

MORAL STRUCTURES :
A READING OF TWO AMERICAN LITERARY WORKS

By

ABDEL WAHAB M. EL MESSIRI, Ph.D.
*Lecturer, English Department,
University College for Women,
Ain Shams University, Egypt.*

1. *Introduction.*

This paper falls into two parts, connected by some obvious thematic links. The first part is a reading of the chapter entitled «The Doubloon» from Melville's *Moby Dick* and the second is a reading of Hawthorne's short story «Rappaccini's Daughter». Both works manifest what one may call some characteristically «American» traits. With the absence of a historical tradition, the non-existence of an acceptable social or religious orthodoxy, and the lack of any recognizable psychological or moral norms, the American writer finds himself preoccupied with the problem of having to define, in a rather elaborate fashion, the narrative voice of his work and the identity of his characters. In «The Doubloon» and «Rappaccini's Daughter», the narrator, whether disguised as Ishmael or wearing the mask of objectivity, is at pains to distinguish between his level of perception and that of the rest of the characters. But he merely establishes distinctions without any attempt at evaluations, even of the most rudimentary kind, because he feels he cannot take a secure moral stance *vis à vis* the world he is looking at (whether from inside or outside). Like many other American narrators, Ishmael and the objective narrator of «Rappaccini's Daughter» are sympathetic empiricists who respond to their respective worlds with sensitivity and feeling, but who feel they are not qualified to make any judgements.

Furthermore, the characters of both «The Doubloon» and «Rappaccini's Daughter», moving in their ahistorical American habitat, experience elemental feelings and face the problem of evil in an abstract metaphysical manner. It could be safely said that both works try to define the position of evil and suffering in the human community.

I have touched on all these themes in the following study, but I have not gone into any depth in my treatment because the goal I hope to reach is mainly methodological. I wish to show that an *explication*

de texte, dwelling on the structural and formal aspects of a literary work, does not necessarily preclude moral and philosophical considerations. On the contrary, one gets to see the «moral» significance of a literary work more precisely, more accurately, and certainly more vividly if one reaches it through an analysis of the concrete details and formal aspects. The significance will then cease to be an abstraction, dead and general, it will rather become a living and a particular experience that deepens and refines one's sensibility in a subtle way.

2. *The Magician's Glass : A Reading of Chapter Ninety-Nine of « Moby Dick ».*

In an age that values organic art so highly, it may be considered preposterous to try to read and analyse a single chapter from a novel, separating it thereby from the «organic whole». But criteria applicable to the novel in general do not function adequately when dealing with *Moby Dick*, a novel which develops in its own unique fashion. In lieu of the traditional «plot» and logical development of characters, this novel unfolds through poetical flashes and dramatic climaxes. If one may venture the generalization, one may say that whereas the traditional novel is linear in structure, *Moby Dick* is radial, consisting almost of separate circles with independent centres. It is true that the over-all impression *Moby Dick* leaves is one of unity, yet the reader's sense of unity does not, in the least, eclipse his sense of the exuberance of the novel and its poetic and dramatic quality. I think therefore that a reading of a single chapter rather than the whole novel is not entirely out of order.

I believe that chapter Ninety-Nine entitled «The Doubloon» deserves separate reading for what it tells about the novel as a whole. The chapter begins in a rather calm, objective tone : «Ere now it has been related how Ahab was wont to pace his quarter-deck, taking regular turns at either limit» (425) (1). The neutral «it» at the beginning of the chapter, the use of the passive voice, and the purely descriptive language imply that the story is told by an impersonal, abstract narrator who is not emotionally involved. From this tone of abstract generality, the narrator, dropping «the multiplicity of other things requiring narration», focuses on one point in time and on one object only. («But one morning, turning to pass the doubloon», etc. [245]). From now on the narrator will be more personal and his name will be Ishmael. It is true that his tone remains rather detached, yet there is a perceptible shift from the general to the particular. It should be added, however, that intensity does not result in subjectivity, for the narrative modulates into the dramatic or

dramatic-lyrical rather than the purely lyrical. It is a tribute to Melville's artistic ingenuity that he succeeded in incorporating the specifically dramatic within the exclusively novelistic. The gradual rising of the tone towards a degree of personal involvement and intensity reaches its consummation in the soliloquies, and its climax and conclusion in Pip's divine delirium.

