

The Blithedale Romance

N.Hawthorne

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I remember vividly, by chance listening to a recital on Public Radio of Hawthorne's 'The Scarlet Letter' in the late seventies in New York. I was mesmerized by the language and having by chance some ten years earlier bought a paperback edition of the very book back in Sweden and imported it across the Atlantic on some excuse, I naturally picked it up being seized with a strong motivation to read it, something that had never occurred to me before. I was not disappointed, I enjoyed the elaborate language and could see in my eye how it was formed initially by an elegant long hand. In those days writers wrote by hand, dipping their quills in ink, instead of tapping on a key-board. The movement of the hand must give to the prose a distinctive graceful flow, so different from the staccato of a step dance on recalcitrant keys. This held in particular for the 18th century, and although at the time I was innocent of the sophisticated pleasures of the prose of a Gibbon, a Hume or an Adam Smith, I would certainly have recognized in Hawthorne an elaboration of that tradition, and my admiration would surely have been somewhat tempered as well by the realization that the old tradition had been somewhat overdone and hence vulgarized by the somewhat rougher hand of a New World Yankee. Although I greatly enjoyed the book I would be hard pressed to recall the plot, novels, although greatly enjoyed in reading tend not to leave lasting impressions unlike that of say a mathematical text. Still it remained fondly enough so when a second name for our new-born daughter was demanded almost seven years later at UCLA I hit upon 'Hester' - the name of the able heroine. In the early nineties (92 I believe) I read another book by Hawthorne - 'The House of the Seven Gables'. Some fifteen years earlier I had visited Salem in an illicit interlude one fall evening and seen the gray wooden house. It thus carried strong connotations of ancient New England and splendid falls, intermixed with the taste of white chocolate I had never tasted before, as well as the prospects of adultery with which the latter came associated. The book itself I found somewhat tedious until it suddenly came to life at the end involving a train journey whose contemporarity struck me. In fact train travel has not changed significantly for the last hundred and fifty years. The present book I snapped out of my library more or less in desperation to have something to read during a congress. There was little time to read, so the relatively short novel enjoyed an extended life well beyond the demands of its volume. For the sake of coherence this may not have been optional, having long lost in memory the contents of its initial pages when working through the middle. Anyway a brief recapitulation is not beyond my capabilities.

The novel, as most novels, is based on autobiographical experiences, and there is a strong identification between the narrator and the author, which is of course inevitable and hardly fortuitous and unintended. The human imagination is very limited and it is seldom if ever capable of truly independent creations, when those are attempted the results are invariably empty and disappointing. What it requires are restraints, only when frustrated and forced to comply does it get stimulated. In mathematics and science the constraints

are obvious, imposed as they are by logic and nature; when it comes to art and literature it normally works by elaborating and transforming scenes that are already given. Thus a student of Hawthorne's correspondence and diaries has no trouble finding the sources of many of the depictions in the novel, be those as trivial as a dove flying towards a window out of which the narrator is gazing, or a girl slipping down from a bale of hay. Much of the pleasures of a novel result, as with visual art, from verisimilitude. In art (not to mention photography) this can be achieved more or less directly, while in words the act of painting is more subtle, even if the ultimate goal remains the same, the invitation of the active engagement of the reader or spectator in the process of evocation. What is needed is the presence of the inconsequential details which enhance the sense, or illusion if you prefer, of reality. Reality being so much more than the ostensible purpose with which we may happen to view it. It is exactly those intrusions that vividly assert reality, that by their mundanity, separates reality from dream, material substance from mere airy conjuring.

In his youth Hawthorne participated in a communal experiment in socialist living. This was before the days of Marx and the Communist Manifest, although those would soon enter the stage but their immediate influence may only be obvious in the light shed by retrospection; what mattered at the time were the ideas of Fourier set in the aftermath of the French Revolution. It took place at what was called Brooks Farm just outside Boston. Hawthorne, like his alter ego, could only hack it for a summer, then he left. It was not that he did not participate willingly in the hard manual labor needed, no doubt he abandoned himself to it, savoring the sweet pleasures induced by sweat and bodily exhaustion, but of course it never left enough energy to nurture his true vocation, that of an intellectual, reading and writing. In the book he is presented as a poet, and a poet is basically an observer, standing apart from the bustle of life, renouncing blind participation for open-eyed reflection. Actually the hard work on the farm, in the book referred to by its eponymous title, is almost never described in the book, it remains rather shadowily in the readers perception. What engages the narrator as well as the author is the presence of three main characters, or rather two main ones and an addendum. There is his friend Hollingworth, a man that both fascinates and repels him. He is fascinated by his energy and passion, yet repelled by what this very passion channels into, namely an overriding philanthropy taking the form of the reformation of criminals. Such single-mindedness is nothing but egotism raised to a higher and hence more dangerous level. A man like Hollingworth, reasons the narrator, reduces everything, including friendship, to its instrumental use for the one great purpose to which he has submitted himself. True, the aversion of the narrator for this man, seems a bit exaggerated, not to say hysterical, a ruse to still his own bad conscience and envy for a man who has a mission in life and thus appears larger than life, which for most people is a petty thing never really going beyond contentment and pleasure. More intriguingly though is the young woman Zenobia. Not really young, rather in the full ripeness of womanhood, chastened but not broken by previous experience. In the description of her there is a strong erotic element, surprisingly at first, because you associate Hawthorne and the society in which he moved with old-fashioned puritanism, firmer and less hypocritical than the so called Victorian variety at the opposite side of the Atlantic. But erotic power, is like imagination, most powerful when kept in check. Physical desire meeting no obstacle soon is dissipated, that which

