

Warsaw Studies in English Language and Literature

Edited by Jacek Fisiak

New Essays on the Short Stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne

Janusz Semrau (ed.)



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Prefatory

Unlike the novel, a short story may be, for all purposes, essential.

(Jorge Luis Borges quoted in
May 2004: 14)

Although Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) does not garner quite as eager recognition as Mark Twain, Walt Whitman or Ernest Hemingway, for example, he continues being a living and signifying presence, amply acknowledged as one of the most original and outstanding authors in the history of the United States letters. It is often pointed out (courtesy of Richard Brodhead) that Hawthorne's writing has attracted critical attention for as long as there has been a general entity known as 'American literature'. Moreover,

[d]espite radical changes in American culture and society ... [Hawthorne] has managed to remain at the top of the list of classic [American fiction]. In fact, over the years he has never been displaced. Through psychological criticism and the study of symbols, myth criticism and deconstruction, linguistic, Marxist and feminist analysis, he has managed to stay in place.

(Coale 2011: 20)¹

It is a standard appreciation that Hawthorne's status as an artist rests as much on *The scarlet letter* (1850) – the first serious contender for the coveted distinction of the Great American Novel and a work that features the first great heroine of U.S. letters into the bargain – as on his short stories. In fact, Hawthorne never thought of himself as a 'novelist', but rather as a storyteller and a writer of story-books. Besides, as is well known, *The scarlet letter* was originally intended and was actually designed as a tale (novella), which is to say, a long-short-story. With the earliest pieces written in the mid-1820's and a failure of at least three attempts at a book collection in between, it was finally the privately sponsored publication of *Twice-told tales* in March of 1837 (with the author's name appearing for the first time ever over his writing) that established Hawthorne on the literary scene, with his reputation growing steadily ever since.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, a one-time notorious invalid, mediocre student, reclusive idler and later measurer of salt and coal, did arguably more than anyone else in the first half of the nineteenth century to advance the American short story and,

1 Although no such verdict is accepted unanimously, Hawthorne has earned the nickname of American literature's greatest 'survivor' (Brodhead 1986: 215).

indeed, the short story as a genre. Even though half-way through his career Hawthorne for a mixture of commercial, artistic and personal reasons had as good as ceased writing short fictions,² and even though his varied oeuvre of nearly one hundred short pieces is fairly uneven in quality ('marble' and 'mud', to pastiche his own popular existential conceit), he helped transform yarn-spinning, fable-spawning, tale-telling and sketch-drawing into a disciplined, viable and legitimate literary form. It was a development that certainly helped usher literary narrative prose into a new realm of art. While it was still very much a field-in-the-making, Hawthorne can be credited – along with Washington Irving (of "Rip Van Winkle"), Edgar Allan Poe and (even more coincidentally) along with Nikolai Gogol – with having introduced a new intelligence and craftsmanship into literature: a serious attention to plot, a sense of control and economy, proportion and condensation, circumference and closure.

It is both telling and appropriate that – along with William Peden's *The American short story* of 1964 – academic interest in the short story should be dated to Mary Rohrberger's study *Hawthorne and the modern short story* published in 1966. (The short-story genre as such was first announced, or 'proclaimed', by the first U.S. professor of dramatic literature Brander Matthews in 1885.) The best of Hawthorne's fictions project not only an architextural system of parameters, relationships, bearings and coordinates, but a force of intensity and focus as tangible as "a magnetic field" (Cowley 1970: 31). They demonstrate how rather than being an apprentice format short narrative can prove a serviceable medium for the probing of reality by means of often excruciating attention to detail, by means of formal configurations and patterns, by having the spatial and the temporal functionally interpenetrate and meaningfully inform each other. While Hawthorne was certainly a product of a particular (strong, intense) contextual juncture rather than of thin provincial air he had himself complained of, the challenge and indeed the reward today is to be able to get beyond what we believe we can 'figure out' about the writer and the man, to be able to transcend the so-called Hawthorne Question (a bandwagon fallacy of a kind) in order to appreciate the powerful undercurrent of suggestiveness, the various artistic nuances of his fiction, as well as its larger, ongoing cross-cultural and existential relevance.

