

II - Nationalism and Literary Fish

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I have assumed in this provocation to a discussion that I should remain a 'literature' person. What I can perhaps do is give a peculiarly literary perspective on nationalism in the mid-nineteenth century, and then see, more precisely by way of provocation, if I can parallel problems there with problems I have felt latent in the symposium. I shall suggest that there are technical parallels in literary art to the social and philosophic problems relating the individual to a transcendent idea of the nation. I shall also suggest that the interpretation of this literature can surreptitiously alter its function in history.

It is maybe a truism that literature provides one of the threads from which national ideology is woven. One of the things which professional writers do is establish a discourse for other discourses. A paper in this volume (Sobel) establishes that dreams are part of political discourse, but equally that dreams themselves can be formed by the images of traditional religious discourse, or whatever. One must draw distinctions here, distinctions which have perhaps not always come easily to the discourse of the conference itself: when one speaks of writers, or dreamers, or philosophers, or popular singers, as spokespersons of the people, one must distinguish between at least three possibilities. Does one mean that they affected the way people behaved, or that they were themselves affected by popular action, or that they are understood to be the articulate symptoms of the people's state? My suspicion is that most commentators think that they themselves mean the first, but that the spokespersons themselves thought the last. The truth of the matter may well be that the texts they have left us had the first intention, believed themselves to be also the last, and were consciously and unconsciously moulded by the second – but the commentator has either to recognize this multiple ontology, or be clear *which* state of the text he or she is thinking about when using it as evidence in an argument. The professional writer then, to return, is one of the establishers of the building blocks of other people's discourse, but equally can directly, but perhaps rarely, affect behaviour, is him or herself writing under pressure of particular circumstances, and builds up a text from existing possibilities. In short a text can be viewed as conditioning the future, explaining the past in the nature of its own peculiar existence, or itself constituting the present.

The literature of the period (and that includes non-fiction of course, not to

mention those texts like *Walden*, of which more hereafter, which hover somewhere between fiction and non-fiction) is deeply involved in one of the difficulties raised by the idea of the nation in America. «I sing One's-Self, a simple separate person. / Yet utter the word Democratic, the word *en masse*» Whitman writes at the beginning of the final (1891-2) version of *Leaves of Grass*, enunciating the democratic paradox. This problem of the identity of the individual in the consuming identity of the State has a long history in Romantic thought. It goes back at least to Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, and is generally seen as a paradox involving the finding of identity – which of course in daily usage we associate quite precisely with particularity – either in a hypothetical union of world with idea, or of Nature with the pure spirit of man, or as in Whitman's version of it, of the sense of American-ness with the constituting perceptions of normal individuality. The difficulty lies in the odd distortion of the normal usage of identity. Wrenched away from the specific and the particular, it is left floating as an idea of union. There is of course an even longer Christian tradition underlying this manoeuvre. The moral danger of this is fairly obvious, and many histories of the connections between German Romanticism and twentieth century German nationalism have made the point. If identity is involved with a non-specific over-arching principle then it can be involved with anything. Loretta Valtz-Mannucci has spoken of the 'mystical jump' into the empty idea of nationality*. An ideology of the nation as an ideology of the self leaves both nation and self dangerously empty in moral terms. One can distinguish between a mystic or *Gemeinschaftlich* and a practical or *Gesellschaftlich* version of national identity, and clearly constitutional America has many elements of the latter. But characteristically the literary element, heavily influenced by European Romanticism, has an inbuilt tendency to contribute to, or to be, the former. One of the intriguing effects of this, but not my subject here, is the contribution made by Romanticism to the mystical ethos of the State, and in particular to the Southern State and later to the whole idea of the Confederacy. In the North the inevitable tensions of self and nation-state – as found say in Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience* – and of the underpinning Romantic idea of the centre of the self revealed as the common essence of the state produced quite specific 'technical' literary responses. I shall here give two examples.

His writings... might have won him greater reputation but for an inveterate love of allegory, which is apt to invest his plots and characters with the aspect of scenery and people in the clouds, and to steal away the human warmth out of his conceptions... Occasionally, a breath of nature, a raindrop of pathos and tenderness, or a gleam of humor, will find its way into the midst of his fantastic imagery, and make us feel as if, after all, we were yet within the limits of our native earth¹.

* As a panelist in the closing Roundtable «The Formation of the Nation and the Emerging of a National Consciousness», the «other side» of the fight for suffrage. [Editor's Note]

¹ First published in the *Democratic Review*, December 1844. For easy access page references are to the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, ed. Baym, Gottesman, Holland, et al., 3rd edition, 1989, I.1142. Hereafter *Norton*.

