

STORY—HISTORY—POETRY

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Abstract: The paper explores the sophisticated ways in which two imaginative creations, Hawthorne’s „My Kinsman, Major Molineux” and Whittier’s „Ichabod,” confront and resolve the complexities and difficulties of American historical events, situations and personalities in key moments in the country’s evolution—the periods preceding the War of Independence/American Revolution and the Civil War. History is thus compared to short fiction and poetry, in an attempt to illustrate the age-old (Aristotelian) dichotomy; through Robin’s and Whittier’s speaker’s perspectives we get an idea of the intricacies that „cool reason” and imagination are faced with in a tradition that, paradoxically, does not claim history as one of its significant assets.

Keywords: Hawthorne, Whittier, history, fiction, poetry

Theseus: *I never may believe*

These antique fables, nor these fairy toys.

Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,

Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend

More than cool reason ever comprehends.

The lunatic, the lover, and the poet

Are of imagination all compact...

A Midsummer Night’s Dream, V, 1

Our decision to put together a story by Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) and a poem by John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1892)—side by side with a couple of other texts—is motivated, first, by a number of thematic parallels that we can just mention here, as they will become (hopefully) more obvious as our project gets under way; and, second, by the repeatedly tested conviction that each literary text reveals many more of its interpretive disponibilities as it is set side by side (i.e. in the con-text of) with (an)other text(s), with the latter also revealing enriched significances in the process; and this has been, for some time now—several years, in fact—the „hermeneutic challenge” we have chosen to assume.

The thematic parallels between „My Kinsman, Major Molineux”(1832) and „Ichabod”(1850) may be summed up as follows: the degrading of a father, or „father figure” rather (Daniel Webster in his „drunkenness” and the Major at the hands of the mob); Webster repudiated by Whittier (and others we shall mention) and the Major repudiated by the mob and, more importantly, by Robin himself; betrayal by the father (Webster of his political trust accumulated over decades of political and oratorical excellence, and the Major in being an agent of the King of England); and, thus, „majesty in ruins,” doubled by the ambivalences of the relationship son-father, with the son thrown back on his own resources; then, quite significantly for the structure of this paper, the fact that both texts are inspired by complicated political situations preceding the two most important events in American history—the War of Independence and the Civil War; finally, it might not seem completely useless to show that while Hawthorne was conscious of the complexities at stake in his work (having written it long after the main event), Whittier (writing immediately after the Seventh of March Speech)

was unconscious (see his hesitations and then the second poem on the same theme, „The Lost Occasion,” almost thirty years later) of certain difficult implications in „Ichabod.”

Next, our purpose is not specifically that of looking for the literary roots of Hawthorne’s story or Whittier’s poem, or to compare the former with Shakespeare’s play—see the epigraph; still, one cannot overlook the fact that Robin Goodfellow in A Midsummer Night’s Dream bears more than a chance resemblance to both Robin in „My Kinsman...” and Goodman Brown and also that Puck/Rubin Goodfellow, based upon an ancient figure in English mythology is a mischievous, clever—Hawthorne’s Robin is „shrewd”—elf personifying the trickster or the wise knave—„the shrewd and knavish sprite” and a „merry wanderer of the night,” who is longing for freedom in a play that is „a dream”; and there is an allusion to Pyramus and Thisbe in Hawthorne’s story, while Shakespeare’s Robin Starveling plays the lantern-carrying Moonshine in the play-within-a-play based on the Roman mythological figures of doomed young lovers Pyramus and Thisbe who meet at night (by moonlight); this comparative effort has been done, anyway (see, for instance, Mario L. D’Avanzo’s „The Literary Sources of „My Kinsman, Major Molineux’: Shakespeare, Coleridge, Milton,” Studies in Short Fiction 10/1973: 121-136).

