Mladen Machiedo

Dalle poetiche ai gruppi*

La verità sopravvive più facilmente all'errore che alla confusione.
(Bacone, *Novum Organum*)

Mi sia consentita una breve schematizzazione preliminare. Nella storia della poetica — dalle origini alla seconda metà del novecento — distinguerei tre periodi o filoni, il primo dei quali precede, il secondo sfiora e il terzo abbraccia, in gran parte, l'argomento proposto. Il periodo più lungo (il primo) è quello della così detta *poetica normativa*, da Aristotele a Orazio, a Boileau ... ogni volta con lo sfondo storico d'un potere assoluto, sia quello di Filippo e Alessandro, di Augusto o di Luigi XIV. La poetica normativa — dopo gli antichi — si rivela sempre più rettilinea, esclude dubbi e scarti, rende possibili le applicazioni dogmatiche (tipico, in questo senso, il rapporto Castelvetro-Aristotele) o, nel migliore dei casi, le variazioni sul tema (ad es. Orazio ripreso da Boileau, con quell'insistere sul «buon senso», sulla «giusta cadenza», su ogni cosa «al suo posto», sull'«eleganza» dei versi ecc.; anzi, se non ci fosse l'interpretazione lievemente ironica del sonetto, in quanto forma chiusa, e la verisimiglianza dei personaggi, richiesta nella commedia, sarebbe difficile capire perché un arco teso su due millenni raggiunge in Boileau il suo punto finale).

Il secondo periodo nella storia della poetica è quello in cui il *vero* sostituisce la norma. Non più norma, dunque, il vero si fa sentire a sua volta come *tendenza*, costante ma sempre articolata — userò uno stilema caro alle scienze naturali

* È il testo della relazione presentata al convegno internazionale «La poesia e il linguaggio dei nostri giorni» a Mondello (Palermo) dall'8 al 10 settembre 1977.

— entro un dato orizzonte paradigmatico: per cui via via si distingue il vero nel romanzo storico dei romantici da quello successivo dei realisti, naturalisti e autori del romanzo psicologico. Le poetiche del vero (sembra più opportuno usare il plurale) agiscono soprattutto nell'ottocento. Prima di vedere quanto abbiano trasmesso ai giorni a noi più vicini, conviene volgere lo sguardo indietro, risalendo magari di corsa ad alcuni precursori: a Herder, e prima ancora a «Sturm und Drang», a Rousseau, Voltaire, Du Bos, a qualche frase di Cervantes e — naturalmente — all'antico trattato *Del sublime* (Curtius suggerisce la traduzione letterale del titolo: *Dell'altezza*), trattato pervenutoci col nome di Longino, non identificabile finora con nessun autore o pensatore dell'antichità. Le poetiche europee del vero coincidono con la formazione pre- o postrivoluzionaria della borghesia, con il risveglio della coscienza nazionale, con l'intuizione e con la verifica dei nuovi valori sociali e scientifici, come d'altro lato — probabilmente non a caso — il remoto antenato, il così detto Longino, appartiene al semiadombrato mondo alessandrino, dotto ma dubitante. (Quanta amarezza, infatti, in quella parentesi dell'anonimo Longino, greco o giudeo che sia, implicitamente rivolta alle norme della Roma vittoriosa: « . . . ne parlo pensando che anche a noi, che siamo greci, sia lecito capirne qualcosa» e quanta logicità in quel raffronto, già cosmopolitico, dei valori artistici dal quale risulta l'abbandono del precetto a favore d'una «particolare disposizione di spirito», preannuncio evidente della soggettività che sarà cara ai romantici!).

È ora di lasciare le fonti (ciascuna delle quali invita ad un discorso più lungo, ma questa volta i salti saranno inevitabili) e di registrare le più significative riapparizioni novecentesche del vero negli anni '30 e '40 (dunque, dopo il romanzo psicologico): dalla narrativa americana (la nota «scoperta dell'America» di cui parla Pavese nei suoi saggi), al neorealismo italiano, al romanzo esistenzialista francese (che trova i suoi precursori nel giovane Moravia, nel primo Céline e in Krleža, per approdare successivamente alla teoria sartriana del tempo globale: inteso come somma dei momenti simultaneamente vissuti da diverse «esistenze»). Più recente, il romanzo-documento mantiene tuttora viva un'esigenza particolare del vero. In generale, si direbbe che il vero fosse per la letteratura l'occasione più immediata per forzare i propri limiti.

Il terzo periodo o filone abbraccia, infine, le *poetiche* che preferirei definire *della scrittura*, anziché della ribellione o negazione. La loro origine è da cercare all'inizio della «lirica moderna» presentata da Hugo Friedrich o nell'ambito dell'«idea simbolista» (penso all'antologia omonima di Mario Luzi), idea più che movimento, essendo il fenomeno simbolista

— come osserva Luzi — «più descrivibile che definibile». Non mancano pertanto precursori più lontani: Dante (riletto in maniera originale da Sollers) e Du Bellay (a cui, non a caso, s'ispira ad es. un volume recente di Michel Deguy). Nessun secolo finora ha avuto un ritmo accelerato paragonabile a quello del novecento, alla successione, in media più che decennale, delle poetiche della scrittura: in parte pronte a elaborare l'eredità simbolista, in parte decise ad eliminarla. Gli *ismi* da richiamare alla memoria sarebbero: crepuscolarismo, futurismo, espressionismo, dadaismo, surrealismo ed ermetismo, i quali — con le già menzionate poetiche del vero — colmano la prima metà del secolo, sempre con lo sfondo, ora tragico ora drammatico, delle due guerre mondiali, delle rivoluzioni proletarie, dell'imperialismo ed internazionalismo, delle resistenze e lotte di liberazione, dei dogmatismi e antidogmatismi, dell'urbanesimo e della ripresa economica (e anche su questo piano, tra slanci e incertezze, si profila — sia pure molto a distanza — il paragone col tempo dei comuni di Dante).

Una distinzione tra le poetiche novecentesche del vero e quelle della scrittura può riproporre, a prima vista, la questione dei generi letterari, sembrando le une più vicine all'espressione in prosa e le altre al verso. Nel neorealismo ad es. questo rapporto (anche quantitativo) risulta evidentemente a favore della prosa (e del cinema), ma basta d'altro lato la scrittura in prosa di autori quali Jarry, Joyce e Queneau — con apporto e portata straordinariamente poetici — per rendere difficilissima la linea di demarcazione. Né ha senso, in questo momento, riprendendo il discorso sulle poetiche della scrittura, cedere alle suddivisioni indubbiamente attraenti tra poetiche *esplicite*, basate sui manifesti, e altre *implicite*, individuabili o ricostruibili nello spirito vagamente comune di determinate opere; né contrapporre quelle *centripete*, intente a scavare dentro la parola, alle *centrifughe*, partite di corsa ad esplorare aree extratestuali («esterne», direbbero Wellek e Warren), ma per agire, nell'atto stesso sulla lingua.

