Olivet Nazarene University
Digital Commons @ Olivet

Faculty Scholarship – English English

2010

Bakhtin's Heteroglossia and Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*

Rebecca Blecher-Rankin
Olivet Nazarene University, rbelcher@olivet.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.olivet.edu/engl_facp

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation

Blecher-Rankin, Rebecca, "Bakhtin's Heteroglossia and Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*" (2010). *Faculty Scholarship – English*. 5.
https://digitalcommons.olivet.edu/engl_facp/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Digital Commons @ Olivet. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Scholarship – English by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Olivet. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@olivet.edu.

PAPERS ON AMERICAN FICTION

BAKHTIN'S HETEROGLOSSIA AND HAWTHORNE'S *THE SCARLET LETTER*

Writing of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter," Patricia M. Roger says, "[N]o one, neither character, nor narrator, nor reader, nor perhaps author, can know or 'see' the 'whole story' all at once" (452). Roger goes on to say that "Hawthorne seems to be advocating an awareness of multiple perspectives" (453). If Roger is correct in her assertion when speaking of a fairly straightforward plot sequence of approximately twenty pages, how much more could such a statement be true of Hawthorne's first full-length work and masterpiece, *The Scarlet Letter*? Beginning with the frame that inserts the reader into both the narrator's own time period and the time period of the characters he is creating and continuing with a story that, although seemingly personal, in reality reveals the dissection of a whole society, *The Scarlet Letter* is truly a novel in which the whole story cannot be known at once. Even though Roger does not refer to M. M. Bakhtin in her article, her idea that "no one [...] can know" dovetails nicely with Bakhtin's idea that the dialogue in a novel "can never be exhausted [....] [but] is pregnant with an endless multitude of dialogic confrontations, which do not and cannot resolve it" (364-5). Bakhtin's concept of the dialogic nature of the novel is echoed in Roger's words that Hawthorne, himself, could be "advocating [...] awareness of multiple perspectives" (453). Such a viewpoint goes well beyond traditional scholars, such as G. R. Thompson, Harold Bloom, and Nina Baym, who view Nathaniel Hawthorne as a representative writer of American Romanticism.

"As a contemporary term for the new literature [of the 1800s]," says G. R. Thompson, "romance implied a narrative form of complicated design, in which the modern version of the quest was to incorporate the irregular, the conflictual, the incomplete, the half-known with their opposites" (12). Harold Bloom's statement that romance "depends on enchantment and imperfect knowledge" furthers this view of the hallmark of Romantic writing (471). Nina Baym, one of the foremost Americanists, wonders if Hawthorne, with *The Scarlet Letter*, "actually underwent some sort of conversion or simply adopted another in a long series of authorial stances designed to find favor with an audience. Clearly a romantic view was more up to date" (142). Baym continues by praising Hawthorne's change of stance both because it fits the times and because it ushers in his most productive decade, but the words sound somewhat pejorative, painting Hawthorne as a mere sycophant who wants to increase his readership and his remuneration. Whether or not economic and social considerations influenced him, Hawthorne's adherence to the Romantic vision is seen in the introductory section to *The Scarlet Letter* titled "The Custom House." After describing a domestic scene meant to inspire, he says, "[W]ith this scene before him, if a man sitting all alone cannot dream strange things and make them look like truth, he need never try to write romances" (45). Hawthorne seems to acknowledge the irregular, the conflictual, the incomplete, the half-known, and the imperfect as his material for his writings.

Yet, if Hawthorne is to be believed in his "Preface" to *The House of the Seven Gables*, he understands that while managing "his atmospherical medium as to bring out or mellow the lights and deepen and enrich the shadows of the picture," he, as a Romantic writer, wants to "make a very moderate use of [such] privileges" (vii). In fact, Hawthorne wants his reader, "according to his pleasure," to "either disregard" or "allow" the Romantic elements "to float almost imperceptibly" (vii). Hawthorne's idea that the reader is free to pay attention to the Romantic elements or to focus on the narrative, which, though "woven of [...] humble [...]

texture," is "difficult" to follow (vii), gives credence to Roger's idea of multiple perspectives when reading his works and certainly invites the use of Bakhtin's theoretical approach to the dialogic nature of novels. Bakhtin, unlikely to quibble over the terms "romance" or "novel," would explain Hawthorne's many shifts and perspectives in terms of "heteroglossia," which he describes as "*another's speech in another's language*, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way" (324). In Bakhtin's world, Hawthorne, like any other author of a novel, uses the languages of narrators and characters to tell the readers his story, whether that story be about a life he is creating or about his own life, albeit in a refracted, oblique way.