It is (our purpose), rather, to look at „My Kinsman...” and „Ichabod” as masterful products of the imagination as distinct—to a certain point—from their historical backgrounds as products of „cool reason”; i.e. to explore the ages-long dichotomy between historical discourse and fiction; in Hawthorne, the historical background is proposed in very vague, indeterminate, and general terms, as if history had needed fiction in order to become more intense and persuasive. Since the setting of the story is „the little metropolis of a New England colony /most probably Boston/,” and the time of the story is „not far from a hundred years ago/i.e. around 1730/”, and behind the events of the narrative seems to be „a long and dry detail of colonial affairs,” and these events „caused much temporary inflammation of the popular mind” (thus preparing the War of Independence), we may choose not to „dispense with” these historical circumstances and have a look at the American colonial events first, as a more detailed preface than the one provided by the author:

„After the kings of Great Britain had assumed the right of appointing the colonial governors, the measures of the latter seldom met with the ready and general approbation, which had been paid to those of their predecessors, under the original charters. The people looked with most jealous scrutiny to the exercise of power, which did not emanate from themselves, and they usually rewarded the rulers with slender gratitude, for the compliances, by which, in softening their instructions from beyond the sea, they had incurred the reprehension of those who gave them. The annals of Massachusetts Bay will inform us, that of six governors, in the space of about forty years from the surrender of the old charter, under James II, two were imprisoned by a popular insurrection; a third, as Hutchinson inclines to believe, was driven from the province by the whizzing of a musket ball, a fourth, in the opinion of the same historian, was hastened to his grave by continual bickerings with the house of representatives, and the remaining two, as well as their successors, till the Revolution, were favored with few and brief intervals of peaceful sway. The inferior members of the court party /pro-Crown/, in times of high political excitement, led scarcely a more desirable life.” (Norton..., p.1085)

As Hawthorne starts out with history and then jumps into the dreamlike story of Robin's nocturnal journey, we can follow the same steps. So, history: The Mayflower anchored at Provincetown harbor on November 11, 1620, the immigrant pilgrims set foot on land on Nov. 13, and on Nov. 15 captain Miles Standish led a party of sixteen men on an exploratory mission; an expedition along Cape Cod on Dec. 6 resulted in a skirmish with the local Native Americans, and the first formal contact with the „Indians” took place on March 16, 1621, when Samoset introduced himself and spoke about their supreme leader Massasoit. The „Mayflower Compact” was signed by forty-one able-bodied Separatists on Nov. 21, 1620—this was the colony's first government document (a hybrid of English common law and Biblical religious law that specifically prevented Quakers—Whittier was a Quaker—from becoming „freemen”) in late 1621 the first Thanksgiving was celebrated by the fifty-three surviving Pilgrims, along with Massasoit and ninety of his men (see William Bradford's Of Plymouth Plantation). The Plymouth colony was soon joined by other short-lived colonial settlements, and in 1624 the Plymouth Council for New England established a small fishing village at Cape Ann, under the supervision of an overseer (Thomas Gardner); the colony's most powerful executive was its Governor, originally elected by the freemen and later appointed by the General Court in an annual election; he had seven „Assistants,” with whom he then appointed the „Constables”(administrators) and „Messengers”(civil servants).

Massachusetts Bay Colony included much of present-day central New England (portions of Massachusetts, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Connecticut); relationships with „Indians” finally deteriorated into the 1636-1638 Pequot War (with Dutch involvement) and the 1675-76 King Philip's War, after which most of the natives were pacified, killed, or driven away. In 1636 a Book of Laws was published, and reissued in 1658, 1672, and 1685.

As settlers kept pouring in by the hundreds, the Company leaders sought a Royal Charter for the colony, which was granted by King Charles in March 1628 to establish a legal basis for the New English colony at Massachusetts. Charles dissolved Parliament in 1629, so the Company directors met to consider the possibility of moving the company's seat of governance from England to the colony and soon (in 1630) the Massachusetts Bay Colony became the first chartered colony whose board of governors did not reside in England. As a matter of fact, in 1630, more than seven hundred colonists arrived from England, with Governor John Winthrop (famous for his „City upon the Hill” sermon) and the colonial charter, followed by the „great migration” of Puritans and religious leaders (John Cotton, Roger Williams, Thomas Hooker), totalling more than 10,000 until 1640. This charter remained in force for 55 years, when, in 1684, as a result of colonial insubordination with trade, tariff and navigation laws, Charles II (1660-1685) revoked it and established the Dominion of New England (in 1686) with the purpose of bringing all of New England under firm control. The dominion collapsed after the Glorious Revolution of 1688 in England, when James II (1685-1688) was deposed and exiled to France and the colony reverted to the rule under the old charter. The President of the Dominion between 1686 and 1689 was the highly unpopular Edmund Andrews, arrested in 1689, when a delegation of New Englanders led by Increase Mather went to England to negotiate for a return of the colonial charters that had been nullified during the Dominion years.