Pare che il prefisso *neo* sia stato trasmesso dal neorealismo alla seconda metà del secolo: lo ritroviamo nel neo-sperimentalismo degli anni '50, rispettivamente nella così detta neo-avanguardia del decennio seguente. (Per motivi di spazio e di informazione, mi limito prima all'esame della situazione italiana, sperando, anzi presentendo, ch'essa possa offrire un termine di paragone ad altre letterature contemporanee). Nel neo-sperimentalismo s'incontrano curiosamente una poetica del vero (il neo-realismo) e una della scrittura (l'ermetismo); ed è così che si spiegano sia la «libertà stilistica» e la «zona franca», definizioni suggerite da Pier Paolo Pasolini in *Passione e ideologia*, sia la cautela d'un movimento che «tende sem-

mai a essere epigono, non sovversivo, rispetto alla tradizione novecentesca». Al di là delle singole personalità, maturate in quel periodo (e sono, a mio avviso, da considerare neo-sperimentali non solo gli autori direttamente legati alla rivista *Officina,* promovitrice ufficiale del movimento), il neo-sperimentalismo segna l'inizio d'una lenta dissoluzione delle poetiche collettive. È, nello stesso tempo, l'ultimo degli *ismi,* almeno nella periodizzazione della letteratura italiana. La neo-avanguardia degli anni '60 è intenta ad intensificare il problema della scrittura, senza rinunciare pertanto all'impegno ideologico «antiprospettico», ereditato da *Officina,* anzi spostato dalla verifica della coscienza all'esasperazione individuale e al desiderio di provocare lo *choc.* Fallisce il tentativo ambizioso della neo-avanguardia di misurarsi con l'avanguardia storica (del primo novecento), a cui implicitamente voleva richiamarsi, e fallisce pure il tentativo di formulare una poetica comune, che trascenda gli itinerari personali o quelli dei gruppi più ristretti. Sempre tra scrittura (non più passione!) e ideologia si muove la poesia tecnologica degli anni '60 e '70, attratta dal linguaggio, attualissimo e per conseguenza sincronico, dei *mass media;* viene respinta la cultura, più esattamente la scelta diacronica a cui la neo-avanguardia, tra rifiuti e preferenze, era pur legata. L'efficacia (anzitutto extratestuale) del messaggio capovolto, antitecnologico quindi (per cui sarebbe più esatta la nozione di poesia antitecnologica che tecnologica), si esaurisce, dopo le prime prove, nella prevedibilità dell'operazione. A livello di struttura (non, certo, a quello d'impegno) il processo era annunciato, a suo tempo, da una sola riga del secondo manifesto dadaista (riprodotto poi da Breton in *Passi perduti*): «Basta pronunciare una frase, affinché la frase contraria diventi DADA»!

Finito il neorealismo, la sociologia cede il posto all'ideologia, grosso modo contraria alla programmazione neocapitalista (ed è più esatta una tale indicazione negativa che il diapason delle precisazioni alternative), la quale ideologia continua a coesistere con interessi vivissimi rivolti alla struttura, alla statistica e al segno (segno «tecnologico», alla fine, sempre più circoscritto da sé).

Parallela alla storia dei movimenti, si presenta — nel terzo venticinquennio del novecento italiano — la storia dei gruppi letterari. (Il fenomeno è riscontrabile altrove: basta l'accenno al *Gruppo 47* tedesco, ai *Noigandres* brasiliani, a *Tel quel,* alla «scuola di New York»). Il gruppo, fin dal suo nome, ostenta la sua propria *presenza,* ossia la data di nascita, più che la poetica: *Novissimi* (un'altra volta si punta sul «nuovo», come nel «nouveau roman» francese che, mette, invece, in primo piano il rinnovamento del genere letterario), *Gruppo 63,*

Gruppo 70 ... (e si potrebbe continuare, per aggiornare l'elenco, ma a puro titolo d'informazione, non di valutazione critica). Si dirà forse a difesa del gruppo e in linea di massima, che la sua esistenza coincida con la formulazione della rispettiva poetica. Poetica o programma, questo è il punto da discutere. L'esame dei *Novissimi*, i meno numerosi e (per conseguenza, chissà) i più omogenei, può risultare sintomatico, benché non debba menare necessariamente a generalizzazioni o previsioni affrettate. Tra «informale» e «neo-contenutismo» (cito Sanguineti), tra «ermetismo di ritorno» e «realismo» (cito da uno studio recente di Walter Siti, che pertanto abbandona la prima etichetta), le oscillazioni sembrano eccessive per giustificare una poetica. Una metrica sì, e in questo senso l'analisi capillare di Siti convince; non convince invece il presupposto «realismo», in quanto costante tipologica (alquanto discutibile per un materialista), la quale dovrebbe collegare — a distanza di cinquant'anni — i crepuscolari e la neo-avanguardia. A difesa dei gruppi contemporanei (senza giustificare la loro mercificazione letteraria, più volte notata e ripudiata), si può obiettare semmai ch'essi operano in un tempo particolarmente critico per il rapporto autore-lettore con il filtro editoriale *imposto*, non solo interposto. A suo tempo Whitman aveva venduto una copia sola della prima edizione dei *Fogli d'erba* e aveva trovato un unico lettore importante: Emerson. Ma gli Emerson d'oggi, troppo indaffarati per leggere — se non diagonalmente — i libri degli amici, prendono in mano i versi d'un anonimo e, per giunta, senza fascia pubblicitaria? C'è da dubitarne. Siamo ben lontani anche da Apollinaire che, con simpatica noncuranza, si accontentava di essere letto per ipotesi da «non più di sette dilettanti», di «sesso e nazionalità diversi» (oggi la sua lettera del '15 ha l'aria d'una trovata). Né credo che il problema si avvicini alla soluzione (se non soggettivamente), quando Siti ad es. (alla fine del suo libro) identifica il linguaggio della «sua» neo-avanguardia (i cinque *Novissimi* + uno non-novissimo, incluso con qualche cautela) con il linguaggio quotidiano (fatto funzionare entro la «figuralità letteraria»), sperando che venga abolito il distacco «produttore-fruitore». Pertanto, l'obiezione fondamentale da muovere è questa: la «fruizione» della poesia resta un fatto di cultura, non solo di linguaggio. Aveva ragione Giuliani (cito la prefazione dell'antologia *I Novissimi*) quando, senza voler provocare lo *choc*, affermava: «Non soltanto la poesia si legge poco, ma non si sa bene come leggerla». In un componimento intitolato *Arte poetica* (titolo ormai rarissimo ed esclusivamente personale nel secondo dopoguerra), Nelo Risi voleva letteralmente «affrontare», «provocare» e, magari, «inventare» il lettore. Qualche spunto nuovo, in questa direzione, viene offerto dall'anto-

logia di Berardinelli e Cordelli, *Il pubblico della poesia* (apparsa nel '75). Guardando il volto senza volto d'una generazione italiana — presentata com'è (occorre precisarlo) — che coincide con la mia o con quella immediatamente posteriore, mi pongo molte questioni per individuarne ora una sola. Mettersi dalla parte del lettore è segno di modestia (alludo non solo al titolo che può essere arbitrario); ma non è forse segno di disperazione occupare il posto di cui l'ex-lettore non si cura più! Dalla prefazione, piuttosto scoraggiante, di Berardinelli risulta, però, un fatto nuovo: «la mancanza di una credibile organizzazione in gruppi e tendenze». Davvero, alcune *riviste aperte* sembrano, negli ultimi tempi, opporsi alla chiusura dei gruppi (e a quella delle case editrici, loro o altrui): è più facile pubblicare, ma a condizione d'essere impaginati assieme alla gente con cui spesso non si ha nulla da spartire salvo... l'anonimato e la speranza. La situazione presente non influisce visibilmente sulla critica, che richiede una certa età e per conseguenza resta in gran parte quella *di gruppo*. In pratica significa: se si presentano o traducono gli stranieri, si cerca la conferma, non si indaga, né si allarga, in ultima analisi, il proprio orizzonte. Manca la vera curiosità, manca l'internazionalismo in un mondo — paradossalmente — sempre più internazionale. Non vorrei essere preso troppo alla lettera; idealmente, però, contrappongo alla miopia settaria la letteratura comparata fondata da De Sanctis (mirando non più alla metodologia, è chiaro, bensì alla disponibilità desanctisiana), come pure la lezione esemplare dei grandi maestri tedeschi: Auerbach e Curtius; ben conscio che le sintesi non possono essere quelle di ieri e nemmeno autosufficientemente europee.