The now involved narrator prepares the stage for the appearance of the different characters by furnishing the reader with many details about that tropical, golden doubloon. Coming from a country that is « planted in the middle of the world and that knows no autumn » (426), the doubloon is so revered and sanctified by the mariners that none dares pilfer it. What perhaps adds to its sanctity are the symbols, pregnant with meaning, depicted on it. Its placing on the mast at the very centre of the ship gives it a physical and symbolical centrality. Now that the narrator has given us the setting, the soliloquizers step on the stage one after the other to look and unburden their souls.

It is quite clear that their soliloquies are modelled after Shakespeare's rather than Scribe's (2). They do not help develop the plot (except, perhaps, in a very accidental way), nor do they reveal to us the *conscious* intentions of the soliloquizers (3). When Flask says : « I see nothing here », surely he reveals himself unawares (429).

A basic difference, however, exists between Shakespeare's soliloquies and Melville's. Shakespeare's soliloquies more often than not, are uttered by the main characters — the hero, the heroine, or the villain. In « The Doubloon », on the other hand, we have a most bizarre collection of soliloquizers : main characters such as Ahab, together with the old Manxman, Starbuck and Flask, as well as the heart-breaking Pip. Mention should also be made of what we may term « pantomime soliloquies » such as Queequeg's and Feballah's. Melville's democratic Muse was at work here. He would have disagreed with Jean Anouilh's claim that tragedy is for kings ; according to Melville, it is rather the product of the common routine. Thus the author of *Moby Dick* allows all his characters to soliloquize irrespective of their importance in the human drama because this is bound up with his view of the world (4).

His deviation from Shakespeare's practice is not out of sheer artistic wantonness, but is rather dictated by a philosophical necessity. Shakespeare wrote supported by a stable, socially accepted hierarchical world picture that assigned everyone and everything his or its proper place in the chain of being. In the human hierarchy, the king's place is at the top of the body politic just as the head is at

the top of the human body. It was possible, then, for Shakespeare to know what was and what was not important. The courtiers and noblemen spoke in blank verse ; for the common people prose was enough. There were as much «order» and «degree» in life as there were in different levels of style. Melville, on the other hand, writing after the weakening at the Christian ideal and the failure of the Enlightenment and unsupported by any social or historical visions, had to launch himself upon an unknown world fully aware, before hand, that it was also unknowable. To make some sense out of the modern chaos, he had to let reality unfold itself in front of our very eyes without any attempt on his part either to interfere or interpret ; he knew he could not do otherwise. Ishmael-Melville withdraws, and everybody soliloquizes.

The soliloquies, significantly enough, are concluded by Pip's. His appearance at the end leaves us in no doubt that complete knowledge of truth is not within the reach of humanity. «We look, ye look, they look » (430) yet each sees in his own way. Stubb, *wise* Stubb, can watch a Flask or a Queequeg and can hear the old Manxman muttering his words of doom. He can even watch Fedallah («tail coiled out of sight as usual»), but with Pip it is a completely different matter. «He is too crazy-witty for [Stubb's] sanity » (430). Pip has passed beyond the human and the Finite — he has seen «god's foot upon the treadle of the loom» (411) and was blessed with divine madness. He stands for absolute truth forbidden us as human beings ; he possessed it, and therefore «his shipmates called him mad» (411). It is inherent in the human condition to see truth only partially and to be always suspended in half truths.

So there is no truth, general and comprehensible, behind the world of Melville's soliloquizers. Each has his own view, hence the fixed thing « out there » becomes fluid and disembodied through the various interpretations. Each, as it were, speaks his own language. The Faustian Ahab, thinking of the doubloon as « the image of the rounder globe » (427), focuses on the three peaks pictured on it, finds them as proud as Lucifer, and unhesitatingly identifies with them. He reconciles himself to the evil around him and to the disaster about to be, in words reminiscent of Milton's Satan : « So be it then. Born in throes, 'tis fit that man should live in pain and die in pangs ! So be it then » (427). This is no Christian surrender to the fact of the Fall, it is rather the hailing of the horrors of the infernal pit with no hope of salvation. Self-reliance ? yes, indeed it is ; but with no gentlemanly Emersonian evasions or abstractions. Ahab knows it :

evil will damn and ice will freeze, and there is no point in diluting one's knowledge.

