Warsaw Studies in English Language and Literature
Edited by Jacek Fisiak

New Essays on the Short Stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne

Janusz Semrau (ed.)

University of Social Sciences
Warsaw

PETER LANG
Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften

11

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.

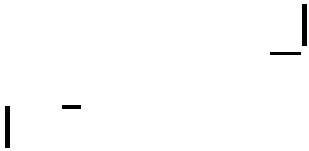
More recent studies present the tale as a response to contemporary historical change, usually described as the emergence of modern capitalism, rather than a response to contemporary proposals of change; such studies may be described as neohistoricist. The prime example of this kind of discussion is David 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 *horse-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 pretension, 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.

2.

> The site fixed upon, at the representation of the Insurance Companies, and as being as central a spot as any other on the globe, was one of the broadest prairies of the West, where no human habitation would be endangered by the flames, and where a vast assemblage of spectators might commodiously admire the show. Having a taste for sights of this kind, and imagining, likewise, that the illumination of the bonfire might reveal some profundity of moral truth, heretofore hidden in mist or darkness, I made it convenient to journey thither and be present.
>
> (887)

Since the site of meaning is as central in one spot as in any other, the globe of thoughts can be arranged in any, and hence no, way. It is the condition of visibility that matters, the illumination that reveals the truth. The truth in painting, which Derrida discusses in four ways, is precisely the how and the what revealed in Hawthorne's short story which, given its brevity and urgency of moral purpose, points out to visibility and invisibility in itself. Derrida's distinction, which he tries to express in terms of frame and centre, or the circle and the abyss (Derrida 1987: 11), is also that between writing and what is written, between movement and its trace. Movement, or its elocution, is the painted truth that must be told; the prime-moving economy of mimesis. This can be the truth 'of' painting in relief or effigy, the truth of representation; this can be the truth 'put into' painting (image); this can be the truth 'about' painting (action), the truth of its strokes; this can be the truth of truth (representation), unveiled and direct, not in writing, but in *this* writing, in what is between us; and this truth is not a painting (Derrida 1987: 5).

> The common feature [*trait*] of these four times is perhaps the trait. Insofar as it is never common nor even one, with and without itself. Its divisibility founds text, traces and remains.
>
> (Derrida 1987: 11)

Derrida relegates the trait to the parergon, which can be a visible frame, but is rather the space that is both 'inside' and 'outside' of a work of art, the space which is non-significant, sub-significant, as when a work of art is considered by strokes, one by one, and hence has no 'inside', no 'content'; it is like a voice that tells a story, when considered purely as voice, not as speech.

> It works the frame, makes it work, lets it work, gives it work to do (let, make, and give will be the most misunderstood words in this book). The trait is attracted and retrac(t)ed there by itself, attracts and dispenses with itself there. … It is situated. It situates between the visual edging and the phantom in the center, from which we *fascinate*.
>
> (Derrida 1987: 12)

In Hawthorne's story, the bonfire, including the catalogues that constitute the bulk of the text, assumes the position of the abyss, and fascination works in the dialogic space 'outside', at the visual edge, as it were, sometimes below and sometimes above the radar. The radar will be the most misunderstood word in this article.

> "Oh, some very dry combustibles," replied he, "and extremely suitable to the purpose—no other, in fact, than yesterday's newspapers, last month's magazines, and last year's withered leaves. Here, now, comes some antiquated trash that will take fire like a handful of shavings."
>
> (888)

The first occurrence of dialogue in the story defines its (dialogue's) focus; the characters are going to explain the 'centre', to create its meanings, its satirical message. To quote from Derrida, "it's enough to say: abyss and the satire of the abyss" (Derrida 1987: 17). In this, the conversations are steps, the strokes or traits, and the image attracts their traces [*traits*], concentrates and organises them, as frame, into imagery of the story. Could conversations exist without their traces? In a text, they could not, so while they constitute the trace, they have no other existence than the trace. In this desperate pairing, both draw a text and provide combustibles for its consuming economy, its self-inflammatory, self-propelling compulsion to reproduce itself (Derrida 1987: 32-46).

3.

> As he spoke, some rough-looking men advanced to the verge of the bonfire, and threw in, as it appeared, all the rubbish of the Herald's Office; the blazonry of coat-armor; the crests and devices of illustrious families; pedigrees that extended back, like lines of light, into the mist of the dark ages; together with stars, garters, and embroidered collars; each of which, as paltry a bauble as it might appear to the uninstructed eye, had once possessed vast significance, and was still, in truth, reckoned among the most precious of moral or material facts, by the worshippers of the gorgeous past.
>
> (888)

The image of the bonfire is augmented with catalogues, which constitute a large part of the text; it is not so much the fire that matters, but the lists of objects thrown into it. "Earth's holocaust" can be, because of those lists, described (so it stays encircled and inscribed) as an encyclopaedic narrative, a modern equivalent of the epic produced by a nation at the verge (edge) of a historical upheaval (Mendelson 1976: 1267). Edward Mendelson, when he introduced the term into literary criticism, stated that representatives of the genre were few, long, and

complicated novels, such as Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), the American example almost concurrent with "Earth's holocaust". However, Hawthorne's short story has some of the "intrinsic formal qualities" of the genre, most importantly the use of catalogues and integration of different, antagonistic types of discourse into the text. Because of its brevity, however, Hawthorne's text highlights the intrinsic economy of the encyclopaedic narrative, an economy that is akin to Derrida's economimesis, an ongoing production of exemplary beauty, modified through an exchange of truth and truth about exchange, an act of decapitation and recapitulation, a self-propelling repetition:

> The exemplary (*exemplarisch*) is a singular product (*Produkt*) – since it is an example which is immediately valid for all. Only certain exemplary products can have this effect of quasi-rules. Whence the historical, cultural, pragmatico-anthropological character of taste, which is constituted after the event [*après coup*], after the production, by means of example. The absence of concept thus liberates this horizon of historical productivity.
>
> (Derrida 1987: 119)

By simultaneously performing an act of economimesis and telling the truth about it, "Earth's holocaust" is a scaled down showpiece, at the same time a radar station and a radar screen, when compared to the integrated, nationwide system of air defence, such as the SAGE system, which was a network (an Automated Ground Environment) of hundreds of stations (Buderi 1996: 405-430).

4.

> He had not the tokens of intellectual power in his face; but still there was the demeanor—the habitual, and almost native dignity—of one who had been born to the idea of his own social superiority, and had never felt it questioned, till that moment.
>
> (889)

The first voice that openly opposes the reforming fire is a representative of aristocracy; his voice contradicts the image of the bonfire, and thus makes it possible, by providing a reference point, to extend its definition in a negative way, by contradicting aristocracy. Introduction of this voice, its placement at this position in the text, on Hawthorne's part, is a stroke, a movement that leaves a visible trace [*trait*], the first in a series that is about to form a more detailed image.

5.

> "People," cried he, gazing at the ruin of what was dearest in his eyes, with grief and wonder, but, nevertheless, with a degree of stateliness—"people, what have you done? This fire is consuming all that marked your advance from barbarism, or