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Linda Sahmadi

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# The Earnestness of Humor: Hawthorne's Puritanical Sense of Humor in "Wakefield", "Young Goodman Brown" and "My Kinsman, Major Molineux"

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*Linda SAHMADI, Docteur ès Etudes anglaises, chercheur indépendant*

It has become a truism to say that Nathaniel Hawthorne liked to indulge himself in polarities. Any student of our Salemite author has come across in his researches remarks of the following kind: "Hawthorne was interested in polarities, and his writings show a keen concern for chiaroscuro effects through description and characterization<sup>1</sup>". It would not be exaggerated to state that claims of Hawthorne's penchant for humor have been commensurately less numerous, so much emphasis being put on his thematic concerns. Yet, numerous are his stories, whether they be short or long fiction, which are fraught with laughing heroes, smiling heroines, dark humor, or simply pithy comments. If critics have emphasized – when they had noticed it at all – this aspect it is to superimpose thematic or symbolic interpretations: innocence, Satanism, madness. This rigid typification has come to freeze their laughs into a symbolic cold which recoils the approach of warmer approaches. Without completely rejecting this reading as it is not entirely nonsensical (far from it), we would like in this essay to go beyond the surface, to look not *at* but *through* the mirror that is humor. Indeed, as we read it (or should we say "hear" it?), smiles and laughters<sup>2</sup> in Hawthorne's fiction don't simply mean or symbolize such or such human qualities or defects. They signify, period. Hawthorne seems to be playing with humor and in this game, words are the stylistic counterpart of his mind and heart. Despite the somewhat misleading character of the title of our essay, we will not content ourselves with a Puritan(ical) justification or chastisement of the writer's humor. We will veer towards a budding meta-reading of Hawthorne's humor, according to which it is essential to see humor not as a means to achieve a symbolic or moral end, but as a means for its own sake.

To do that, we will perfunctorily confront our readings to the literal and symbolic ones which construe Hawthorne's "humor" (if they dare using the word) as implicitly related to his Puritan roots, and thus representing and symbolizing more severe, more somber considerations and thoughts. In this preliminary perspective, two questions will arise and inform our stream of thoughts. First of all, is it really possible to play with the Devil? For, indeed, Hawthorne's Puritan conscience obliged him to

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1 R. Dusenbery, "Hawthorne's Merry Company: The Anatomy of Laughter in the Tales and Short Stories," in PMLA, Vol. 82, No. 2 (May 1967), pp. 285-288

2 We consider them as kinds of humor, and even manifestations of it. So whenever we shall refer to humor, we implicitly allude to the hyponyms, though we are perfectly aware of finer subtleties.

consort with the almighty evil more than once and, thereby, offered him an inexhaustible source of inspiration. Secondly, within this daring game, what does Hawthorne make of his Puritan inherited sets of values, traditions and ways of thinking? Does he mock and laugh at them? These questions will hopefully allow us to partially invalidate the theories that focus on symbolic import and do not take account of the strictly linguistic and even meta-linguistic quality of a writer's writing. To us, a more stimulating exegetic approach rests on the essence of Hawthorne's humor viewed from a vantage viewpoint that embraces all levels at once: literal, symbolic and metalinguistic.

## I.

In this triple dimensional analysis<sup>3</sup> of Hawthorne's humor, it seems unavoidable to keep in mind Aristotle's conventional definitions of "tragedy" and "comedy" because Hawthorne's fictions may well fall into the first category exclusively if we do not pay attention to his subtle humorous fads. Accordingly, for a writer to be qualified as a tragic writer, his work needs to deal with pathetic and pessimistic characters, doomed mankind, guilt-ridden consciences, secrets of atrocious and ineffable crimes. Not a common-sensical mind would venture calling these subjects comic or funny, or even choose them as the background for lighter and heartier thinking. Yet, if we are to believe Henning Cohen, "it is these very qualities [pessimism, egocentrism, guilt, among others] that led the authors [Cohen is speaking about Poe, Hawthorne and Melville] in the direction of comedy."<sup>4</sup> Such a paradoxical claim is sure to arouse the hair of more than one Puritans had they lived to hear it. If we thus assume – and we do – that to make fun of serious and grave issues was a controversial move in Hawthorne's time, we can equally posit that it may have been in a challenging mood that Hawthorne chose to don, at times overtly, at other covertly, the disguise of humor, or, as the writer would have phrased it, the veil of humor. Surely the result is going to be explosive as the two titanic figures – Gloom and Humor – are pitted one against the other in the scramble for life.