The pious Starbuck, supported by the Christian faith, never losing sight of his pieties, ever maintaining his sense of transcendence, sees the same three peaks as « heaven-abiding » or as a symbol of the « Trinity » (427). Sailing with the mad, infernal captain on the Pequod, he still finds that everything is not yet past redemption. Yet, because he is mature, he does not gloss over the paradox of existence, for he knows that life is fleeting and that the great sun itself is « no fixture ». No wonder that the coin speaks to him « mildly, truly, but still sadly ».

In Stubb's « poor insignificant opinion » (428) the doubloon signifies « the life of man in one sound chapter ». Yet instead of confronting his conclusion in its full symbolistic complexity, he immediately dilutes his vision and reads it off « straight out of the book », reducing the symbol to a simple and clear sign. I have a feeling that Stubb is Ahab's duplicate or counterpart, comically conceived. It is perhaps worth noticing that his reading of the meaning of the Zodiac is not in the least optimistic. He too has seen much ; and he too has been embittered by what he has seen. Yet his knowledge and bitterness result into a comic attitude toward everything. He is no Faustus, nor does he want to be. As for Flask, he simply does not live up to Ishmael's expectation that human beings find « certain significance » (425) behind all things. The doubloon for him is worth sixteen dollars — «that is, nine hundred and sixty cigars» (429). No allegorist like Stubb, Flask is simply Economic Man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.

Up till now I have been stressing the « waving hand » and the relativistic aspects of Melville's imagination. Yet he too has his granite « temple » or point of fixity that takes the form of the sun image. When the doubloon is first referred to, it is held up « to the sun » (159). Once this note is struck, it is hardly ever dropped. The doubloon itself is a « medal of the sun » (426), pictured on it is a sun and a cock crowing. Ahab sees the sun as an emblem of his woe and pangs and finds that his course is like the sun's (427). Starbuck observes the « sun of righteousness still shining » (247), and most of the other soliloquizers make use of the symbol in one way or another.

The sun metaphor, operating on the structural level as a unifying element, functions similarly on the moral and philosophical levels. The fact that most of the soliloquizers make use of the *same* metaphor is a clear indication that their isolation and loneliness are not complete.

There is a certain common symbology, however vague and undefined, which has some universal significance and which therefore binds them together. Only Pip does away with the symbol for he goes back to « the thing itself ». For him the doubloon is the « ship's navel » (430). Isn't he the Blessed One ?

Since everything in « The Doubloon » proceeds by paradox and contrast, one may be justified in saying that the final word about this chapter is that there is none. After each soliloquizer has had his say, Pip steps in and mumbles his divine words to assure us that « we look, ye look, they look », yet see not. Thus after having established the solid identity of the doubloon and asserted the importance and magnificence of the sun pictured on it, everything becomes disembodied. Between Locke and Kant (and even worse, Plato), suffering humanity is entrapped. Perhaps Melville is suggesting that our salvation is through the acceptance of the precariousness of our existence and of the partial truths we can attain. And even this is very doubtful.

3. *The Maiden and the Flower : A Reading of «Rappaccini's Daughter».*

If the problem of the narrator in «The Doubloon» is settled in a relatively simple manner by letting every viewpoint modify and illuminate all other viewpoints and be modified and illuminated by them in turn, the problem of the narrator in « Rappaccini's Daughter » is far more intricate. In the case of Ishmael-Melville both his detachment and involvement are minimal ; he appears in his own person yet abstains from judgement. The « objective » narrator of « Rappaccini's Daughter », on the other hand, rarely speaks in his own voice, yet his condemnation of the moral and intellectual fragmentation of the characters is unmistakable. He gives one the distinct impression that his is a more complex imagination than theirs, including such «grown-ups» as Baliogni and Rappaccini. Yet the narrator is also quite careful not to commit the sin of abstract moral judgement, and therefore he empirically shows us the characters in their situations, perhaps even implying that Giovanni and Beatrice were helpless victims of their conditions. After all the Faustian Rappaccini is Beatrice's father, and the opportunistic Baliogni is Giovanni's mentor.