Independently, Edgar Allan Poe and Henry James seem to have between them rather adequately discerned the distinctiveness of Hawthorne's writing in terms of the ease and naturalness of fancy (imagination), the lightness and elegance of conception, and the originality of incident, introspection and reflection. Conceptually, thematically, and ideologically, Hawthorne's stories are almost

2 *Mosses from an old Manse* published in 1846 was followed only by *The snow-image, and other twice-told tales* in 1851.

anything one may choose to call them. The trademark of his fiction is “part moral allegory, part psychological investigation, and part historical analysis”; although how and why and in what proportion and order of importance these qualities obtain, or rather coexist, no one seems prepared to determine (Budick 1986: 218). Especially when reading Hawthorne’s stories for children it is actually sometimes tempting to conclude, following some well-known personal impressions of his contemporaries, that by the standards of immediate practicality he was a soft-spoken and mild-mannered quaint antiquarian or fastidious confectioner of bygone days, one who did not seem to have patronized enough the local butcher. However, as D. H. Lawrence ([1923] 1965: 91) notes, even with his “little-boy charm” Hawthorne is likely to resolutely tell you “what’s what”. It is an experience that may – to borrow from the joys of the brief encounter by a contemporary short-fiction author – alter the reader’s mode and manner of seeing and feeling, “all in a space of a few minutes” (McKenzie 2005: 8). One of the most astute comments on the dynamic of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s fictions has been offered by a modern classic author of children’s literature:

[Hawthorne] knows how to squeeze all the emotion in his material into one small fragment of [tangible] suggestion that can be confidently left to produce its effect in concert with the reader’s mind.

(Ransome 1908: xx)

It is essential to stress that Hawthorne is anything but anatomist, emblemist, dogmatist or ideologue. As many critics have recognized it, he seems to have perfectly intuited that the true value of the literary work resides in the co-constitutive writerly-readerly mode, which is to say in the controlled play of significances rather than in the achieved status of meaning, let alone any formulatable foregone conclusions. This is the immediate reason why Hawthorne’s oeuvre lends itself so gracefully to a variety of responses, theories, methodological approaches and critical tools. It is possible, consciously or unconsciously, to appropriate, which is to say naturalize, Hawthorne according to one’s own personality and convictions – and “in two, or ten, or twenty years there will be another, equally credible Hawthorne coming along ...” (Dunne 1995: 3-4).

The present collection owes in part its inspiration to Marek Wilczyński’s essay of several years ago “Nathaniel Hawthorne’s ‘Young Goodman Brown’: An attempt at deconstruction”. In it, the author posits provocatively that “the readers of Hawthorne’s fiction have usually been rabbis and not poets”; and closes his own refreshingly original reading of “Young Goodman Brown” with at once an apology and ongoing *raison d’être* for Hawthorne scholarship: “After all, there is no

duty to ... follow ... the guide ... Resisting the devil's temptation to exercise his authority, a critic may as well choose the part of a joyful spectator, a witness, a voyeur" (Wilczyński [1988] 2009: 90, 98).

*

Represented in *New essays on the short stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne* are some of the most widely-known and most frequently anthologized stories (e.g., "My kinsman, Major Molineux", "Wakefield", "Roger Malvin's burial", "Ethan Brand", "The Great Stone Face") and some of the less widely-known ones (e.g., "Legends of the Province-House", "The haunted mind", "The threefold destiny", "Foot-prints on the sea-shore").

The volume opens with Paweł Stachura's essay on the image of the bonfire in "Earth's holocaust". It explores the relations between visuality and narrativity, as discoursed by Jacques Derrida in *Truth in painting* (1978/1987). Stachura reads Hawthorne's story as a graphic example of what Derrida calls 'economimesis', a self-propelling mechanism that produces examples of visual beauty negotiated between various individual judgments of taste. Economimesis – which essentially creates images – initiates a series of strokes whose geometry can conform to various places in the graphical and semantic layers of a literary text. Stachura finds the concepts of stroke (trait) and trace so appealing because they help address the ever-fascinating question of how it is possible for literature to lastingly entertain visual images.