Bakhtin says that the author of a novel "attempts to talk about even his *own* world in an alien language," that alien language being anything other than his own personal spoken or written pattern (287). In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne does this by comparing his world, where he is a customs inspector, to the world of colonial America, circa 1675. As Hawthorne says in "The Custom House," he wants to "keep the inmost Me behind its veil," the veil being the "genial consciousness" of a sympathetic reader (16). Immediately following this confession the narrator attributes the origin of his tale to materials that came into his possession, a second form of veil behind which Hawthorne hides himself. These veils of the story of "The Custom House" and *The Scarlet Letter* might be explained by Bakhtin as follows: "The author utilizes now one language, now another, in order to avoid giving himself up wholly to either of them" (314). This changing of one language for another, yet indicating authorial intention in a refracted way, can be seen in Hawthorne's creation of characters' speech.

Hawthorne's own story, as nearly as it can be ascertained in the introductory piece, which he calls "autobiographical," is that, although he feels critical of the republic which "swept him out of office," he still is drawn to his home through a "mere sensuous sympathy of dust for dust" (19, 20). Furthermore, he thinks he must "take shame" upon himself for the sake of his

ancestors whose deeds he does not approve (21). Such attitudes can be found in the fictional Hester, who is critical of her society that has not yet established "the whole relation between man and woman [...] on mutual happiness," but who, nevertheless, returns to the society with the thought that "here had been her sin; here, her sorrow; and here was yet to be her penitence" (245, 244). Hester's consciousness displays the same feelings for her town as Hawthorne does for his—a mix of accusation, of acceptance, and of responsibility.

Another connection between Hawthorne's autobiographical account and his fictional account concerns his feeling of living for three years in an "unnatural state" in his custom house work which makes his "intellectual machinery" so rusty that he cannot write (51). In *The Scarlet Letter* proper, in a conversation between Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth about the secret sins of men, Dimmesdale is surely referring to the feelings of guilt that he has carried for years concerning his part in Hester's adultery when he says of these others that "they shrink from displaying themselves black and filthy in the view of men [....] So, to their own unutterable torment, they go about among their fellow creatures looking pure as new-fallen snow; while their hearts are all speckled and spotted with iniquity of which they cannot rid themselves" (130). Although Dimmesdale is referring to others, his is the "unutterable torment" and his the "speckled and spotted" heart that is unnatural because of its hypocrisy. Not being true to himself, just as Hawthorne, autobiographical narrator of "The Custom House," is not true to his inner desires and thoughts, Dimmesdale lives in an unnatural state that finally kills him. Hawthorne, the narrator, manages to lose his hypocrisy with the loss of his inspector's position, perhaps thereby saving his life, either metaphorically or literally.

The examples of both Dimmesdale and Hester seem to point to some direct correlations between Hawthorne's life and Hawthorne's story, but the language of the characters can be explored for "authorial intentions" without reference to

Hawthorne's life. As Bakhtin points out, "[A]ll languages of heteroglossia, whatever the principle underlying them and making each unique, are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values" (291-92). In other words, using Bakhtin's approach, in *The Scarlet Letter* specific points of view can be found in such varying people as the narrator, with a view contemporaneous to Hawthorne; Hester, with a woman's view; Dimmesdale, with a theological view; Chillingworth, with a scientific view; and the townspeople, with their evolving viewpoint.

The narrator, presumably the same autobiographical narrator of the introductory preface of "The Custom House," immediately contrasts the days of the Puritans, when all punishments of crimes seemed "solemn and almost sacred," to his own day when the "penalty would infer a degree of mocking infamy" (58). On one hand, the narrator is not convinced that all punishment should be "solemn and almost sacred," but, on the other, he sees his own age as one which is nothing if not ironic in its decrees. He also contrasts the original Puritan women of "coarser fibre" to the women of his day who have inherited "a fainter bloom, a more delicate and briefer beauty, and a slighter physical frame, if not a character of less force and solidity" (58). In both instances, the narrator's tone implies a criticism both of the Puritan's day of which he writes and of his own society's day. Too, his description of the women of his day diminishes the strength of their physical characteristics. Hawthorne's use of the word "if," although it does not seemingly diminish the women's moral character, places that very moral character into question because of the conditional nature of the word.