Le poetiche e i gruppi rivelano il dinamismo e le stasi del secolo. Il bilancio conclusivo — come pure il nostro provvisorio — dipenderà naturalmente anche dalle *personalità* (fuori di qualunque reminiscenza saintebeuveiana). Oggi, anche il concetto della grande opera può far sorridere. Pertanto, nella definizione del remoto Longino, tuttora accettabile, si cercherà invano la pateticità: «È invece realmente grande ciò che induce a molte riflessioni, produce un'impressione a cui è difficile, anzi impossibile, sottrarsi, e lascia un ricordo così vivo che difficilmente svanisce».

Chi non conosce ormai il sistema mnemonico delle triadi nell'insegnamento della letteratura italiana? (Sistema alquanto lacunoso, poiché il criterio della «non-poesia», ante o postcrociano, ha tenuto esclusi Leonardo, Galileo, Bruno, Vico e tanti altri con cui, volendo, sarebbe possibile formare quasi una successione alternativa). Scelgo, ciò nonostante, tre nomi nel novecento italiano, spinto non dalla veggenza, bensì dalla mera funzionalità da sperimentare. Su Svevo, Pirandello e

Montale non c'è nulla a ridire, ma questa pare soltanto una delle combinazioni possibili. Nessuno dei tre apparteneva ai gruppi letterari; Svevo e Montale più che esprimere le poetiche in cui vengono inseriti (il romanzo psicologico, rispettivamente l'ermetismo), le creano con le loro opere (creano o superano storicamente, come dimostra l'ultimo Montale); a Pirandello poi (passato il suo giovanile verismo) sembra impossibile trovare paragoni geograficamente più vicini, e comunque vaghi, d'un Čekhov o d'un Kafka.

Se getto uno sguardo sulle letterature della Jugoslavia e mi soffermo un attimo su quella che credo di conoscere meglio, cioè sulla letteratura croata, scegliendo per pura simmetria tre nomi, non posso fare a meno di notare qualche analogia nel rapporto autore-poetica. Miroslav Krleža, ottantenne, tuttora attivo, parte da un instintivo espressionismo (accertabile nel suo teatro del 1915 e nei versi poco posteriori), espressionismo razionalmente attenuato (eppure mai soffocato) nelle sue opere seguenti, narrative e teatrali, esistenzialiste *ante litteram* oppure impegnate, ed altre saggistico-enciclopediche pervase da un'irruente polemicità (in tutto una quarantina di volumi). Antun Branko Šimić, morto giovanissimo negli anni venti, artefice d'un granitico geometrismo poetico (a partire dal '17), assai informato (senza essersi mosso mai da Zagabria, per non parlare della sua nascita in uno sperduto villaggio erzegovese), resta incerto tra l'espressività, in quanto tratto peculiare dell'arte, e la nozione di espressionismo, sfuggente in una «vastità indeterminata, senza contorni». (Non a caso il problema irrisolto della definizione dell'espressionismo viene riproposto da Benn, nemmeno dieci anni fa). Il terzo (cronologicamente), Nikola Šop, settantenne, sta vivendo nella sua mobilissima immobilità, un'altra giovinezza poetica. La sua è un'opera isolata senza confronti, se non si vuole tentare una verifica entro il «pensiero planetario» di Axelos o entro la «rêverie» di Bachelard. (La letteratura croata del secondo dopoguerra si svolge, invece, all'insegna dei gruppi generazionali, legati da visibile o invisibile solidarietà). La letteratura serba (su cui aggiungo qualche riga per allargare la veduta del vario e complesso orizzonte jugoslavo e per offrire un esempio complementare) trova invece il suo stimolo più fecondo nell'area surrealista. Che il surrealismo serbo — volutamente organizzato a differenza dell'espressionismo croato — sia parallelo a quello francese, è un fatto riconosciuto anche da Crevel. (Basta qualche data: Marko Ristić traduce Breton nel '23 e Reverdy, allora sconosciutissimo all'estero, nel '24).

Si può obiettare che i nomi finora menzionati appartengano più alla prima che alla seconda metà del secolo. Certo, è più facile misurare gli obiettivi da cui ci stiamo distaccando,

che quelli che ci adombrano o che, visti troppo da vicino, rivelano difetti di costruzione, e più ancora quelli che stanno spuntando appena dalle nebbie del futuro. Ho fatto anch'io le mie scelte ben precise nel ventennio trascorso, ma preferisco lasciarle dove sono: cioè, in altri testi. Veggente o no, il critico del novecento, più di quello dei secoli passati, rischia di rimpiangere le ore sprecate in fenomeni effimeri; per prendere parte occorre, come mai prima, sopportare la quantità. Non credo che «tutto torni» (come afferma Berardinelli) e il mio omaggio al passato è d'altra natura. Con Bacone e Vico sono più incline a considerare giovani gli antichi e noi più vecchi; anzi, come i secentisti, vorrei poter credere alla perfettibilità della letteratura. Solo in questo senso gli impulsi dell'espressionismo, del surrealismo e dell'ermetismo (tre poetiche della scrittura) mi sembrano i più durevoli. (Contrassegno con un punto interrogativo il futurismo, distinguendo tra il suo aspetto tecnico con la rispettiva diffusione internazionale e quello ideologico marinettiano, certamente facile da giudicare *post festum*, ossia *post bellum*; ma già Lucini e Prezzolini, nel lontano 1913, avevano capito benissimo che i futuristi non intendevano uccidere solo metaforicamente, né solo il «chiaro di luna»!). Pertanto, non mi faccio illusioni su quanto direbbe ad es. André Breton, se dovesse sentirmi: più che riconoscere un altro «sistema di coordinate» a proprio uso, rifiuterebbe probabilmente queste e simili «costruzioni astratte», dove il suo «amore non funziona più» (è una parafrasi dei prolegomeni al terzo manifesto surrealista) e mi sospetterebbe, a ragione, più vicino alle scienze diagonali di Roger Caillois. Se l'uomo «sognatore definitivo» (cito Breton) rischia di passare per astorico o per individualista (in un secolo in cui la vita e l'arte si dibattono drammaticamente tra partecipazione e strumentalizzazione), è tuttora possibile controbilanciarlo con la nozione di letteratura, intesa (pure e già nel primo manifesto surrealista) come «uno dei sentieri più tristi che portano a tutto».

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Nikola Šop, *Pohodi* (a cura di Z. Mrkonjić), Kolo, Zagabria, 1972.
Nikola Šop, *Dok svemiri venu* (a cura di Z. Mrkonjić), Razlog, Zagabria, 1975.
Nikola Šop, *In cima alla sfera* (antologia a cura di M. Machiedo), Abete, Roma, 1975.
René Wellek — Austin Warren, *Teorija književnosti* (trad. di A. Spasić e S. Đorđević), Nolit, Belgrado, 1965.