Paulina Ambroży draws on the Heideggerian notion of unconcealedness to examine Hawthorne's conception of art and the artist in "The prophetic pictures". Her focus is on the origin of the work of art and on the author's doubts about the subjectivity and the mimetic role of an artwork. Ambroży argues that for both Martin Heidegger and Nathaniel Hawthorne art is a happening of truth involving at once revelation and occlusion, a complex process that creates an opening in which the spectators can access/enter the unconcealedness of their own being. Ambroży pays special attention to Hawthorne's use of the sketch as a medium of quasi-prophetic revelation. The 'thingly' nature of the sketch, its primacy and sheer potentiality is what makes it a natural conduit of Heideggerian *alētheia*.

Marek Paryż concentrates on the cultural significance of the depiction of the corpse in "Roger Malvin's burial". He does so in the light of selected psychoanalytic and anthropological theories, as well as with reference to the historical context of the Indian wars in the American colonial period. Paryż argues that the narrative parameters of presenting the corpse are its refraction through the protagonist's mind and its historicization. The protagonist's failure to properly bury an-other signifies a larger crisis of the patriarchal order which the two

main characters (Reuben and Roger) represent and whose continuity depends on the symbolic distribution of male authority across generations.

Marek Wilczyński's essay takes up "Legends of the Province-House", Hawthorne's early short story cycle that connects the colonial history of New England with its post-revolutionary present. Analyzing the texts in terms of the relationship between the Lacanian Imaginary and Symbolic, the essay follows Lauren Berlant's reading (in *The anatomy of national fantasy*, 1991) of Hawthorne's effort to develop a National Symbolic – by bringing together the past and the nationalist demand for a separate cultural identity. Wilczyński argues that by originally placing his historical fictions with John O'Sullivan's *Democratic Review*, Hawthorne at once pledged allegiance to its nationalist agenda and undermined it by his affirmation of the British cultural heritage.

Joseph Kuhn discusses the special place of "My kinsman, Major Molineux" in the oeuvre of Lionel Trilling (1905-1975). Trilling was very sensitive to the stubborn worldliness and contradictions of Hawthorne as a moral historian, qualities which inform his own "liberal imagination". Kuhn shows how the critic brings to his interpretation of Hawthorne an Arnoldian approach and how something in the story resists this kind of poised reading. The Dionysian laughter at the end of "My kinsman" means that Trilling is forced to recognize the story as prime example of a new, anti-moralistic Hawthorne – "our modern Hawthorne, our dark poet". Kuhn expands Trilling's comments by analyzing the story as a depiction of a certain terror implicit in the American Enlightenment and of the birth in Robin Molineux of a 'weightless', modern self.

Janusz Semrau offers a transcriptive (anti-type) response to "Wakefield" as a seemingly obvious relational proposition. He argues that inasmuch as Hawthorne's text is a distinctive rhetorical performance, foundationally a story about story-telling, its title can be naturalized as identifying the story-teller. Semrau's argument is that the text's order of re-appropriative and be-longing signification is that of Mrs. rather than – as is commonly believed – that of Mr. Wakefield. Informed by object permanence and a looking bias, "Wakefield" proves to be her-tale rather than his-story. The essay ultimately proffers the discourse of radical relativization with the implicit recognition that in certain spheres there obtains nothing absolutely 'moral' or 'immoral', and it is only perspectival thinking that makes it so.

Katarzyna Kuczma discusses in existential terms the self-reflexive dimension of Nathaniel Hawthorne's fiction in "Foot-prints on the sea-shore", "The haunted mind", "Wakefield", "Ethan Brand", "The threefold destiny", and "The Great Stone Face". The threshold spaces and intermediate zones created in these narratives accommodate and explicate the intricate mechanisms of self-creation. Drawing originally on Emerson's classic distinction between 'Me' and 'Not-Me', Kuczma develops her own larger interpretive framework that communi-

cates through the trajectory and the symbolism of the ouroboros, the Möbius strip, and the spiral.

Finally, David Malcolm's essay deals in taxonomic and quasi-generic terms with Hawthorne's stories published collectively in 1837 as *Twice-told tales*. While critics disagree as to whether the volume is unified, Malcolm argues that there are several elements in it – especially thematic sequences and recurrent motifs – that generate a commendable degree of coherence. Malcolm points in particular to the relevance of the tropes of isolation, of problematic knowledge, and of the transmission of history to the present.