A new charter was subsequently issued, in Oct. 1691, so that on May 14, 1692, the charter of the Province of Massachusetts Bay, issued by the co-government of William and Mary arrived in America, carried by the new Governor, Sir William Phips. This charter established English rule of the colony, by appointing a governor, deputy governor and secretary; it took away many of the rights of self-government that had been previously enjoyed by the Massachusetts and Plymouth authorities. Although James had been deposed and many rights were, however, restored in the new charter, the citizens never regained the right to elect their own governors. With new taxes enacted in 1730 and the constant discord between the colonists and the royal governors, the escalation to „mob rule” and revolutionary fervor in the following decades comes as no surprise.

Another allusion in the story is connected to the fact that in this same period, more exactly after 1685, when the Edict of Nantes by King Louis XIV of France deprived French Protestants (Huguenots) of all religious and civil liberty, many of them emigrated to Massachusetts (see the innkeeper Robin talks to, „being in the second generation from a French protestant, he seemed to have inherited the courtesy of his parent nation.” Norton..., p.1088)

And still another one, highly relevant, is to tarring and feathering, a form of public humiliation, by which the victim (the Major in our story) is stripped to the waist and hot tar is poured or painted on his body; then feathers are thrown on him or he is rolled around on a pile of feathers, so they stick to the tar. In colonial America, „tarring and feathering” was this act of humiliation and retribution committed by vigilante groups (or mobs) upon unpopular persons, especially officials of the British administration, and Loyalists during the revolutionary period; the practice was never an official punishment, and the victim was often paraded around town in a wheelbarrow or a cart or a wooden rail. Tarring and feathering was presented in literature rather humorously, as a punishment inflicting public humiliation and personal discomfort, but not serious injury.

Written in 1831, „My Kinsman, Major Molineux” was first published, with three other stories, in the 1832 issue of The Token and Atlantic Souvenir, an annual collection of fiction, poetry, and essays, and then included in The Snow Image and Other Twice-Told Tales of 1851. The plot/subject is as simple as in many other Hawthorne allegories, where the accent falls on other components of the narrative: in American colonial times—about 1730, see supra—young Robin, the son of a country clergyman, arrives by ferry in town (Boston) in quest of his uncle (second cousin?), Major Molineux, an official of the British Colonial government who has promised him help. After six unsuccessful attempts (old gentleman in front of a barber shop, the innkeeper, the woman of the scarlet petticoat, a watchman, a two-color-faced man, the kindly gentleman) to get information about his kinsman, in the company of this kindly gentleman he hears the roar of an approaching mob that, it soon turns out, tarred and feathered Major Molineux. Disillusioned, he attempts to return home but is advised by the old gentleman to stay in town as he does not need his uncle’s protection.

As Hawthorne, from the beginning, seems to be moving back and forth between the historical world (see supra) and the dream world (that of Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream?), at one point things begin to become very concrete: „It was near nine o’clock of a moonlight evening,” an „evening of ambiguity and weariness” later, with the focus just on one character and the perspective on only one „historical” event. Like in many others of his „romances,” Hawthorne provides an explanation, an interpretation, where you may be

least expecting it: after looking into the church, with a vivid description of a pulpit illuminated by a single ray of light, Robin seats himself upon the steps and looks down along the street and its „respectable appearance”; „and the moon, creating, like the imaginative power /our emphasis/, a beautiful strangeness in familiar objects, gave something of romance /see „The Custom House” preface to The Scarlet Letter/ to a scene that might not have possessed it in the light of day.” Concise..., p.534) So Robin himself wavers continuously between fantasy and reality, whence also his inability to see the complete picture—a constant theme as a matter of fact, similar to Whittier’s in „Ichabod”: „his mind kept vibrating between fancy and reality”—very much like Hawthorne’s own, one is tempted to speculate, who is also interested in the reliability of language and meaning, both distorted, unsettling, transient, and with shifting significations—all of these sources of endless irony.