NOTA

Mi è parso superfluo precisare i titoli e le edizioni delle opere, facilmente accessibili, di Montale, Moravia, Pirandello, Svevo ecc.

Accludendo la bibliografia al testo della relazione presentata a Mondello, mesi fa, traduco come poscritto una citazione, sottolineata nel frattempo: «... la poetica storica è il settore meno elaborato della poetica» (Tzvetan TODOROV, *Poétique*, ed. du Seuil, Parigi, 1968).

Ivo Vidan

Sign and Significance in Hawthorne and in Melville

When one contemplates American writing up to the Civil War — that is to say the literature preceding the realism of Mark Twain and Henry James — a dominant pattern seems to impose itself. It appears that this considerable body of writing is united by a theme which for cultural and historical reasons must be unique to America, namely, the *theme* of *the interpretation of signs*. Not that the significance of the works themselves is unclear or ambiguous. A critical understanding of the works is not the issue. No, it is rather that the works deal with the problem of interpretation, with the methods and the possibilities of reading signs produced by nature and by society.

Puritan hermeneutics originating from Calvinist theology and its transformation into Emersonian Transcendentalism is the intellectual source and the habit-forming impulse for what in the works of Hawthorne and Melville became a dominant aesthetic preoccupation, the productive centre of their view of the world. In the pages that follow this perspective will be used first to discuss Hawthorne, then to indicate the analogues of his procedure in the reflexions of Emerson and in the religious ancestors of his worldly thinking, and then to compare and contrast Melville's literary practice — as it concerns interpretation as a theme — with Hawthorne's. Both of them handle sign and significance in a very different way from Poe's — which perhaps accounts for Poe's early domestication in European literature contrary to the late recognition of the more characteristically American contributions of Hawthorne and of Melville.

At first glance the significance of a Hawthorne story can hardly present a problem; if anything, it is probably too plain. The thinness of Hawthorne's characteristic allegorical structure was criticised by Poe and James, and modern scholarship has seen in it a minor and negligible whim in the moralistic

manner. But a whole range of Hawthorne's shorter fiction is anything but simple and onesided.

Even such a light piece as the story "David Swan" contains an interesting ambiguity. While young David is sleeping by the road, he is seen by a rich childless couple who contemplate adopting him, a beautiful maiden who would like his attention, and a group of robbers who are ready to cut his throat. All these passers-by have schemes which they do not realize, as they have to hurry on while David continues to sleep. He had been close to Wealth, Love, Death, "all, in the brief hour since he lay down to sleep", says the author.[1] "Sleeping or waking, we hear not the airy footsteps of the strange things that almost happen." Contrary to this allegorical explanation by the author himself, a modern reader would see in the story a case for relativistic interpretation. Each set of passers-by sees some other features of the youth which suit their own life projects and fit into their own realm of experience. Hawthornian allegory turns into a Rashomon-like pattern which appeals to modern attitudes of mind.

Another early story concerning a young man's entry into the world is "My Kinsman, Major Molineux", a story disregarded by generations of critics until Q. D. Leavis[2] and Lionel Trilling[3] separately pointed out its relevance as a story of an ambiguous and open-ended process of initiation, of the experience of the irrational and communal living in a socially dense world — a story, we may add, that can hardly be covered by any kind of allegorical reading.[4] But the story is also about the cultural difficulties of interpretation, for it is about a young country boy's misreadings of the city people's tone, behaviour, customs, and *etiquette*. In its drama recognition

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[1] The quotations from Hawthorne's stories come from *The Complete Short Stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, Garden City, New York, 1959, those from *The Scarlet Letter* from the Penguin edition *(The Scarlet Letter and Selected Tales)*, 1971, and the quotations from Melville's *Moby Dick* from the Reinhart edition (New York and Toronto, August 1952).

[2] «Hawthorne as Poet» in *Interpretations of American Literature*, ed. by Charles Feidelson, Jr. and Paul Brodtkorb, Jr., New York, 1959, reprinted from *The Sewanee Riview*, vol. LIX, 1951.

[3] «Hawthorne in Our Time» in Lionel Trilling's *Beyond Culture*, New York, 1965, originally published as «Our Hawthorne» in *Hawthorne's Centenary Essays*, ed. by Roy Harvey Pearce, Columbus, 1964.

[4] The Bradley-Beatty-Long-Perkins anthology *(The American Tradition in Literature*, Vol. I, Fourth Edition, 1974) in its brief note to the story says: "As an allegory it is concerned with Hawthorne's familiar polarity of good and evil, of light and darkness, in the affairs of mankind". This comment strikes one as too abstract and strangely irrelevant in a usually excellent and very helpful manual, and indeed its remark on character and action in the story is much more appropriate.

coincides with the antropological theme of achieved initiation, insight into the nature of mass rule and a carnevalesque reversal of power.

If "My Kinsman, Major Molineux", strikes *us* as modern, to its author it may have been primarily the tale of a historical even patriotic environment, like others that deal with The New England Legend. On the other hand, in a playful piece like "Wakefield", the author's voice speculates about possibilities surrounding a man who without apparent reason wanders off for twenty years, rather than builds a story. It is fully illuminated by an interpretation which brings Hawthorne very close to the sociological imagination of modern students of alienated behaviour: "Amid the seeming confusion of our mysterious world, individuals are so nicely adjusted to a system, and systems to one another and to a whole, that, by stepping aside for a moment, a man exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place forever". It is not us, but Hawthorne himself who offers this suggestion, so higly topical to us today.

This is the same Hawthorne who in "The Minister's Black Veil" will be explicitely, moralistically allegorical: the clergyman in the story impresses his parish with a piece of dark cloth behind which one day he hides his face forever. But is it there as a sign of his own "sin and sorrow", as a visible admonishment to everybody about his own insincerity, as a representation of the whole community's unworthiness? The primary meaning of the black veil seems to change from passage to passage without losing other connotative effects. It disturbs not through its religious significance but through the very fact that it defies any straightforward interpretation: a subject definitely of the past presented in a form which is strikingly similar to our modern anxieties. It is therefore unsettling in the manner of "Young Goodman Brown", the later story being perhaps the most concentrated masterpiece of Hawthornian ambiguity.

The witches' sabbath which Young Goodman Brown attends out of curiosity leaves him a spiritual invalid for life, tortured with the question: had he dreamed that all the respectable members of the community, including Faith, his own wife, were committed to the devil — or is this really true? In that case, empirical reality becomes illusion, phantasy turns into reality. But more than epistemological in general terms, his problem is that of a historically defined moral consciousness. The contradictory ethical positions are expressed in a concentrated passage in which Brown is told by the Devil: "I have been as well acquainted with your family as with ever

a one among the Puritans; and that's no trifle to say. I helped your grandfather, the constable, when he lashed the Quaker woman so smartly through the streets of Salem; and it was I that brought your father a pitch-pine knot, kindled at my own hearth, to set fire to an Indian village in King Philip's war". All of Puritan history is here called into question: the methods of establishing and maintaining their community, the values which they profess and by which they want to be identified are shown to be enforced by nonChristian action, hence to be essentially nihilistic, or the opposite of what they were asserted to be.