Janusz Semrau

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Drawing under the radar: “Earth’s holocaust” and truth in painting

Paweł Stachura, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

The critical tradition of writing about “Earth’s holocaust” has shown relatively little interest in its central image – the “general bonfire” (Hawthorne [1846] 1982a: 887)¹ – that consumes all conceivable objects in order to reform the world by obliterating the meanings of those objects and the values ascribed to them. Instead of discussing the image itself, critics have mostly focused on the cultural context of the story, reading it as a satire on social-reform movements in the nineteenth-century America, and thus concentrating on the meaning of the image, rather than its composition and strategy of representation. In view of the disturbing quality of the central image, i.e., the Holocaust, such discussions, valuable and well-informed as they are in terms of literary history, seem to be incomplete. The present analysis is an attempt at a close reading of relations between the image of the bonfire and its satirical meaning.

In a typical early example of critical treatment of the tale, Davidson (1947: 539) relates the text to contemporary reformist literature. Like several other critics, Davidson points out to similarity between the image in Hawthorne’s story and the description of bonfire in Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*. Jones (1968: 1436) provides more information in an extensive intertextual study of relations between Hawthorne and Thoreau, linking “Earth’s holocaust” to Thoreau’s “Paradise (to be) regained” (1842), a sceptical review of the second edition of the famous reformist work by J.A. Etzler *The paradise within the reach of all men* (1833), an early and important example of technological utopianism in America (Naydahl 1977: iv-xx). Buford, like several other critics, discusses “Earth’s holocaust” together with Hawthorne’s other, usually satirical, texts about American social reformist, including, of course, *The Blithedale romance* (1852), and several tales and sketches from *Mosses from an old Manse* (1846), which, as Davidson demonstrated in his 1947 article, were inspired by Hawthorne’s acquaintance with Thoreau (apart from “Earth’s holocaust”, these are “Egotism; or, the bosom serpent”, “The celestial rail-road”, “Fire worship”, and “Buds and bird-voices”). Buford extends this list with “The Hall of Fantasy”, which is perhaps in closest thematic relation to “Earth’s holocaust”. In general,

1 All further references to the text of “Earth’s holocaust” are to this edition and are henceforth cited parenthetically by page number only.

such studies conclude that Hawthorne was sceptical about the nineteenth-century reformist movements, and saw their proposed schemes of change as impractical and superficial, incapable of achieving their objective of eradicating evil, and capable of actually perpetuating evil, being self-contradicting in their self-righteousness.

More recent studies present the tale as a response to contemporary historical change, usually described as the emergence of modern capitalism, rather than a response to contemporary proposals of change; such studies may be described as neohistoricist. The prime example of this kind of discussion is David Reynolds's *Beneath the American Renaissance*, where the critic demonstrates the affinities between canonical works and popular imagination of the 1850s, noting similar images, themes, characters and, above all, the spirit of ironic subversiveness directed against both the cultural establishment and the reformist movements, which were apparently perceived as duplicitous and insincere. Reynolds's study, however, does not explicitly mention "Earth's holocaust", even though it provides popular equivalents of its imagery, such as representation of hack reformists as fiery devils and reforms as destructive fire (Reynolds 1988: 45). In articles related specifically to the short story the discussion is similar. Lewis Perry, for example, in his synthetic book on American culture between 1820 and 1860 refers to "Earth's holocaust" as a dramatisation of anxieties caused by the burden of tradition on the one hand, and the reckless destruction of it on the other hand: "In a nation where everything was changing, it was hardly possible to find middle ground between burdensome awe and reckless indifference to the past" (Perry 1993: 69). Similarly, Sheila Post-Lauria's book on Melville (1996) mentions Hawthorne among representatives of "*Graham's* fiction" which, as opposed to "*Godey's* fiction", is more concerned with contemporary historical change and popular concerns of the age:

A look at the tales of Hawthorne and Poe in light of these conventions reveals the interest of these authors to write in the *Graham's* style. While ostensibly different, Hawthorne's "Earth's Holocaust" and Poe's "The Imp of the Perverse" share common techniques with other tales published in this magazine. Both stories are highly philosophical rather than action-filled. Through the conversations between the narrator and a "grave ... looker-on", Hawthorne dedicates considerable space to discussing the philosophical implications of the mob's actions in burning various elements and representations of "civilized society".