On a historical level, therefore, the story depicts the political feelings that led to the American Revolution, with America and England symbolized by light and darkness, and by Robin’s loss of innocence, his quest of identity and the final ideal of a self-made man; adulthood comes with independence, after witnessing the blood and death of war (the red-and-black grotesque face, described no less than three times by the author; and here is the second description: „One side of the face blazed an intense red, while the other was black as mid-night, the division line being in the broad bridge of the nose; and a mouth which seemed to extend from ear to ear was black or red, in contrast to the color of the cheek. The effect was as if two individual devils, a fiend of fire and a fiend of darkness, had united themselves to form this infernal visage.”(Concise..., p.534).

One element that Hawthorne emphasizes in this view is that political liberty and spiritual liberty do not coincide: in his pursuit of spiritual liberty Robin unwillingly becomes a member of the community of sinners representing mob rule and political liberty. Having passed successfully the obstacles of temptation and encounters with the devil (three times, see supra), the hero encounters in the end the grotesque, carnivalesque, laughing mob and joins in with the cathartic laughter after having experienced a „mixture of pity and terror”(Aristotle’s tragic effect); Robin’s is the journey of the soul in the night of ignorance and immaturity rising to its self-perfection, i.e. one’s soul’s acceptance of sin as part of its condition of being and of deliverance in this fallen world of fallen people the hero encounters in the city’s dark and winding labyrinth during his phantasmagoric journey; which, otherwise, is that of an initiation fairy tale, with Prince Charming who, in his quest for identity, after crossing the big river, has overcome several „obstacles” before getting to know about himself and others (in the company of a „helper”).

Still, there is one suspicion in Hawthorne’s mind, namely that the reality of a democratic nation based on liberal individualism would not be a stable and rational order, but an indecipherable chaos and a noisy crowd of people; thus his more complex (and more difficult) theme is that the American „glorious revolution” may have brought about American dignity, but one cannot help feeling that there was an element of viciousness in it, i.e. the mob, ignorant and untrustworthy; one is acutely aware that democracy has to accommodate multiple and contradictory systems of belief (see Whittier’s consequently tragic Webster/Ichabod). The reader is left, in the end, with no simple answer, as the mob revolution is one in which America/Boston is swept up in the chaotic exhilaration of the moment, while the tyrant to be overthrown, the Major, is a „steady soul” and a „majestic person.”

Even though Hawthorne seems thus to undermine democracy and revolution, Robin's awakening into critical consciousness simply means that democracy requires the existence of multiple truths and multiple perspectives (hence also Whittier's double truth about his statesman). If Robin's transition into adulthood is America's coming of age during the War of Independence, we still have to remember how naive and cocky he was, with an inflated sense of his own importance and competence, and great faith in his own shrewdness (catastrophically shaken in the end). Reality vs. illusion occupy front stage in the reader's mind as he sees the dissonance between what Robin wishes to perceive and what is actually transpiring in this lurid, unfriendly, frightening city. So, in the darkness of Major Molineux's city, we are given the dark portrait of America hurtling (in the 1730s) toward a war of independence; the country bumpkin's quest, accompanied by negative reactions as he seeks help from the „bad guy,” makes him „begin to grow weary of town life” as a final epiphany.

The intricate complexities of history that literature is faced with and the great difficulties of „solving” them imaginatively are at least as pregnant in Whittier's case, where the historical past is twofold, i.e. Biblical and American, both of them raising big problems for any writer/historian to tackle imaginatively or argumentatively in both types of discourse. The Biblical antecedent is, first, in 1 Samuel 4: the description of a war between Israel and the Philistines (the North and the South in the American Civil War?), and, in spite of the fact that Israel had the ark of God among their midst, they were defeated and thirty thousand fell and „the very ark of the [true] God was captured.” High priest Eli, ninety-eight years old, is given the news that his two sons, Hophni and Phinehas are dead and dies, especially on account of the Ark of the Covenant having fallen into enemy hands. The shock from so much loss induced premature labor in Phinehas' unnamed wife and this resulted in her giving birth to a son and her subsequent death: „And she called the boy Ichabod /the inglorious/, saying ‚The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured.” (I Samuel 4:21-22, pp.324-325)