What an enormous distance between such a story and the pleasant romantic tale of "Rappaccini's Daughter", a phantastic story in which beauty and science, perfect in their soullessness, are shown up for the evil that a forerunner of Henry James must have seen them to be. The method however is not the dramatic self-questioning of *The Portrait of a Lady* or of "Young Goodman Brown", but that of a clearcut black-and-white allegory. It is surprising to us today that James did not stop to consider the difference between the ways in which the two stories function. He placed both "Young Goodman Brown" and "Rappaccini's Daughter" among allegories, one of the three groups of Hawthorne stories which he liked, though apparently in a tepid way. James was never a votary of the phantastic in Hawthorne, though the man who was later to write "The Turn of the Screw" could have appreciated Hawthorne's psychological explorations with whatever motifs these were connected.

Many of Hawthorne's tales or sketches are indeed allegorical presentations of a basically static moral idea — and these will invite little critical effort on our part. But often the story is an account of the course, the process of some surprising realization, in which it is the experience that remains in the mind, while the message can be formulated in ways that do not even coincide in content. The *American Notebooks*[5] are full of jottings in which an idea is the starting point for fiction, but reads as a synopsis in which a drama has to work itself out, rather than as a didactic definition. And the gnomic germ of a narrative induces us to search for significance in a way in which mere allegory never does.

Hawthorne contemplates at some length presenting the human Heart as a cavern: "at the entrance there is sunshine,

[5] Edited by Randal Stewart (New Haven, 1932). A good selection appears in *The Portable Hawthorne*, ed. by Malcolm Cowley, New York, 1948.

and flowers growing about it". Somewhat deeper you "begin to find yourself surrounded with terrible gloom, and monsters od divers kinds"... "but deeper still is the eternal beauty". Or, giving us substantially the outline of James' later "The Beast in the Jungle", explains the moral: "What we need for our happiness is often close at hand, if we knew but how to seek for it". Sometimes an allegorical idea pregnant with meaning, like the project for some later well-known stories: "The search of an investigator for the Unpardonable Sin — he at last finds it in his own heart and practice". Or: "A story of the effects of revenge, in diabolizing him who indulges in it". With such examples one can contrast dramatic riddles that do not lend themselves to moral reformulation: "A young girl inherits a family grave-yard — that being all that remains of rich hereditary possessions". "A story, the principal personage of which shall seem always on the point of entering the scene; but shall never appear". "A person who has all the qualities of a friend, except that he invariably fails you at the pinch".

Such ideas allow us to envisage a great deal of implied psychological analysis. It is however in *The Scarlet Letter* that the significance emerges from an extended interplay between several characters. The significance is earned in such a way that the act of interpretation becomes not an external effort on the part of the reader, but is the essence of the book's dramatic structure. Quite apart from the individual drama of the three adult characters that develops through their interconnection, the drama of the novel is in the total act of narration, in the tone and perspective of the authorial voice: it is in the rhythm and speed of the author's disclosure of what is supposed to be secret, in his speculations and his suggestion of alternate possibilities.

"Hawthorne's subject", we are told by Charles Feidelson, Jr., "is not only the meaning of adultery but also meaning in general; not only *what* the focal symbol means but also *how* it gains significance... The symbolistic method is inherent in the subject, just as the subject of symbolism is inherent in the method."[6] The letter A which accompanies the progress of the story as a constant presence wihtout really interfering with it, can be seen as a central fact and as a sign of values; those of the Puritans, of Hester, of Chillingworth. In the opening scene there are two statuesque human emblems which can be interchanged with the scarlet letter and yet are a necessary embodiment of its significance on the level of the characters in-

[6] Charles Feidelson, Jr.: *Symbolism and American Literature*, Chicago 1962, pp. 10 and 13.

volved: these are Hester with her child on her bosom and the minister holding his hand on his heart. Heart — child — letter A (the meaning of which letter we naturally guess but are never explicitly informed about), these constitute a group of emblematic objects standing for the unique and all-involving human drama that absorbs the story. Such a stiff, deliberately non-realistic use of allegorical instruments, is one of Hawthorne's means of suggesting a significance that transcends empirical facts. Another one is the hinting at rumors, opinion, possibilities that constitute the "device of multiple choice", as Matthiessen calls it.[7] On many occasions in the novel it is suggested that a natural occurrence may have its supernatural concommitant or that instead of a normal human encounter some phantastic or demonic exchange might have taken place. This method — another name for it is the "formula of alternative possibilities" (Yvor Winters)[8] — is basically an expedient with which Hawthorne tried to make up for his lack of assurance that he was building a humanly cogent story. Ursula Brumm who studied its typological antecedents, has criticised its artificiality and facileness.[9] Indeed, af all Hawthorne's allegorical devices it is the most sentimental and immature when its aim is to invoke a fanciful divine intervention.

On other occasions, however, it can have a profound structural significance, essential for our grasping the book as a whole. Such in the double possibility of the wild rose-bush rooted almost at the treshold of "the black flower of civilized society", the "prison". "This rose-bush", we are told by the author, "by strange chance, has been kept alive in history; but whether it had merely survived out of the stern old wilderness, so long after the fall of the gigantic pines and oaks that originally overshadowed it, — or whether, as there is fair authority for believing, it had sprung up under the footsteps of the sainted Ann Hutchinson, as she entered the prison-door, — we shall not take upon us to determine." What is suggested here is either the natural or the spiritual origin of a supernaturally resillient object of life and growth, involving the soil and history, the eternal and the mortal, nature and society. "Hawthorne is perpetually looking for images which shall place themselves in picturesque correspondence with the spiritual facts with which he is concerned, and of course the search is of the very essence of poetry",[10] observed Henry

[7] F. O. Matthiessen: *American Renaissance,* London-Toronto-New York, 1954, p. 276.
[8] Yvor Winters: *In Defense of Reason,* Denver, 1947, p. 170.
[9] Ursula Brumm: *American Thought and Religious Typology,* New Brunswick, 1970, pp. 157—161.
[10] Henry James: *Hawthorne,* London, 1967, p. 115.

James; and Matthiessen, viewing over a wider horizon finds that "the tendency of American idealism to see a spiritual significance in every natural fact was far more broadly diffused than transcendentalism."[11]

It is between the natural and the spiritual that the human coil of *The Scarlet Letter* resides, and it acquires a new significance as step by step in the novel a new facet of the situation in revealed and brought into the foreground. The natural and the spiritual, the two aspects of symbolism as understood by Hawthorne and his contemporaries, become poles of a basic tension which each of the human beings experiences, but differently, each from his own perspective. It is even possible to draw a pattern of individual attitudes which, however static, will contain the mutual relationships that among themselves define and exhaust the basic significance of the human situation. I suggest however that we substitute the word social for the word spiritual, and reserve spiritual for a more specific meaning.

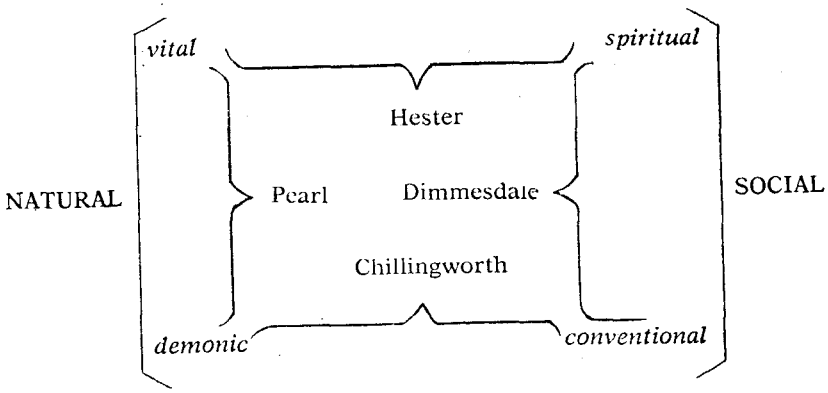
According to James, the characters in *The Scarlet Letter* are "representatives, very picturesquely arranged, of a single state of mind".[12] What he means is that together they exhaust the possibilities of human behaviour, rather than that each of them stands for what the others also do.