In these prefatory remarks to the short story *Rappaccini's Daughter* Hawthorne presents his fiction as if it were a translation from a French author. The worries over this author's style are not only typical of Hawthorne (see for example the extract from 'The Custom-House' in *The Scarlet Letter* below, or the Preface to *The House with the Seven Gables*) but relate directly to the subject of this story. The scientists in this quasi-allegory try to explain human experience in black and white terms. Their view of life is reductive, just in the way that Hawthorne fears his own as a writer (in the guise of Monsieur Aubepine) might also reduce the richness of his characters' lives to the singleness of a moral purpose. Hawthorne typically sees the Puritan community as the allegorizer of its members' lives. For him allegory is the formal literary equivalent of the organic idea of the community. It is that over-arching form which gives order and therefore meaning, but which also dissolves the individuality of its characters.

The search for meaning can be a search to impose restraints. The search for communal and then national identity is paradoxically a struggle to regulate and exclude. Though transcendence liberates from the Actual (see Hawthorne's usage immediately below) it imprisons in the Ideal. But both Hawthorne and one might say America are desperate not to allow the allegorical to dominate the free - even if thereby the 'merely' contingent - individual. This balancing point then is not only the more or less explicit subject of many of Hawthorne's novels and tales, but also motivates their formal dynamics. Hawthorne in one way attempts to 'teach' this balance as the future of the nation, but in another the formal ambivalence of his fiction is the product of the 'balance' as an *unresolved* and perhaps unresolvable dialectic. In his self-consciousness of this double existence there is therefore a discussion between literature as tool (with which to shape the future) and literature as product (unable to do anything other than write out of its own cultural dilemmas). Hester's identity floats between the community's inscribed 'A' and her own virtually unreadable rewriting of it in her elaborate embroidery. In the same way Hawthorne's recipe for the Romance form is made in terms which balance the casual and unreadable with their transformation into the significant but captured².

Moonlight, in a familiar room, falling so white upon the carpet, and showing all its figures so distinctly, - making every object so minutely visible, yet so unlike a morning or noontide visibility, - is a medium the most suitable for a romance-writer to get acquainted with his illusive guests. There is the little domestic scenery of the well-known apartment; the chairs, with each its separate individuality; the centre-table sustaining a work basket, a volume or two, and an extinguished lamp; the sofa; the book-

² It is a moot point I realise whether the idea of the organic community can be usefully identified with the ideal of the organic Nation. It might well be objected that this slippage of scale is unacceptable, and that if it is a slippage which occurs in Hawthorne (or indeed arguably throughout transcendentalism) then it reveals a serious oversimplification of the idea of America. It might equally well be argued that just such a 'serious oversimplification' conditioned the reality.

case; the picture on the wall; – all these details, so completely seen, are so spiritualized by the unusual light, that they seem to lose their actual substance, and become things of intellect... Thus therefore the floor of our familiar room has become a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet...

The somewhat dim coal-fire has an essential influence in producing the effect I would describe. It throws its unobtrusive tinge throughout the room, with a faint rudeness upon the walls and ceiling, and a reflected gleam from the polish of the furniture. This warmer light mingles itself with the cold spirituality of the moonbeams, and communicates, as it were, a heart and sensibilities of human tenderness to the forms which fancy summons up. It converts them from snow-images into men and women³.

These represent the ideal conditions for the writer of Romances as envisaged in the 'Custom House', the preliminary chapter to *The Scarlet Letter*. The moonlight dissolves 'separate individuality' into the intangibility but significance of the world of the 'intellect', while the fire-light on the contrary maintains the individuality of 'men and women' against the 'snow-images' of the intellect. Somewhere 'in the middle' lies the ideal reality of writing, as also 'somewhere in the middle' between the community's condemnation and Hester's act would lie the ideal reality of both community and individual. The trouble is that defined only by polarities this 'somewhere' is also 'nowhere'.

My second example is more radical in that it suppresses the difficulties of the paradox. It would be typical of Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman rather than of Hawthorne or Melville. The balancing act becomes here itself the unquestioned texture of the writing. It is not a difficulty faced by the text, but the text itself. A solid surface of present specificity is gained – we are dealing not with a discussion of experience but with experience. But there remains a temptation to 'reveal' the 'hidden' dialectic 'beneath' the rhetoric. To do so is maybe to mistake time for history.