The complexity of the narrative voice, however, is simply one manifestation of the total complexity of the story. Indeed this story is a study in the failure to face complexity, and it is this aspect that I intend to concentrate on in my «reading». The dilemma faced by

Giovanni, and to a lesser degree, by Beatrice, cannot be explained away as a simple conflict between the «heart and the mind». This formula, applied so glibly by many critics to the story in consideration and to several other works by Hawthorne, is, I contend, too naive and perhaps completely irrelevant. Ironically enough, it seems to me that Hawthorne in «Rappaccini's Daughter» (if not also in *The Blithedale Romance*, «Hell's Holocaust», «The Birthmark») is trying to show the inadequacy of such a formula to account for human reality in its full complexity.

The first sentence in «Rappaccini's Daughter» conjures up the atmosphere of a fairy-tale or a myth, and introduces the reader to an archetypal human situation — an innocent young man from a sunny warm place is thrust all by himself into the wide wide world, and the world, as we all know, is cruel and dreary. In order to survive in this loveless world, the young man has to come to know it for what it really is. The one-sidedness of innocence ought to be replaced by the multi-sidedness of experience, which is essentially a knowledge of good and evil. That this theme was in Hawthorne's mind at the time of the writing of this story, is evidenced by the mythical and literary allusions he makes.

The allusions are to the myth of Vertumnus and Pomona, the Adam and Eve myth, and finally to Dante's journey from *Inferno* to *Paradiso* via *Purgatorio*. The focus of the three myths, if we subsume Dante's *Comedy* under such a heading, is a protagonist who can be easily identified with Giovanni Guasconti. All three myths deal with a vision of innocence and absolute beauty whose blessings the protagonist of each either fully enjoys (Adam), or attains through physical labours (Vertumnus) or spiritual exercises (Dante).

But series of details and a number of references and innuendos, which Giovanni fully notices, yet whose significance he entirely misses, cast deep shades of doubt on the possibility of his ever attaining the state of paradisiac bliss reached by the three mythical (and literary) heroes. When in Padua, he takes up lodgings in a house once owned by a person «pictured by Dante as a partaker of the immortal agonies of his *Inferno*» (268) (5). The reference suggests the positive existence of evil and its realness, but Giovanni, a young man with a not very complex or discriminating imagination, insulates himself from his new surrounding and all its memories. Nor does he prove himself an intelligent observer when he looks at the earthly paradise below, for his innocence blinds him to many traces of the Fall found therein. Round the statue of Vertumnus, who in the

legend achieves a happy and paradisiac reunion with his beloved Pomona, a «serpent-like» plant «crept» and «wreathed itself» till it shrouded and veiled the statue (270) (6). The serpent is already inside the garden, and there is no escape from the Fall. And as if this is not enough warning for the innocent Giovanni, the narrator gives him a modernized version of the Adam myth. Described as the Adam of «the present world», Dr. Rappaccini walks in a non-paradisiac garden full of poisonous plants and practises gardening in a fashion not exactly reminiscent of «the joy and labor of the unfallen parents of the race» (270).

Our sense of the fall and failure of the earthly paradise is reinforced by various other details. The garden is described as might once have been «the pleasure place of an opulent family» (perhaps before the Fall ?), yet there stands now in the very centre the ruin of a marble fountain, so «woefully shattered» that it became a «chaos of remaining fragments». (269). The wholeness of the original design is completely lost and the ravages of time are to be traced everywhere.

Nor is Dr. Rappaccini's garden, with all its scientific and rational pretensions, completely free from that most destructive of all passions : physical love. The shrub, which engrossed Giovanni's attention, carries a «profusion of pruple blossoms» (269) or «purple gems» (271, 275) as the narrator refers twice to them. Purple, a colour traditionally associated with sexuality, reminds the reader, but not Giovanni, of sin and the Fall. When Beatrice, «the human sister of the plant», appears, her voice makes poor Giovanni «think of deep hues of purple or crimson» (271). The eroticism latent in all these references becomes explicit when Beatrice plucks one of «the richest blossoms of the shrub» and tries to fasten it in her bosom (277). The doctor's garden then is not quite insulated from human passions, and Giovanni *sees* the purple blossoms and *thinks* of the deep hues of purple, for passion is in him and around him.