Of the four characters, Pearl entirely belongs to the pole of the natural, and Dimmesdale to the pole of the social. But there are two sides to Pearl. She is "a demon offspring" to the Puritans, but Pearl herself asserts that she "had been plucked by her mother of the bush of wild roses, that grows by the prison door". Hence her natural-ness — her belonging to nature — is on the one hand demonic and on the other life-asserting and vital. Similary, Dimmesdale's belonging to society has two aspects too. He is caught among the norms of the Puritan community — the conventional — and on the other hand he has a charismatic or spiritual personal power.

Our terms are now complete, we only have to place the remaining two characters into our paradigm. Unlike Pearl and Dimmesdale, who each belong to one pole, Chillingworth and Hester stand between the natural and the social poles. Chillingworth obviously belongs to the demonic — and to the conventional, Hester to the life-asserting or vital and to the spiritual. To repeat the terms of our paradigm: Pearl is natural (vital and demonic), Dimmesdale social (conventional and spiritual), Chillingworth belongs between the two poles, parti-

[11] Matthiessen, *op. cit.*, p. 243.
[12] James, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

cipating in the demonic and the conventional, Hester, his opposite, participates in the vital and the spiritual.



What is the purpose of creating such a pattern? It is to show how complementary the characters are and how among themselves they cover and exhaust all the aspects of the novel's symbolism. They form a closed system perfect in itself. It tells us why Hester is such a full and complete personality and Chillingworth a totally nihilistic one, why Dimmesdale is faulty and why Pearl, delightful and disturbing, shares the features which Hawthorne associates with the forest; it is the place where life grows and human freedom finds that sensuous love has "a consecration of its own", but it is also the meeting place of witches and the black man — the residence perhaps of the savage pagans. The pattern, in other words, is not unduly geometrical — its symmetry and completeness echo the symmetrical distribution of scenes, the gradual display of dialogues, the rhythm of individual analyses and communal pageants in the organization of this uniquely and uncannily regular book, equally disturbing and satisfying, in more perfect proportions than any other American book has ever succeeded in being.

Perhaps one ought to justify the substitution of the term "social" for what — in opposition to natural — is usually called "spiritual". The charismatic effect and the subjective convinction of both Hester and Arthur are exercised within and in opposition to a precisely defined social environment. Hence "spiritual" can be a reserved for a more limited category, for one of the terms within the binomial pairs spiritual--vital and spiritual-conventional.

Upon examination it appears that Hawthorne establishes the significance of his stories in a combination of plainly alle-

gorical and more complex, ambiguous, symbolical elements. Each of these groups constitutes a system based on the ethical and cultural assumptions which the story exemplifies or, in the more important works, examines. Through the individual characters or from the narrator's own perspective an anxious awareness of signs is made apparent: the analogy of heart — child — letter, for instance, is produced by the strategy of the authorial voice and not by any of the individual characters.

Ursula Brumm formulates the basic conception of Hawthorne's standpoint in his fiction as "the belief that an analogy obtains between the outer and the inner worlds so that the things and events of the outer world can be emblems or types of those of the inner".[13] Fourteen years before *The Scarlet Letter,* Emerson in *Nature* wrote that "particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts".[14] Hawthorne's semiology however does not seem to draw upon Emerson, but upon a much older source, the Puritan culture of the seventeenth century. The sophisticated system of signs in *The Scarlet Letter* is much more perfect than Emerson's semiological awareness would ever permit. It points back to the concreteness of the two hermeneutic preoccupations of the Puritans: religious typology and the interpretation of special ("memorable" or "remarkable") providences.

"The face of the world", says Michel Foucault, "is covered with blazons, with characters, with ciphers and obscure words — with 'hieroglyphics', as Turner called them."[15] What constitutes a sign and endows it with a particular value as a sign is resemblance. Among the many types of resemblance, as they were understood in the sixteenth century, Foucault analyses four: *convenientia, aemulatio, analogy,* and *sympathy.* These, he continues, "tell us how the world must fold in upon itself, duplicate itself, reflect itself, or form a chain with itself so that things can resemble one another. They tell us what the paths of similitude are and the directions they take; but not where it is, how one sees it, or by what mark it may be recognized".[16]

This then is no explanation of the poetic effect of Hawthorne's emblematic centers: the hand and the heart, the hand and the birthmark, the mirror images, cannot be unambiguously classified; yet they fall under the categories comprized by the Renaissance terms which Foucault revives. Consequen-

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[13] Brumm, *op. cit.,* p. 146.
[14] *Ralph Waldo Emerson,* ed. by Frederic I. Carpenter, American Book Company, 1934, p. 21.
[15] Michel Foucault: *The Order of Things,* New York, 1973, p. 27.
[16] *ibid.,* pp. 25—26.

tly, the Puritan concern with signs and implied resemblances stems from an older tradition, but it is their Calvinist consciousness that determines the specific forms of the *significances* for which they looked.

The Puritan semiology — if we can allow the anachronism — is based on the conviction of God's purposefulness in the order and unity of the world and in his revealed message to man in the Bible. In life, God communicates with man through memorable events, the "special providences", by which, Feidelson says, "God gave a particular direction to the process of natural events, thereby creating an effective sign of one of his ever present purposes ... The Puritans saw the world as instinct with meaning by reason of God's concurrence and susceptible of interpretation by reason of God's salient acts".[17] Shipwrecks and toothache, earthquakes or broken glass could be understood as particular signs within a total pattern of God's supernatural volition. In written texts or sermons, on the other hand, the Puritan divines operated with a system of correspondences, purported to be intended by God, which sets two successive historical events into a reciprocal relation of anticipation and fulfillment. A characteristic relationship, discussed by Ursula Brumm, is that between Adam and Christ. The "type" as a prophetic symbol comes from medieval hermeneutics and is ramified into most ingenious analogies involving current New England events and personalities. In the poetry of Edward Taylor, in the writings of Jonathan Edwards the typological method is used with increasing freedom. "The more the fulfillment loses its concrete historical character and becomes a spiritual correspondence, the more this mode of interpretation approaches the allegorical, and the more the type approaches the symbol", says Ursul Brumm.[18] She also shows how the technique of parallels and connections based on a typological inheritance can be seen in Hawthorne and Melville.

It is therefore interesting that the authors of *The Scarlet Letter* and of *Moby Dick* differ so much from Emerson, who on a theoretical level appears to have given a contemporary version of the Calvinist ideas on the interpretation of signs.

We have been warned by Ursula Brumm that Puritanism was an enemy of symbolism as an independent interpretative activity which went outside the restriction to precise scriptural parallels: Within his general outlook Emerson did not elaborate a single system of signs — he was no semiologist.

[17] Feidelson, *op. cit.*, p. 82.
[18] Brumm, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

But he was a symbolist — no writer of his generation studied the nature of symbolism more deeply or exhaustively.