Hester's thoughts concerning the punishment she is suffering at the hands of the Puritans indicate a viewpoint different from that of the narrator. She does not question whether it be "mocking infamy," but, instead of repaying the accusers with a "bitter and disdainful smile," which the narrator said she "might"

have done, she feels "under the leaden infliction which it was her doom to endure" (64). With the acceptance of the townspeople's punishment, Hester perhaps illustrates Hawthorne's own nagging doubt about the "solemn and almost sacred" nature of such punishment. Later Hester feels that she has gained discernment about the characters of others through the scarlet letter because it gives "her a sympathetic knowledge of the hidden sin in other hearts" (89). Thus, she feels the kinship with a "venerable minister" or "some matron who [...] had kept cold snow within her bosom" (90). The narrator reports, however, that she "yet struggled to believe that no fellow-mortal was guilty like herself," words that reinforce Hester's world view (90). The narrator, so closely linked to Hawthorne, shows, with his sympathetic view of Hester, the justice of the punishment, whether or not others are guilty, as she senses they might be. But, even as the letter asserts through its "electric thrill" that Hester is seeing a "companion in sin," she acknowledges her punishment to be just (90).

Dimmesdale's view differs from both the narrator's and Hester's views. He is described as having

> an apprehensive, a startled, a half-frightened look—as of a being who felt himself quite astray and at a loss in the pathway of human existence, and could only be at ease in some seclusion of his own. Therefore, so far as his duties would permit, he trod in the shadowy bypaths, and thus kept himself simple and childlike. (72)

The narrator reports that when Dimmesdale preaches, however, he has "a freshness, and fragrance, and dewy purity of thought" that affect the townspeople as if he were an angel (72). Dimmesdale, with his elevated position within the community, remains, as much as possible, separated from it because of his guilt. When Dimmesdale mounts the scaffold in the dark of the night, thinking that perhaps through such an act he could gain "a moment's peace," he knows "there is no peril of discovery" (142-43). Even after he "shrieked aloud," as the narrator reports, no one hears

or sees his "agony of heaven-defying guilt and vain repentance" (144). And when Pearl, who, with her mother, has joined him on the scaffold, asks if he will stand there with her mother and her "tomorrow noontide," he answers, "Not so, my child. I shall, indeed, stand with thy mother and thee one other day, but not tomorrow" (148-49), thus acknowledging his theological understanding of a coming judgment day, but rejecting any idea of present disclosure with its subsequent disgrace and punishment. No touch of irony pervades the narration of the minister's account. Instead, the narrator reports that "strangely enough" the minister is "impelled" as "a professional teacher of the truth [...] to answer the child so" (149). For all of the judgment of the earlier time period that the narrator reveals in the opening chapters, he seems inclined here to identify with the minister's viewpoint.

Chillingworth, both as the wronged husband and as the man of science, takes yet another view of Hester's adultery. While protesting that he seeks no revenge against Hester, he indicates that such is not the case against the man who has wronged him. He is perfectly confident of his ability to ferret out the identity of the adulterer, saying, "[F]ew things [are] hidden from the man who devotes himself earnestly and unreservedly to the solution of a mystery [....] I shall seek this man as I have sought truth in books, as I have sought gold in alchemy. There is a sympathy that will make me conscious of him" (79-80). Yet he tells Hester not to fear because he will not "contrive aught against his life [...] nor against his fame," instead relying on "Heaven's own method of retribution" (80). Such words, seemingly even-handed, perhaps rather objective, like his scientific bent, frighten Hester, who says, "Thy acts are like mercy [....] [b]ut thy words interpret thee as a terror!" (80). Later, when Hester determines to intervene in Chillingworth's torture of Dimmesdale, she internally questions the kind of character he has become with such thoughts as these: "Would he not suddenly sink into the earth, leaving a barren and blasted spot, where, in due course of time, would be seen deadly nightshade, dogwood, henbane, and whatever else of vegetable

wickedness the climate could produce?" (169). Although this is Hester's viewpoint, oddly enough, Chillingworth, too, has discovered his own evil, saying that he "has become a fiend for [Dimmesdale's] especial torment" (165). The narrator reports that with these words, Chillingworth "lifted his hands with a look of horror," because it is a time when "a man's moral aspect is faithfully revealed to his mind's eye" (165-66). Then the narrator, perhaps Hawthorne's double, says, "Not improbably, he had never before viewed himself as he did now" (166). Chillingworth's science cannot save him from his evil, and Hawthorne's narrator acknowledges the universality of the horror of such knowledge.