(Post-Lauria 1996: 161-162)

Post-Lauria points out to discourse, dialogue, and debate as important elements of this kind of fiction, which is effectively closer to today's column writing and,

more importantly, to contemporary French *roman feuilleton* than to the tradition of the American romance. In a somewhat different manner, Beauchamp (2002: 38) also interprets Hawthorne's work as part of a historical process, by placing the author as a conservative actor on the scene of history of American utopian thought, an example of "an almost mystical quietism regarding political reform". Again, however, the common denominator of such readings is their disregard for imagery as such, and total concentration on its meaning. Examples of other angles of interpretation are difficult to find, but a curious exception is provided by Clack (2000: 89) who wrote a history of interest in alchemy among writers of the American Renaissance. For Clack, who very interestingly explores the acquaintance between Hawthorne and "the American hermeticist, General Ethan Allen Hitchcock", numerous images in Hawthorne's short stories can be interpreted in terms of alchemical attributes and transformations, by and large in the symbolic logic derived from Carl Gustav Jung's writings. As such, the imagery of fiery social reform simply acquires another layer of meanings, an archetypal foundation, but Clack's informed account of Hawthorne's interest in alchemy is interesting in itself, as historical background of his fiction.

The present discussion will concentrate on the compositional aspect of "Earth's holocaust", in particular on the relations between dialogue and description, and on the ability of these relations to generate meanings. To this end, a procedure based on Roland Barthes's *S/Z* (1970) is adopted to diffuse, neutralize, or mask the meanings of the text, and show it as a beautiful sight, an art-object or a landscape painting, akin to Barthes's starred text. The present text has been divided into twenty six lexias, which are not given in full, but are reduced to shorter fragments, usually the length of one sentence. They are constituting, as it were, a series of strokes (i.e., lines) by which the text is drawn. The relation between image and meaning is constantly reviewed in terms of economimesis, as presented in Jacques Derrida's *The truth in painting* (1987). The focus of reading is the sublime image of the colossal fire; arguably such an image is the visual outcome, or trace, of dialogical transactions performed outside of the meaningful aspect of the text. It can be observed as the meaningless, though visible, series of artistic movements, much like the isolated strokes seen before a sketch starts to resemble or mean anything. In terms of interpretation, it is argued that Hawthorne saw such meaningless strokes as the constitutive elements of his subject-matter, that is the human heart and its attempts to change. The first lexia is, of course, the title.



1.

“Earth’s holocaust”

As in “The Hall of Fantasy”, the title clearly focuses on an image, leaving its meanings beyond the field of vision, in the marginal area where generation of meaning cannot be witnessed at first sight, an omission and exclusion which is perhaps most pronounced for a modern reader.

Does the *topos* of the title, like that of the *cartouche*, command the ‘work’ from the discursive and juridical instance of an *hors-d’oeuvre*, a place outside the work, from the exergue of a more or less directly definitional statement, and even if the definition operates in the manner of a performative? Or else does the title play *inside* the space of the ‘work’, inscribing the legend, with its definitional pre-tension, in an ensemble that it no longer commands and which constitutes it – the title – as a localized effect?

(Derrida 1987: 24)

Indeed, localisation of the title in Hawthorne’s text is difficult. Other than a *cartouche*, the wording of the title does not appear in the text (as it does, as a frame, in *The scarlet letter*), and as a performative element it is scattered throughout. It is impossible to state, as it was hastily done just now, that holocaust is ‘central’ to the text, since it is simultaneously on its edge (as *cartouche*), and scattered throughout. This paradox subverts spatial metaphor of frame, content, centre (abyss), revolving around the metaphors that Derrida wants to use and discard simultaneously, as it structures its own (that is, his, and Hegel’s) description (Derrida 1987: 26). It was an initial impulse for this article to write that meaningful dialogues revolve around the meaningless image of the bonfire, as if they occupied a frame around a painting but, clearly, such arrangements are very easily interchangeable, both in text, as a narrative device, and in any process of reading, as moment of reflection. The text has several such rearrangements.