Statements like "Every appearance in nature corresponds, to some state of the mind",[19] and "Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts",[20] can be thought to refer to some kind of romantic system of typological correspondences, more precisely, naturalist in the pantheistic sense. But do the phrases "it is things which are emblematic"[21] and "The world is emblematic"[22] mean the same?[23]

For except for some naive examples of vulgar etymology or trite analogies, like that between the natural seasons and the ages of man, Emerson does not show particular instances of his basic triangle of resemblance, nature-spirit-man.[24] Emerson's criticism of Swedenborg could also apply to the Puritan theologians: "The slippery Proteus is not so easily caught. In nature, each individual symbol plays innumerable parts, as each particle of matter circulates in turn through every sistem . . . Nature avenges herself speedily on the hard pedantry that would chain her waves. She is no literalist".[25] Seeing the particularity of Hawthorne's allegory-like significances, no wonder that Emerson had no understanding at all for his novel writing.[26]

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[19] *Ralph Waldo Emerson, ibid.*

[21] *ibid.*

[20] *ibid.*

[22] *ibid.*, p. 25.

[23] Namely, "the standard of beauty is the entire circuit of natural forms, — the totality of nature . . . nothing but is beautiful in the whole. A single object is only so far beautiful as it suggests this universal grace" (*Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. by Frederick I. Carpenter, American Book Company, 1934, p. 20). Speaking of the poet: "Nature offers all her creatures to him as a picture language . . . (*ibid.*, p. 214). "The poet alone knows astronomy, chemistry, vegetation and animation, for he does not stop at these facts, but employs them as signs" (*ibid.*, p. 218) At the same time, with coarse but sincere rites the poet worships "nature the symbol, nature certifying the supernatural)" (*ibid.*, p. 215).

[24] In his *Literary Transcendentalism, Style and Vision in the American Renaissance* (Ithaca and London, 1973), Lawrence Buell remarks that "the dominant impulse behind Transcendentalist catalogue rhetoric" is "the sense of the underlying identity of all things in the universe as manifestations of the divine plenitude" (p. 169).

[25] From *Representative Men*, quoted by Stephen E, Whicher in his *Freedom and Fate, An Inner Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, New York, 1957, p. 88.

[26] Matthiessen quotes some remarks by Emerson on Hawthorne: «I never read his books with pleasure; they are too young». Cf. «Nathaniel Hawthorne's reputation as a writer is a very pleasing fact, because his writing is not good for anything, and this is a tribute to the man» (Matthiessen, *op. cit.*, pp. 47 and 194).

According to Emerson, nature is at one with the spirit and with Man (or the Poet). The all-comprising symbol is identical with itself. As Feidelson seems to argue,[27] this makes us ultimately infer that it is impossible to create artistic meaning outside experienced reality; yet at the same time Emerson's concept of symbolism coincides with that in modern literary criticism. Hence the closeness of the writers of the American Renaissance to the great modernists, like Joyce and Eliot. Feidelson's metacritical investigations of American literary symbols are a product of the 1950's outlook upon literature. The same body of fictional writing today invites to an examination of the relationship of a literary sign to other signs in the same system (and every work as well as a set of works is a system in itself). It also invites us to examine the historical interconnections and differences between apparently similar ways of thinking: that of the Calvinists, of Emerson, of individual creative authors since the Puritan divines up to and beyond the American Renaissance.

In Bryant's "Thanatopsis" one discovers a proto-Emersonian awareness of signs:

> To him who in the love of Nature holds
> Communion with her visible forms, she speaks
> A various language ...

And the references to "letters from God dropt in the street" in "Song of Myself", in Emily Dickinson's lyric "This is my letter to the world That never wrote to me", are indications of a more problematic and more individualized conviction of signs being communicated through the universe: theirs, contrary to Emerson's, is a question about meaning. These poets, in other words, belong to the race of Hawthorne and Melville. If James jokingly mentions his boyhood fascination with the title of Hawthorne's novel, that be mistook for a reference to "one of the documents that come by the post,"[28] the Dead Letter Office in which Melville's Bartelby worked before coming to face an empty wall in Wall Street belongs to the same problematic intuition of literary communication. It is now fit to attempt a brief description of Melville's techniques for the presentation of the act of interpretation and to show it in contrast to that of Hawthorne.

"Benito Cereno" — perplexing contradictory in the values it seems to propound — is essentially a story of reading and interpreting signs, of a faulty chain of observation based on

[27] Feidelson, *op. cit.*, especially pp. 71—74 and 150.
[28] James, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

ignorance and lack of imagination. The puzzling over Bartelby turns later, in *The Confidence Man,* into a total lack of orientation. In each of the three works the interpreting takes place from the perspective of a secondary center of the fictional universe. In "Benito Cereno" it is the third-person limited observer, who is also a character in the story; in "Bartelby the Scrivener" it is the narrator (the story is to a great extent one of action and reaction between him and Bartelby); in *The Confidence Man,* the apparent lack of narrative center, the author's refusal to build in rhetoric hints about the angle of observation, his absolute refusal to interfere with the reader's efforts to group and structure information — those are part of the thematic strategy: to confuse, to show ours to be a world without bearings in which we can confide.

What all these stories have in common contrasted with Hawthorne's, is that the interpreting is done from a limited perspective, whereas in Hawthorne — the exception being, perhaps, "My Kinsman, Major Molineux", Hawthorne's most Melvillian tale, — the signals have been posited by the author. In Melville the drama is an inconclusive process within some subjective horizon, in Hawthorne we witness a performance, the effects and issues of which have been calculated by the director-author. The interpretation, as we saw before, need not be one-sided or simple, but it is laid out, so to speak, dis-played for the benefit of the reader.

In *The Scarlet Letter* the meanings are outlined by the authorial voice, in *Moby Dick* it is Ishmael who tries to find them without ever achieving Hawthorne's precision of scope. *Moby Dick* is just as much about Ishmael's efforts to grasp significances arising from objects and relationships and to associate them with the ultimate cosmic verities, as it is about Ahab and the White Whale. Ahab's obsession with his revenge, the symbolic possibilities of Moby Dick himself, are never metaphysically interpreted. The chapters "Moby Dick" and, in particular, "The Whitness of the Whale", crown hermeneutic procedure itself as a creative literary subject. Modulating his theme through numerous examples, Ishmael uses these two absorbing chapters to explain psychologically the effect of Moby Dick's apparent malevolence and the "vague, nameless horror concerning him", concentrating on the "elusive something in the innermost idea of his hue". It is only the critics who, in their attempt to come to terms with the book, speak of evil and Deity and universal rebellion. Indeed, the whole story with all its apparent irrelevancies and the superabundance of descriptive detail points to an ultimate resolution of the Ahab-Whale relationship; but it is never

grasped, defined, or even suggested by the narrator — *these* issues transport the story beyond the total text.

Ishmael, of course, can outline symbolic situations — but they are limited to details though they always point towards ultimate issues. Hawthorne would have developed the story out of Ahab's mark — which, we are told, either he was born with or it was left him when he was struck by thunder — and he would repeatedly return to Ahab's whale-bone leg. Melville's narrator suggests the emblematic function of these facts, but allows us to forget them for the plethora of other significant details on all levels of the story.

More original, however, are Ishmael's comments on objective *données* from the whaling boat equipment and the activities connected with whaling (the whale-line, the mat, the monkey-rope) or with the living habits and the anatomy of whales. He reads these as if they were allegorical, but in fact it is his interpretation that gives additional meaning to facts unavoidable in any extended presentation of Melville's subject. All these readings concern life in general, as if cetology were a metaphysical argument in terms of specific, professionally conditioned imagery: the interconnection and mutual dependence of people, the interrelationship of chance, free will and necessity, these are the issues that emerge out of factual description of instrumental practices in whaling.