And a second Biblical reference to Genesis 9: 20-25: Noah, after the flood, planted a vineyard, began drinking and got intoxicated (Daniel Webster was known to indulge in such passions and appetites as gambling and alcohol), so he fell asleep naked in his tent—„in drunkenness sprawled naked in his cave”(pp.17-18); his sons Ham, Shem and Japheth „took a mantle and put it upon their shoulders and walked in backwards. Thus they avoided their father's nakedness /”shame” is the frequent word against Webster/, while their faces were turned away /hence the „averted gaze” in the last but one line of „Ichabod”/, and they did not see their father's nakedness”(ibid.); the patriarch's folly is Webster's folly, i.e. his true self revealed. And there is also a suggestion of influence from Milton's Paradise Lost (1667), Book I, where Satan says to his fellow fallen angel Beelzebub:

*„If thou beest he—but oh how fall'n! How changed /”So fallen! So lost! in
„Ichabod””/
From him who, in the happy realms of light,
Cloth'd with translucent brightness didst outshine
Miriads though bright!” (ll. 84-87)*

An author's note also sends us to the second chapter of American history:

„This poem was the outcome of the surprise and grief and forecast of civil consequences which I felt on reading the seventh of March speech of Daniel Webster in support of the ‚compromise,‘ and the Fugitive Slave Law. No partisan or personal enmity dictated it. On the contrary my admiration of the splendid personality and intellectual power of the great Senator was never stronger than when I laid down his speech, and, in one of the saddest moments of my life, penned my protest. I saw, as I wrote, with painful clearness its sure results,—the Slave Power arrogant and defiant, strengthened and encouraged to carry out its scheme of the extension of its baleful system, or the dissolution of the Union, the guaranties of personal liberty in the free States broken down, and the whole country made the hunting ground of slave-catchers. In the horror of such a vision, so soon fearfully fulfilled, if one spoke at all, he could only speak in tones of stern and sorrowful rebuke. But death softens all resentments, and the consciousness of a common inheritance of frailty and weakness modifies the severity of judgment. Years after, in The Lost Occasion /Webster died in 1852 and the poem was published in 1880/, I gave utterance to an almost universal regret that the great statesman did not live to see the flag which he loved trampled under the feet of Slavery, and, in view of this desecration, make his last days glorious in defence of ‚Liberty and Union, one and inseparable.’”

One can easily see Whittier’s difficulty in writing the poem (and this very note), so we need to have a look at the complexity of the historical figure in the decades before the Civil War. Daniel Webster (1782-1852) was this leading American statesman in the period: he illustriously spent forty years in national politics as an influential Whig (conservative) leader, famous orator and effective spokesman for modernization, banking and industry; he was for ten years in the House of Representatives, nineteen years in the Senate, US Secretary of State under three presidents, and also tried and failed three times to become President; as a lawyer, he took part in several US Supreme Court cases and was hailed as the leading constitutional scholar of his generation; his „Reply to Hayne” in 1830 (attack on nullification: the idea that states—Southern mostly—were sovereign entities and held ultimate authority over the limits of the power of the federal government, and could thus ‚nullify’ any act of the central government—like the Fugitive Slave Law—it deemed unconstitutional) was generally regarded as „the most eloquent speech ever delivered in Congress” and was a stock exercise for oratory students for many decades.

Around the middle of the nineteenth century the historical problem was focused by the issues of the Civil War: first there was a conflict in the North, between the twin goals of preserving the union (the nationalists, like Webster) and the abolition of slavery (the abolitionists, like Whittier); so the conflict—which, like all conflicts, requires first a compromise—is already present in these two positions, as they could not preserve the Union (with the South) and at the same time abolish slavery (against the South, whose position was based upon the fact that this institution was guaranteed by the Constitution, plus „nullification,” i.e. the sovereignty of each individual state). There was then the very peculiar situation in Virginia, as most of the state turned from secessionism to strict anti-secession philosophy, so a compromise was needed between their earlier political convictions and the demands of the new epoch. This is a simplified version of the „compromise of 1850,” and on March 7 Daniel Webster gave one of his most famous speeches in support of the compromise

(including the Fugitive Slave Law that required federal officials to recapture and return runaway slaves).

