PHYSICAL AND MENTAL SPACES IN NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE'S ROMANCES

Smaranda ŞTEFANOVICI, Associate Professor PhD,
"Petru Maior" University of Tîrgu Mureş

Abstract: *What makes Nathaniel Hawthorne unique? The answer for Hawthorne is not to be found so much in the subjects he treats, nor in the various attitudes he takes towards his subjects; it does not even reside in his understanding of the psychological complexity of his characters, or in his use of language. Although all of these elements are very important to Hawthorne's success, and have been amply dealt with by many critics, they do not necessarily constitute the essence of his fiction. It is my contention that this essence resides in his sense of form and polarization.*

Hawthorne's uniqueness stands in his control over the material he wants to reproduce and his antithetical urge to structure and confine the experience in order to communicate something about it. In other words, he renders the complex human diversity in an ordered, carefully planned manner, which implies both the writer and the reader's examinations, hence the use of moral ambiguity and ambivalence.

In order to render this moral ambiguity and bipolarity, starting from Stubbs' three kinds of balances used by Hawthorne - between verisimilitude and ideality, the natural and the marvelous, and last, between history and fiction, - the paper will analyze how these balances combine abstract patterns of meaning with the appearance of reality.

Keywords*: organic theory, novel/romance, artistic distance, polarization, physical/mental spaces.*

Introduction[1]

Why did Nathaniel Hawthorne declare himself a Romancer? At the time he was choosing Romance as a narrative form in the nineteenth century New England, his American contemporaries considered Romance as inferior and unserious literature. Therefore, the question that has always

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intrigued me. Despite being considered frivolous fiction, he not only wrote Romances, but also theorized extensively about them, distinguishing between novel and Romance.
My further research proved that Hawthorne was a thoughtful writer who found this form of literature a suitable way of expressing his dual vision of life. His life of solitude haunted his imagination, which found in the artistic distance of the Romance the perfect vehicle of expression for his moral ambiguities.
Moreover, this organic theory about life stressed the importance of a bond between the writer and the reader, which would allow the latter to participate in the creative process of the artist. (Cf. Crowley 1970: 29) Hence, the prefaces he wrote, in which he invites his readers to participate in the abstract recreation of the meaningless reality.
His constant commentaries on the Romance form emphasized the balance between the actual and the ideal, the real and the fantastic, which suited his moral ambivalence between his inclination for solitude and introspection and his need to be understood and accepted by society.
By defending and using the artifice of Romance distance, Hawthorne obviously wanted control over the content of his creation and the way in which he ordered it. Thus, it becomes apparent throughout his work that the pursuit of form was Hawthorne's constant preoccupation.

N. Hawthorne's organic vision of the world: physical and mental spaces

What makes Nathaniel Hawthorne unique? Although we might lose sight of the considerable complexity of his works, my contention is that he offers a certain amount of psychological complexity but he shapes it into form. He employed an established literary form, the Romance, but his innovative aesthetic goal was the psychological blend of the physical space from the novel with the mental space from the Romance.
His original narrative form of Romance depends on his ambiguous and alternative interpretations to the ethical or moral dilemmas he sets. Although an artist's urge should be to reproduce human experience in its rich diversity, Hawthorne's uniqueness stands in his control over the material he wants to reproduce and his antithetical urge to structure and confine the experience in order to communicate something about it. In other words, he renders the complex human diversity in an ordered,

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carefully planned manner, which implies both the writer and the reader's examinations, hereafter his use of moral ambiguity and ambivalence.

Hawthorne experimented with the form of Romance, which allows the use of mythical patterns in a world more closely associated with human experience. This fictional world of Romance is suspended somewhere between the real and the imaginary, allowing this *polarization* of Hawthorne's work. Consequently, Romance, allows to see the dualities of Hawthorne's total vision and to balance them in a unique vision of the world.

This unique vision of the world takes in Hawthorne's fiction the shape of a sphere where characters take a quest journey for identity from the outside, material, objective but meaningless reality into the truth of the inner, imaginary, subjective realm of the heart, from where they get back to the outside reality aware of the dual character of human nature.