Ah, the pickerel of Walden! when I see them lying on the ice, or in the well which the fisherman cuts in the ice, making a little hole to admit the water, I am always surprised by their rare beauty, as if they were fabulous fishes, they are so foreign to the streets, even to the woods, foreign as Arabia to our Concord life. They possess a quite dazzling and transcendent beauty which separates them by a wide interval from the cadaverous cod and haddock whose fame is trumpeted in our streets. They are not green like pines, nor gray like the stones, nor blue like the sky; but they have, to my eyes, if possible, yet rarer colors, like flowers and precious stones, as if they were the pearls, the animalized *nuclei* or crystals of the Walden water. They, of course, are Walden all over and all through; they are themselves small Waldens in the animal kingdom, Waldenses. It is surprising that they are caught here, – that in all this deep and capacious spring, far beneath the rattling teams and chaises and tinkling sleighs that travel the Walden road, this great gold and emerald fish swims. I never chanced to see its kind in any market; it would be the cynosure of all eyes there. Easily, with a few convulsive quirks [?:jerks], they give up their watery ghosts, like a mortal translated before his time to the thin air of heaven⁴.

³ First published 1850. *Norton*, I.1181-2.

⁴ First published 1854. *Norton*, I.1782.

The rhetoric of this passage is constructed around the structural tension of precise physical description on the one hand, and of a sense of other-wordly exoticism beyond the material on the other. Our fish are 'pickerel', other fish are 'cadaverous cod' or 'haddock', and these pickerel are not 'green like the pines, nor gray like the stones, nor blue like the sky', but they are 'gold and emerald'. The pond is nowhere other than Walden with in winter its 'rattling teams and tinkling sleighs'. But alongside this specificity the pickerel are also 'fabulous', 'foreign', of a 'transcendent beauty'. Thoreau's first attempt at defining their colour by negative similes collapses into the more general and empty similes of 'flowers' and 'precious stones' (*any* flowers and *any* precious stones). They exist underneath ('far beneath') the surface of things, as their hidden essence. Their very physical existence seems liminal - they are 'watery' and they 'translate' into heavenly spirituality with ease. As rare essence they are the crystallization of their environment, the 'nuclei' of Walden, indistinguishable from their context, the symbolic transcendence of the pond. But they are also *nothing other* than themselves, a unique fish. They form an image of the individual who is also perfectly a part of his community - an American is unique, like no other, and yet his or her very essence is Americanness. the individual is the realisation of the nation, as the pickerel is of the water, and yet that individual is nothing other than an individual.

The knife-edge that Thoreau is balancing on is the knife-edge of integration at the expense of identity. Romantic transcendence and the idea of the nation we can argue are different aspects of the same problem. This passage *enacts* the 'problem' as a resolution, though elsewhere Thoreau explicitly writes *about* the problem - how to be an individual *and* belong, or of course, the necessity of sacrificing one for the other, in Thoreau's case the latter for the former. Now we have to note that neither the implicit nor the explicit writings have a greater claim to a higher 'reality'. They are both constitutive of the American national story. One must not allegorize Walden's pickerel - as I may with some justice be accused of having done. Apart from anything else, the gentle humour with which they are subfused (carried in the hints of overwriting - the sigh, the touches of alliteration in the 'cadaverous cod and haddock', the reference to the persecuted Protestant sect Waldenses) resists a wholly serious allegorical transformation. The pickerel are not 'about' community or nationhood. They float between being themselves in the water of Walden pond and being an allegory of the nation itself afloat between individual and community. To confine them to their allegorical function makes them subservient to the essentially arbitrary interpreter, just as the interpretation of the nation as the essence of its individual members, or the interpretation of individuality as the common essence of the nation, opens nation and individual to enslavement by who-knows-what ideological infilling of transcendent space. If explicated Walden's fish are a problem: what are they, fish or essence of water? - individuals or expression of the nation? But as we read of them simply they are irreducible parts of the present being of the Romantic-national experience. They give as life what history might read as problem.

The relationship of this duality to the conference I see in this way. Most papers have necessarily had in the terms of this literary discourse an allegorical impulse – that is, something is not what it seems merely, but is rather significantly something else – its identity lies in a context not yet noticed, and in a sense always absent from its present existence. That movement is entirely understandable, it is indeed the humanizing, historicizing movement, which transforms the contingent into the stuff of civilization. It is perhaps tiresome to have continually to make obeisance to un-doing it, to hold the theoretical notions of model and hypothesis and dare one say deconstruction continually over one's head, waving feebly or frantically. And there is a sense in which the format of this conference does this for us in any case. Any attempt at totalization is diffused by the variety of subjects and the variety of approaches. The process of the conference, rather than the process of any one paper, is healthy history. Nevertheless... the best safeguard against the infinitely transformable idea, whether of the nation or of the meaning of the nation in history, is the finitely untransformable particular. The democratic historian must not lose the touch, taste, smell of time – in Whitman's words⁵:

You should have been with us that day round the chowder-kettle.

⁵ 'Song of Myself', *Leaves of Grass*, 1891-2. Norton, I. 1980. 'Song of Myself' was first published, without a title, in 1855.