Consequently, Webster's speech was warmly received throughout the South and was bitterly attacked by the abolitionists of New England (like Whittier), who felt betrayed by his compromises. One Reverend Theodore Parker complained: „No living man has done so much to debauch the conscience of the nation,” while journalist Horace Man described him as being „a fallen star! Lucifer descending from Heaven!” (Daniel Webster pages, p.8—see also „Ichabod”). In his turn, James Russell Lowell called Webster „the most meanly and foolishly treacherous man I ever heard of” (ibid., pp.8-9); Emerson criticized him too, though, later, he was to call Webster „the completest man” and: „nature had not in our days or not since Napoleon, cut out such a masterpiece.” (ibid., p.11). However, Webster never recovered from the loss of popularity he suffered in the aftermath of the Seventh of March speech; he resigned from the Senate and as Secretary of State continued to uphold the Compromise of 1850; then, again, in 1852, he entered his third campaign for Presidency in an attempt to win southern support for his candidacy (his „profound selfishness” for Emerson), got a distant third position and died just before the election proper, after falling from a horse.

His Seventh of March speech may have ironically made war inevitable, by encouraging slave-holders to believe that they could always obtain anything they wanted by a sufficient show of violence. Anyway, after the speech, Whittier published his „Ichabod”:

*„So fallen! So lost! the light withdrawn
Which once he wore!
The glory from his gray hairs gone
Forevermore!...
Oh, dumb be passion's stormy rage,
When he who might
Have lighted up and led his age,
Falls back in night.
Scorn! Would the angels laugh, to mark
A bright soul driven,
Fiend-goaded, down the endless dark,
From hope and heaven!
Let not the land once proud of him
Insult him now,
Nor brand with deeper shame his dim,
Dishonored brow...
Then, pay the reverence of old days
To his dead fame;
Walk backward, with averted gaze
And hide the shame!”*

Two contemporaries therefore, both involved in politics and social movements (Whittier was an unsuccessful candidate for Congress in 1832, a delegate to the Massachusetts Republican Convention in 1833, elected as a Whig for one term in the state legislature, founder of the anti-slavery Liberty Party...), who seem to find no agreement regarding the intricately complex problems, but who remain uncertain as to their role in relation to the great event: Webster's Seventh of March speech and Whittier's „Ichabod” and „The Lost Occasion”(see infra) are closely-knit in their attitude of irresolution (very much like Hawthorne's ending before the other great event) and point to a similar „imaginative

compromise” in 19th-century America. Whittier’s „The Lost Cause” is an even more relevant testimony as to the kind of indecision politics require; in the 1880 poem, Webster is endowed

„With rarest gifts of heart and head
From manifest stock inherited,
New England’s stateliest type of man,
In port and speech Olympian...” and
„With power reserved at need to reach
The Roman forum’s loftiest speech...”

Yet, he is a man „foiled in aim and hope bereaved/Of old friends, and by the new deceived” as a result of his „sad concessions”; though „one lofty summit keeps thy name,” the poet is grieved by „the loss of that which should have been”(hence the title).

With „Ichabod” (and „The Lost Cause”) recounting the fall from glory of the great statesman, with an indictment that is also a defence („My Kinsman...” condemns British rule, but ends in indecision)—an elegy with the speaker wailing the fallen angel and addressing a reader, urging him not to scorn or insult him, but pity him as he was deprived of the hope of heaven—we become keenly aware of this reader steeped in the political life before the Civil War, but also a well-informed reader of the Bible, so he was able to get Whittier’s allusions with no hesitation.

History and fiction (a very old story) may or may not be complementary while referring to certain events, but good knowledge of the one may help one understand the other; or, rather, both have more meaning if regarded in conjunction (as with Hawthorne and Whittier), i.e. as parts of the same puzzle. And great political events are, like both our cases, prepared by intricate combinations of forces, the presentation of which seems to require „mighty pens,” from imaginations prepared to match the greatness of such subjects. It may thus seem fitting to end by quoting the journalistic saying, according to which „when fact becomes legend, print the legend.”

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