Nathaniel Hawthorne experiments with the *imaginative* Romance and the *artifice* of Romance distance and his prefaces would contain numerous elaborations on Romance theory. The Romance allows, unlike the novel, artistic distance from human experience. The Romance, says the English Gothic Romancer Clara Reeve in her essay "The Progress of Romance": "is an heroic fable, which treats of fabulous persons and things. The Novel is a picture of real life and manners and of the times in which it is written. The Romance in lofty and elevated language describes what never happened nor is likely to happen. The Novel gives a familiar relation of such things as pass every day before our eyes...." (1785: 110-111).

Northrop Frye, in *The Anatomy of Criticism* compares the novel and the Romance narrative forms: "while the former tends to be extroverted and personal, its chief interest being in human character as it manifests itself in society, the Romance tends to be *introverted* and *personal*, dealing also with characters, but in a more *subjective* way." (1957: 33-67, italics mine)

Similarly, Nathaniel Hawthorne, in the preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* distinguished between the novel and the Romance, showing his indebtedness to the latter because it allowed him to put his fictional world at an artistic distance: "When a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain *latitude*, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a Novel. The latter form of composition is presumed to aim at a minute fidelity, not merely to the

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possible, but to the *probable* and ordinary course of man's experience. The former-while, as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably, so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart-has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation". (1965: vii, italics mine).

The artistic distance does not imply an escape from human experience. On the contrary, Hawthorne's catch phrase "the truth of the human heart" and his quest for artistic distance through the form of Romance allows him to arrange human experience as he conceives it, in order to demonstrate patterns of morality. (Cf. Beattie 1783: 505-506 & Reeve 1785: 86-87). Romance, in Hawthorne's view, was an approach to human experience, not a flight from it, yet an approach much more *ordered*, much more *patterned*, than the reader's chaotic meeting with experience in his daily life, or even in his novel. (Cf. Stubbs 1970: 6, italics mine)

This ordering implies *artifice*, which is a way to engage the reader in a debate about human experience, rather than offering answers to the moral dilemmas. In order to render this *moral ambiguity* and *bipolarity*, Stubbs speaks about three kinds of balances used by Hawthorne: verisimilitude and ideality, the natural and the marvelous, history and fiction. All three balances combine abstract patterns of meaning with the appearance of reality.

Verisimilitude and ideality

Nathaniel Hawthorne strongly believed that a writer of fiction should not copy real life; he's a fictional creator that assumes responsibility for ordering the events in his work. Bulwer-Lytton insists on "the importance of the writer's ability to find ideal or abstract configurations in his subject matter and the relative triviality of the skill necessary to reproduce his subject matter in mechanical detail." (1838: 43) He emphasizes, further on, the importance of *conception* in a writer's work, not imitation of nature. His essay is a defense of the *ideal* over the real. Following this line of reasoning, he attacks Walter Scott's Romances for too much emphasis on verisimilitude and not enough *abstract* design.

Hawthorne often wondered which reality, objective or subjective, is more real. His theory highlights the fact that the abstract recreation in an author's mind of a thing is more real than the original of that thing. This ideal truth of the inner self enriches the meaning of the outside reality.

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This balance between the outer and inner space is what makes Romance superior to novel. Hawthorne's major effort was always to blend his idealized patterns of meaning with the appearance of reality. Such an image of perfect balance is Miriam's studio in *The Mable Faun*: "The room had the customary aspect of a painter's studio; one of those delightful spots that hardly seem to belong to the actual world, but rather to the outward type of a poet's haunted imagination, where there are glimpses, sketches, and half-developed hints of beings and objects, grander and more beautiful than we can anywhere find in reality". (IV: 31).
The studio is midway between the physical world and the artist's mind and it is a perfect image for the Romancer's role to blend the two realms.

Natural and marvelous

The interaction between the marvelous and the natural is another feature of Romance narrative form. In a work of fiction, "characters should react in a natural way to the supernatural events presented, while an air of probability is given to the real events that take place." (Cf. Stubbs: 18)
Hawthorne also favored this balance between the natural and the marvelous to stimulate the reader's interest and to gain artistic distance. His characters and events are ambiguous and ambivalent. Marvelous events are described and explained objectively; his fancies turn out to be accurate metaphors for the actualities; the legends of the past mingle with imaginative projections of the characters.
Examples abound in Hawthorne's Romances. Donatello in *The Marble Faun* is a mixture of marvelous and natural. The author: "had hoped to mystify this anomalous creature between the real and the fantastic, in such a manner that the reader's sympathies might be excited to a certain pleasurable degree, without impelling him to ask how Cuvier would have classified poor Donatello, or to insist upon being told, in so many words, whether he had furry ears or no." (IV: 389).
Roger Chillingworth and Pearl from *The Scarlet Letter* have supernatural dimensions. Mistress Hibbs is a portrait of a historical person considered a witch. The letter A also takes supernatural features.
In all his interventions, the writer advises the reader not to separate the mysterious from the real: "The gentle reader, we trust, would not thank us for one of those minute elucidations, which are so tedious, and, after all, so unsatisfactory, in clearing up the romantic mysteries of a story. He is too wise to insist upon looking closely at the wrong side of the