Even the townspeople have their separate voices and points of view on the world. At first they are condemning of Hester. The narrator reports especially the views of the women of the day, with one woman commenting that "[a]t the very least, they should have put the brand of a hot iron on Hester Prynne's forehead," while another says she "ought to die" (59). Later, when Hester becomes such a quiet, staunch doer of good works, they silently admire her and come to her for advice and solace. Similarly, the townspeople change their viewpoint of Chillingworth, seeing him at first as Dimmesdale's savior, but later questioning his motives. The narrator reports at one point that some have hope that Chillingworth is "restoring the young minister to health," but others see him as "Satan himself, or Satan's emissary" (126). They do not, however, change their views of Dimmesdale; even after he confesses his sin before them, they continue to see him as a saint of the Lord who has only confessed "in order to impress on his admirers the mighty and mournful lesson that, in the view of Infinite Purity, we are sinners all alike" (241). Thus, the narrator adds a sense of grace, both through the townspeople's admiration of Hester's good works in the community and through the townspeople's sense that Dimmesdale partakes of guilt only because all are sinners. The narrator has linked himself, thus, with the punishment of Hester, the guilt of Dimmesdale, the evil of Chillingworth, and the solidarity of society as it vacillates between condemnation and admiration of the adulterous couple.

In all these instances, the narrator and characters of Hawthorne fit Bakhtin's description of a character in a novel: "[H]e lives and acts in an ideological world of his own [...] he has his own perception of the world that is incarnated in his action and in his discourse" (335). These characters in *The Scarlet Letter* do have their own ideas, yet Hawthorne seems to share those ideas through the persona of his narrator. Sacvan Berkovitch says that "Hawthorne's meanings may be endless, but they are not open ended. On the contrary, they are designed to create a specific set of anticipations, to shape out understanding of what follows in some definite way" (xi). Readers follow the characters through their realization, but sense, somehow, that they are privy, as well, to Hawthorne, who has perhaps created "a specific set of anticipations."

Emily Miller Budick goes even further with her analysis of Hawthorne's involvement in his characters' lives and speeches, actually identifying Hawthorne with Hester Prynne. Her thesis is that Hawthorne, American citizen, shows both his aversion to conformity and his consent to live within the society that rewards conformity. She says, "Hawthorne and Hester, author and citizen, literary and critical text finally express their consent. Consent must declare itself. It must put itself under the sentence of a social obligation to listen and to speak" (89). Budick, with such language, ties Hawthorne to Hester by declaring that the words and actions of Hester in relation to late seventeenth-century Salem are, indeed, the words and actions of Hawthorne in relation to mid-nineteenth-century Salem.

Whether garnered from Bakhtin's theory, generally, or Roger's, Berkovitch's, or Budick's interpretations, individually, ideas abound that authorial intention hides behind narrators and characters. Just as readers cannot know whether Hawthorne's motive is to create a Romance to please his reading public, readers also cannot know whether Hawthorne writes his characters' words in such a way to reveal his ideas on his world. His depth of insight into the major characters, however, points to his own "authorial intentions," whether they be to reprimand society, to acknowledge

guilt from generation to generation, or to confess the hidden sins that hide in all men's hearts. He speaks for himself, perhaps, but also, perhaps, for his society. The use of different tongues in the lives of different characters allows for a refracted, effective method of revealing foibles, confessing faults, and reconciling differences. In other words, they are the "authorial intentions" that Bakhtin identifies as the ground from which the characters' views of the world come.

The theories of heteroglossia go much further than this discussion which is limited to Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, but even such a limited study shows how authors, in general, and Hawthorne, in particular, seek to talk about their own worlds and the worlds of their characters through various "languages." Exploring authors' works through their use of unique, distinct words for each character and narrator offers readers vistas of worlds which cannot otherwise be explored. History can be compared to contemporary life, men to women, scientists to philosophers, and innocent narrators to omniscient narrators. Instead of cheapening the work of an author by being concerned with his need to "find favor" with an audience, such an exploration enriches both the work and the readers' perceptions of it.

Rebecca Harshman Belcher-Rankin
Olivet Nazarene University

Works Cited

Bakhtin, M. M. "Discourse in the Novel." *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Ed. Michael Holquist. Austin, TX: U of Texas P, 1981. 259-422. Print.

Baym, Nina. *The Shape of Hawthorne's Career*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1976. Print.

Berkovitch, Sacvan. *The Office of* The Scarlet Letter. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1991. Print.

Bloom, Harold. *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*. NY: Harcourt Brace, 1994. Print.

Budick, Emily Miller. "Sacvan Bercovitch, Stanley Cavell, and the Romance Theory of American Fiction." *PMLA* 107.1 (1992): 78-91. *JSTOR*. Web. 30 Jan 2010.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. "Preface." *The House of the Seven Gables*. 1851. New York: Doubleday Dell, 1981. vii-viii. Print.

---. *The Scarlet Letter.* 1850. New York: Penguin, 1988. Print.

Roger, Patricia M. "Taking a Perspective: Hawthorne's Concept of Language and Nineteenth-Century Language Theory." *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 51.4 (1997): 433-54. *JSTOR*. Web. 30 Jan 2010.

Thompson, G. R. *The Art of Authorial Presence*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1993. Print.