh" (translation mine), alongside "the beasts' grass" to the rolling new "places" (translation mine). Thus, he points out both the stiff ascent which man must get over (like Jesus' way to Golgotha) and the duality of life – compromise between purity and sin; created and arrived on the Earth as supreme human being – something extraordinary -,man sacrifices this quality because of the ancestral sin, becoming evanescent, fragile, lightsome, in other words a "black butterfly" (translation mine); yet he tries to survive, but his limitation in space and time, imposed by the Creator, has its say, so that even the thing which provides and sustains life cannot save him from being a "fugitive", because its nature is itself transitory (the pistil contains a limited quantity of sap). From a fragile butterfly man becomes a weighty pile, as

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he cannot resist the earthy temptations inviting him to sin. He "bounds" in loneliness, the principle according to which Eve was created - to destroy Adam's solitariness -, a principle of birth and of creation, being totally destroyed.

There must be remarked the point of immateriality from which the knot of man's life starts – the sin – and the terminal dominated by the same feature: incorporeality, only that it is the result of the creation and not its embryo. In fact, everything starts from the central point – represented by the idea of divinity and sin –, *the sharp point,* which expands itself (it becomes related to the idea of man trying to reach redemption) and manages to describe the circle (of life) as a knot of a spiral seen in space (being always coordinated by the Creator). This principle of the spiral also represents Liviu Georgescu's *forma mentis*. Hence, the readers light upon "*a self-portrait made from steps in ambush"* (88, translation mine).

To Conclude with …

If the character is strong, his soul, his inner self is strong as well and will thus reject any attempts to be stopped and imprisoned. His inner circle/self will always tend towards expanding into newer and larger circles, facing new circular waves of circumstances. The higher these waves/trials the more force and moral truth the character will have. Every man thus builds circles on another's side trying to connect through sympathy. Each new beginning and ending is marked by immateriality, darkness, lack of meaning. In Hawthorne's case, just like in Georgescu's case, what matters is the circumference (the gaze) and not the center of the circle, the inner self (the eye). It is more important to be seen and less to see. The gazers found on the orbit of the circle can have a more comprehensive glance and thus can complete the portrait, giving it consistence, materiality, meaning, only to build a new circle and start a new ascending spiral journey towards another circle in a continuous overplay of shadows (immateriality) and lights (meaning).

Hawthorne insists upon the circular or compensatory character of every human action. Every action can be better in performance. The only human sin is limitation, giving up searching. And searching means opting for something while renouncing something else. Hawthorne, like Georgescu, insists thus on the image of the circle as an ongoing process of formation, of adding to the incipient small circle and does not see it not as a static geometric shape.

"Who am I" or *Who are we* – this is the question to which Nathaniel Hawthorne and Liviu Georgescu try to find different answers in the film of the irreversible history. By approaching the history as a continuous circular movement, they find the key to the two interdictions: "I am NOT allowed" in Heaven; the black of the *mud* and *apples* is too intense

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to let the white of the *marble* and *dust* to replace it; the grey that results is too impure to stand on a high level and to hold out the hope. Therefore, we *escape on the spirals,* pillared by *the seven gables,* through a hybrid form of faith, which will never touch purity. At the same time, instead of evolving and becoming authentic butterflies, we involve, we deepen into the dirtiness of the clay; instead of arising higher to the point that closes up a circle up against the new starting one – pointing out their parallelism – we remain on the lowest level, so that the 3D spiral becomes equivalent to the plane one. All in all, God offers us all the beauty of the human world, but unfortunately we refuse the beauty in favor of the ugliness; we are given the chance to be redeemed, but we choose to sin over and over again, thinking that we have one life (thus, we follow the saying *carpe diem*) and forgetting that this is an earthy/ evanescent life and we are offered a heavenly/ an eternal one.

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