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tapestry, after the right one has been sufficiently displayed to him, woven with the best of the artist's skill, and cunningly arranged with a view to the harmonious exhibition of its colors." (*Marble Faun*: 382).

History and fiction

History allows artistic distance and fictional shaping. Charles Brockden Brown compared the historian who merely recorded facts with the Romancer who connects facts from the past, present, and future: "he is a dealer, not in certainties, but in probabilities, and is therefore a Romancer." (1800: 251) It is a general human experience, in an extensive neutral ground, common to us and our ancestors, which the Romancer may imaginatively picture, as Walter Scott believed. (1820: xxxiv)

Nathaniel Hawthorne, too, called for this balance between past and present, history and fiction: "The past is but a coarse and sensual prophecy of the present and the future" (*The House of the Seven Gables:* 269).

His Romances thrive with historical facts and characters but Hawthorne insists that the readers be aware that they are receiving his conceptualization of history, not history itself: "It is a Legend, prolonging itself, from an epoch now grey in the distance, down into our own broad daylight, and bringing along with it some of its legendary mist, which the Reader, according to his pleasure, may either disregard, or allow it to float almost imperceptibly about the characters and events, for the sake of a picturesque effect." (Preface of *The House of the Seven Gables*: vii)

Hawthorne consciously manipulates history to achieve historical parallels for the events which take place in the works' present time. Legends like the Pycheon-Maule feud, superstitions, or the scarlet letter legend influence the actions in the present. They provide a historical extension to the action and therefore help create artistic distance which Hawthorne wanted to create.

This *neutral ground* achieved through the artifice of Romance is a *universal* setting, in which the Romancer stages his moral and psychological drama of the fall of man. Nathaniel Hawthorne, the artist, creates this universal realm, in which "he can control his conceptual attitudes about experience", as Stubbs argues (1970: 36).

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Conclusion

Nathaniel Hawthorne obviously adopted the Romance as a narrative form. His aim was not to reproduce the physical space of reality, but to create a mental space that was set at a distance from ordinary experience, a reality which, as N. Frye noted, tended to be introverted and personal, rather than extroverted and social. It seems to have perfectly suited Hawthorne, who found in this distance the freedom to reshape reality as he saw it, while at the same time letting the reader participate in the creative process.

It is important to know, however, that for Hawthorne the distance and *latitude* (freedom) given by the Romance did not represent a flight from human experience, but a different attempt to approach it from a moral, intellectual, and emotional standpoint of his own.

The proof of Hawthorne's need to control the process of *shaping* a vision of reality is apparent in both his fiction and non-fiction. In his fiction he constantly attempted to balance and blend the three antitheses of *verisimilitude* (credibility) and ideality, the natural and the marvelous, and history and its conceptualization in fiction. Their complicated interplay to achieve artistic, yet artificial distance of Romance, gives shape to Hawthorne's *organic* theory of ambiguity and ambivalence of life experience.

Besides, his non-fiction (his prefaces, letters, and notebooks) invites us, the readers, to suspend disbelief and join him in the world he creates. This conscious and systematic strategy is also proof of Hawthorne's sense and control of form. He chose this self-conscious artifice in order to examine human experience by involving the reader in this inquiry, as well. What makes Hawthorne unique, unlike other fiction writers, is the *ordered, carefully patterned* approach to this experience through the form of Romance that permitted the balance between the real and the imaginary.

Hawthorne's aesthetic goal, as a nineteenth-century American Romancer, was to demonstrate that by the psychological blend of the Romance with the novel, of the mental with the physical space, adding the ideal, abstract truth of the inner self, can only enrich the concrete meaning of the original of a thing, event, or character.

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