Nevertheless, it seems that Giovanni keeps on yearning for paradisiac innocence, and, as a consequence, is divided between his dream of innocence and his growing awareness of his own sexuality and of the reality of evil. This sharp dichotomy and failure to grapple with reality in its totality is the key to a full understanding of Giovanni's relationship with Beatrice. Gazing in broad daylight at his earthly paradise, which was completely transformed by his dreams the night before, Giovanni is surprised and a little ashamed to find «how real and matter-of-fact an affair it proved to be» (272). But he rejects the real and the matter-of-fact, for his spirit has to remain in its

height exalted and noble, never «grovelling among earthly doubts» (292). He prefers to remain in the world of his «shapeless half-ideas» existing in the «dim region beyond the daylight of our perfect consciousness» (287). There Beatrice is not a person, but rather an «image of pure whiteness» (292) whose defects have been «transmitted into a golden crown of enchantment» (287). His Beatrice is a «heavenly angel» untarnished by «the mist of evil», more like Dante's Beatrice than any real human being. Therefore his love for her is not a concrete love for an actual woman with full human dimensions, but a kind of sickly romantic love that floats into the abstract vacuum of the absolute and the ideal. As Hawthorne himself designates it, Giovanni's is not a real love, for it is simply «that cunning semblance of love which flourishes in the imagination, but strikes no depth of root into the heart» (287).

Nothing reveals the unrealness of Giovanni's love to Beatrice more than its sexlessness. The two protagonists are described as mere playmates (288). They love on such a high level of abstraction that there «had been no seal of lips, no clasp of hands, nor any slightest caress such as love claims and hallows». Indeed the two lovers never touch each other, and when their hands meet by mistake, Giovanni finds on the back of his hand a «purple print like that of four small fingers, and the likeness of a slender thumb» (287). The fire of desire has burnt him, and «evil... had stung him» (287), yet he remains enmeshed in his state of abstractness, for he is a man frightened of his own «appetites» (294), who forgets his pains «in a reverie of Beatrice» (287).

But glib and naive as he is, Giovanni did have his difficulties in his desperate attempt to ignore complex reality and to resolve all the conflicts. For to disregard complex reality in this facile manner and to go on living as if it were all clear and simple leads, almost uniformly, to our getting caught up in the very contradictions we are fleeing from. Refusing to see Beatrice as a woman, a dialectical composite of body and soul, Giovanni ends up by shuttling in a tragi-comic manner between an angel (the image of Beatrice) and a demon (Beatrice of the poisonous garden).

When he finds that Beatrice is a «wild offspring of both love and horror» (279), he does not adjust himself to this subtle dialectic of life, but recoils in terror. «Hope and dread kept a continual warfare in his breast, alternately vanquishing one another and starting up afresh to renew the contest. Blessed are all *simple emotions*, be they dark or bright ! It is the lurid intermixture of the two that produces

the illuminating blaze of the infernal regions» (279, italics mine). Giovanni's dream after he first sees Beatrice is quite interesting for it shows his bent of mind. He dreams of a «rich flower and beautiful girl. Flower and maiden were different, and yet the same, and fraught with some strange peril in either shape» (272). Giovanni in his dream wants to divorce the flower (an obvious erotic symbol) from the pure virgin. He simply cannot bring himself to the fact that she is both. On the contrary, when fully awake he keeps on putting the question to himself in the sharply polarized fashion characteristic of his way of thinking : «Beautiful shall I call her, or inexpressibly terrible ?» (277).

What complicates matters for him is that Beatrice too, it seems (for we can never be sure whether we are dealing with Beatrice or with Beatrice-as-seen-by-Giovanni), wants to escape from experience to innocence. She is described by the narrator as having no knowledge beyond the limits of that garden (285) and even in her garden of Eden, she does not know much about the poisonous plants ; « and sometimes methinks I would fain rid myself of even that small knowledge » (284). (Not quite as ambitious as her gluttonous grand-mother !). It is also quite obvious that she could be carried away by Giovanni's idealization of her that she forgets all about her destructive sister, the shrub, with all the sexuality it stands for.