Elsewhere life is seen in terms of a paradoxical relationship of contraries: like the brilliancy of blackness, or "that mortal man should feed upon the great creature that feeds his lamp", or that often the hard toil over a whale's valuable sperm just over, the men

> are starthed by the cry of «There she blows!» and away they fly to fight another whale, and go through the whole weary thing again. Oh! my friends, but this is man-killing! Yet this is life.

It is only on rare occasions that one registers a general observation that is a construct rather than an inference from natural material; but such an observation too applies to the whole set of circumstances that Ishmael studies: like the one concerning the Catskill eagle in some souls:

> that can alike dive down in the blackest gorges and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces. And even if he for ever flies within the gorge, that gorge is in the mountains; so that even in his lowest swoop the mountain eagle is still higher than the other birds upon the plain, even though they soar.

This praise of pessimism is in tune with the cautious temerity that right from the beginning Ishmael diplays in his

search. "And taken with the context this is full of meaning", comments father Mapple (who had made a material allegory out of his chapel) on the fact that Jonah before embarking on his Biblical journey "paid the fare thereof". Ishmael is invited to interpret from the very beginning as soon as he enters the Spouter Inn and is confronted by a blackened picture — that turns out to represent a whale. He is often frustrated — whether when he tries to ponder about generalities or when he is prompted to describe or define some aspect of the whale. The whale is the boundary of man's experience. Man seems therefore constantly tempted to render naturally given data as if they were an infinite series of possibly contingent, certainly inexplicable paradoxes. This is why Ishmael occasionally ventures into speculation ("that the incorruption of this most fragrant ambergris should be found in the heart of such decay") or notices incongruous oddities (it has been proved by experiment "that the blood of a Polar whale is warmer than that of a Borneo negro in summer") or, through Ahab or one of the mates, places man on the strength of his natural limitations ("Level by nature to this earth's horizon are the glances of mans's eyes; not shot from the crown of his head, as if God had meant him to gaze on his firmament"). In terms of the story, meaning is achieved through dramatic accounts of Ahab's barbaric rituals, or the misleading Macbethan prophecies of Fedallah, or by nautical phenomena read as omens.

Rarely do we get allegorical constructs which are meant to underscore some ambiguous moral vision, such as Queequeg turning his coffin into a sea-chest that will eventually become Ishmael's lifebuoy, or the sky-hawk caught in Ahab's flag so that Ahab's ship "like Satan, would not sink to hell till she dragged a living part of heaven along with her".

"O Nature, and O soul of man! how far beyond all utterance are your linked analogies! not the smallest atom stirs or lives on matter, but has its cunning duplicate in mind". The parallelism is Emersonian and can be associated with Cotton Mathers' memorable providences, except that Melville mostly deals with the regular, the habitual, that which derives from the ordinary course of life or a vocation. "And some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth, and the round world itself but an empty cipher, except to sell by the cartload ,as they do hills about Boston, to fill up some morass in the Milky Way." We are on the edge of chaos, and yet even if we are prone to emphasize darkness and the ultimate conclusions might be nihilistic, this world still has some sort of pattern. We miss, alas, Hawthorne's letter to Melville which, as Melville wrote to Sophia Hawthorne, revealed to the

author "the speciality of many of the particular subordinate allegories" in *Moby Dick*, and without citing any particular examples, intimated the par-and-parcel allegoricalness of the whole.[29]

Melville's age did not make precise distinctions between allegory, symbol, and related terms, but it is certain that in *Moby Dick* Melville's system of signs for extended meanings and implied resemblances subsumed partial allegory into larger symbolic wholes. With Hawthorne, or indeed in Melville's *Mardi*, this is much more rarely the case, allegory often being self-sufficient and intended to illustrate.

Both authors, we have seen, use a large variety of forms to suggest significance beyond the immediate context, and dramatize the creation and apperception of significance.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, the very letter A is said by the author to allow different interpretations — depending on one's view of Hester; the design on Ahab's Equadorian doubloon is interpreted according to each interpreter's own personality. But a more basic and all-embracing difference is that *The Scarlet Letter* is organized, as we saw, in a strict pattern, and its significance is the result of all its strands; in *Moby Dick* the significance of every detail points to the inscrutability, indifference, and practical hostility of the universe towards man: an indefinite number of illustrative details serving basically the same purpose and reinforcing the book's fundamental idea and all-comprising vision of the particular myth, of whale history, of the relationship of man to nature and to Fate, to Divinity. Contrary to Hawthorne's, it is not a closed system of signs that develop from an idea, but an open one, starting from and dependng on facts, and penetrating beyond the moral psychology of Hawthorne's characters into metaphysical universality.[30]

It is interesting that Poe, the third writer of important fiction of the period, cannot be discussed in the same context at all, though many of his works deal with interpretation. What else is the amazed narrator in "The Raven" doing? But in this poem, and much more definitely so in the early chapters of the *Narrative of A. Gordon Pym* or the ratiocinative stories on C. Auguste Dupin's feats of detection, all the puz-

[29] Letter dated January 8, 1852, quoted in the Norton Critical Edition of *Moby Dick*, New York, 1967, p. 568.

[30] Discussing the symbolism of *Moby Dick*, Matthiessen reaches a conclusion which is worth quoting at this point: "Hawthorne was concerned with depicting the good and evil within man's heart. Melville is not so concerned with individual sin as with titanic uncontrollable forces which seem to dwarf man altogether" (Mathiessen, *op. cit.*, p. 441).

zling signs are unequivocally explained: interpreting is a matter of *post hoc* explanation or a *tour de force* exercise in mere skill. In spite of all his talk about death and his discussion of science depending on both suprasensual awareness and perfect logic, Poe lacks the transcendental dimension of both Hawthorne's and Melville's concerns. His stories exhaust themselves, on the level of mere sensationalism. In "The Masque of the Red Death", once the masque has been torn off, nothing remains. But the ambiguities of Hawthorne's black veil are still with us even though we have always known that what it physically covers is the minister's face. It is characteristic that Poe in his review of the *Twice-Told Tales* explains the plurivalent symbolism away by postulating what he calls an "insinuated meaning" under the "obvious one". This insinuated meaning is a suggestion of a crime "having reference to the 'young lady":[31] Hawthorne becomes a less explicit (and less effective) Edgar Allan Poe.

The father of the detective story deals more directly than any of his contemporaries with the decyphering of signs. Yet he does not contribute to the wealth of significance which in the union of method and theme of interpretation is a characteristic asset of American literature of his generation, inherited from their earliest native ancestors and reinforced by the Transcendentalist climate. From Melville and Hawthorne it was passed on to the generations in which such diverse fictional characters as Huck Finn and Lambert Strether tried to come to terms with a world recalcitrant and problematic, yet pragmatically perhaps manageable, in the divergent visions of America's two greatest realists.[32]

[31] *Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. by Margaret Alterton and Hardin Craig, American Book Company, 1935, p. 362.

[32] In the generations that follow, Crane in his best stories, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Warren, Bellow — to mention only a few — have all been concerned with interpreting signs. To what extent this appears to be an inheritance of the tendency that has been analyzed above, and to what extent it manifests a constant concern of modern authors in all cultures (the influence of Conrad's technique of oblique narration upon Fitzgerald is obvious) deserves thorough comparative study.