is restrained penetrates deeper into the soul. That the effect may not only be profound but injurious not to say tragic, has in later times encouraged the movement for sexual liberation through trivialization. It is symptomatic that the narrator feels unequal to the challenge posed by her exuberant femininity, sensing that his maleness is not up to par. Instead he projects his desire into imagining that she and Hollingworth make up a pair, sensing that he could never generate the same desire in her, as she obviously finds awoken in her for his rival. Now added to this is the pitiful appearance of the young girl Priscilla. She is introduced in the novel dramatically enough. The party on their way to the farm are held up by inclement April weather with a snow storm. Entering the cottage in which they have found refuge, Hollingworth appears covered with snow and a bundle in his arms. This is Priscilla, whom he has found on the way and taken pity on. She turns out to be a bland non-entity, who only comes to life in her total devotion both the Zenobia, who thinks of her as a nuisance to be suffered, and Hollingworth who appears oblivious of her attention, or at least thinks of it as his due.

Now Hawthorne is a child of his times and thus not immune to prevalent sentimentalism and need for melodrama. It turns out that Zenobia and Priscilla are sisters, half-sisters to be exact, stemming from a bum, who once had seen better times. Zenobia the fruit of his first marriage to an able woman, while he still had money and reputation, Priscilla the fruit of a later marriage to a servant when he had been reduced to poverty and well-deserved misery (he is in fact introduced on the very first pages, and then later re-introduced, but by then my disjointed reading had missed the connection, the revelation of his true role in the plot comes much later in a rather contrived aside). The climax of the plot occurs at the end when Zenobia renounces her unrequited love for Hollingworth, accusing him of complete egotism. Hollingworth professes his love for Priscilla and leaves, while Zenobia is in tears, admitting to the narrator, whom she had tended more and more to dismiss (there is a strange scene back in Boston, where they accidentally meet, and she appears in the worldly splendor her inherited wealth not only permits but positively demands, and which she had temporarily shed at the farm, but which now puts him in place), that he being the handsomer man would in the eyes of the female world indeed be seen as worthier object of her love. But of course appearance is superficial, and the admission is of course one of contempt, what fires erotic desire goes much deeper and the narrator cannot match the deeper attraction exerted by a character such as Hollingworth. What the narrator at most could have hoped for would have been to be taken into her confidence, like a brother, but that opportunity is long gone. Now she sees him merely a poet, who would be too happy to compose a couple of stanzas based on her misery. It is furthermore telling that when Zenobia at an earlier episode extols the virtues of women and deplors their subjugation by men and the need for women's liberation, sentiments with which the narrator cannot but sympathize like any modern reasonable man as of today, Hollingworth only scoffs at her, and in the face of his contempt, all her proud feminism, so forcibly and eloquently reasoned (although the narrator for all his admiration cannot deny that she is no intellectual, that her mind is not free of vulgarism) simply melts. The message being that the elemental powers of sexual attraction easily trump any civilized fashion.

Melodrama has already been referred to, and in a sense the ending is if anything melodramatic on the face of it. Zenobia drowns herself as a result of her thwarted love

for Hollingworth. But the ending, in spite of all its trappings is not really melodramatic. By stint of letting the other characters comment on the total lack of necessity of the act, surely she had much going for her in life, bound to enjoy another twenty years of her physical attraction, if need be eventually by a touch of artifice, surpassing in the end many a younger maiden of today, the melodramatic aspect is punctured. The sympathetic reader, who has taken to heart her attractiveness, reads on with horror and regret how her lovely body is forcibly recovered from the bottom of a lake by a hooked pole, causing great damage to her bust. How her body, rather than resting in peaceful repose, shows all the instinctive struggle against death, with contorted arms and limbs.

In an epilogue we meet Hollingworth again steadied by his wife Priscilla. He is a broken man, of all his visions of reformations of criminals, none has come to fruition, having been too occupied by just one murderer, obviously himself in reference to the fate of Zenoba. Thus his egotism coming full circle. At the very end of the book the narrator makes one final confession. He was in love with Priscilla himself, an admission I am afraid I have to reject as totally unpsychological and thus marring the book, unless of course the author makes it ironically, establishing once and for all his distance from the narrator, and the inability of the latter to maintain any serious self-knowledge.

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