No wonder that such an attitude on Beatrice's part encourages Giovanni to degenerate even more deeply into simple idealizations. When doubts about her nature cloud his imagination, she advises him to « forget whatever... he may have fancied », offers him the simple-minded formula of the truth of the heart, and lets him « gaze through ... her beautiful eyes into her transparent soul, and ... feel no more doubt or fear » (284-285). She also shares with him his fear of sex, even when he himself thinks of overstepping the limit (288) of his abstract idealization. In both cases Giovanni succumbs because he yearns for simple emotions and truths.

The catastrophe of the story is brought about as a result of Giovanni's dream of innocence. Because he is unable to accept Beatrice as she is and wants to get her « purified from evil », he acts upon Baglioni's advice and makes her drink a medicine « composed of ingredients the *most opposite* to those by which ... her awful father » poisoned her (297, italics mine). She drinks it and dies.

Grappling with complex reality is one of the main motifs that run through « Rappaccini's Daughter » and indeed many other works by Hawthorne. Giovanni's simple-minded, one-sided view of life is

quite reminiscent of Hollingworth's (in *The Blithedale Romance*) (7). Hollingworth « knew absolutely nothing, except in a single direction » (471) and held a very naive view of evil. His scheme for reforming criminals shows a lack of the awareness of the positive existence of evil. It is quite analogous to Giovanni's disastrous antidote. All the utopians of this novel are characterized by an either/or concept of reality, the dangerous apocalyptic vision of naive revolutionaries. In the very heart of the « bleak little world of New England » they dream of paradise (444). They too want to withdraw from experience and the knowledge of good and evil to a state of pure innocence.

The sin of Ethan Brand, in the story that carries his name, is that he « disturbed the counterpoise between his mind and heart » (1194). His search for the unpardonable sin is based on the assumption, similar to Giovanni's and Hollingworth's, that human nature is a simple and easily knowable thing. Instead of surrendering to the rich concrete and to the real, Ethan Brand « was no longer a brother-man, opening the chambers or the dungeons of our common nature by the key of holy sympathy he was now a cold observer, looking on mankind as the subject of his experiment » (1194).

Aylmer, in « The Birthmark », rejected the best that earth could offer (1032). He looks at Georgiana, and like Giovanni, he never finds her adequate, for he is seeking a paradisiac perfection that exists beyond the limits of mortality. « He always sees the spectral hand that wrote mortality where he would fain have worshipped » (1023). Being a man of extremes, Aylmer believes in nothing but science, sheer matter ; yet he also wants his wife to be a goddess, pure spirit. « He handled physical details as if there were nothing beyond them, yet spiritualized them all by his strong and eager aspiration towards the infinite » (1027). Like Giovanni, he sees either this or that, but never the whole which encompasses both.

All these characters fall because they do not accept the richness of the human condition with its glory and its grief. It seems that Hawthorne, with his allegorical bent of mind, was aware, more than anyone else, of the dangers of anatomizing reality and simplifying our concept of it. All through his life he struggled to keep a firm grip on the actual. It was a struggle of great importance for Hawthorne, both as a man and as an artist.

Notes

1. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, ed. Newton Arvin (New York : Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964). Page numbers will be referred to in the essay itself.
2. It is quite possible that Melville never had the chance to read or see a Scribean well-made play, but the terms are useful here as a means of making some significant distinctions.
3. Compare «Married ! I feel as if a stack of chimneys had fallen on my head !» in Scribe's *A Peculiar Position*, included in *Camille and other plays*, ed. Stephen S. Stanton (New York : Hill and Wang, 1957) P. 8, to Hamlet's «To be or not to be».
4. This is not entirely true though, for there are repeated references to crowns and demi-gods especially when Ahab is the subject of discussion. The *dramatis personae* are referred to as «knights and squires» (111). However, Ahab's kingliness stems from his intrinsic qualities and merits, not from his belonging to any social class.
5. Hyatt H. Waggoner (ed.), *Nathaniel Hawthorne : Selected Tales and Sketches* (New York : Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964). In order to reduce the number of footnotes, I shall refer to the page numbers in the text itself.
6. Walton Rawls, « Hawthorne's Rappaccini's Daughter », *The Explicator*, XV (1957), item 47.
7. All quotations from the *Blithedale Romance*, «Ethan Brand», and «The Birthmark» are from Norman Holmes Pearson (ed.), *The Complete Novels and Selected Tales of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (New York : Random House, 1937). The page numbers will be referred to in the text itself.