'Surely some prodigious merrymaking is going on,' exclaimed he. 'I have laughed very little since I left home, Sir, and should be sorry to lose an opportunity. Shall we just step round the corner by that darkish house, and take our share of the fun?' (My Kinsman, Major Molineux, pp. 14-15<sup>5</sup>)

How strange that Hawthorne should precisely at this point refer to the ongoing events as being potentially construed as "some prodigious merrymaking" when viewed from a particular vantage point

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3 Which here is necessarily going to be perfunctory.

4 Henning Cohen, "A Comic Mode of the Romantic Imagination: Poe, Hawthorne, Melville," in *The Comic Imagination in American Literature*, Voice of America, Forum Series, p. 89.

<sup>5</sup>Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Nathaniel Hawthorne's Tales : Authoritative Texts, Backgrounds, Criticism*, Selected and Edited by James McIntosh, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1987. The references to the tales will be to this edition and inserted in the body of the essay.

("round the corner", which, in itself, deserves analysis and we will try to come back to this do-in-the-sly aspect). We know, after a first reading, that what is going to unfold before Robin's very own "shrewd" eyes cannot really be qualified as a stimulating and exhilarating entertainment, at least not the same degree as Robin is expecting it. Nor should his preceding trials – humiliation, verbally violent rebuffs, quasi-starvation – can be termed "entertaining" or merry. Yet, the carnivalesque procession to come points to the comic potentialities of the whole situation. Some would rather see in this "merrymaking" the "cathartic" power that Aristotle so much praised about tragedy. Yet, this somewhat stereotyped and limited (and limiting) interpretation does not do justice to Hawthorne's prompt tendency to treat somber events in a lightly humorous way<sup>6</sup>. How else are we supposed to read the fact that Robin would fain have "sm[itten] [the hemming old man] on the nose" if he wasn't that old? ('My Kinsman', p. 5) Unless we must see in this un-actualized violence be a most physical and literal way of being cathartically released...Which, nonetheless, would amount to recognizing Hawthorne's humoristic mood.

This seemingly clear-cut Manichaeism, more than a merely Aristotelian legacy, had been passed on to Hawthorne through generations of stern and austere Puritan ancestors who were as thunderstruck at the idea of trifling with life. They would not have felt even the slightest inclination to make merriment out of their doomed existence: "But Robin being of the household of a New England clergyman, was a good youth, as well as a shrewd one; so he resisted temptation, and fled away." ('My Kinsman', p. 10) Here, behaving as a good principled New England Puritan, Robin does not approve the impropriety of the environment, which is clearly depicted as the den of the devil. The "drowsy laughter" and "pleasant titter" surely are signs of evil temptation, destined to throw Robin into the pit of desperation and sin. Bunyan himself would have given his blessing to Robin for having resisted the alluring seductress (formerly physically impersonated by the "pretty mistress," the everlasting temptress). Surely, this trial cannot be deemed funny or humorous. There is nothing funny about being tempted by the devil or being on the brink of falling into endless despair and loss. Yet, Hawthorne seems to be turning this tragically tense event into a moment of merrymaking. This transformation, as we shall see later on, has its roots on Hawthorne's dexterous manipulation of the linguistic and stylistic materials.

Hawthorne, in a rebellious fit against his strait-laced lineage, decided to sever the entangling ties and take the forbidden road to merryland. In his case, as Cohen and others have pointed out, merriment presages gloom. As we see it, we would say that it is merriment *in* gloom. And this is nowhere more striking than in his dealings with the Devil. In this respect, the situations contrived by Hawthorne are

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<sup>6</sup>In this respect, his juvenile journal *The Spectator* is a pungent piece of evidence of his characteristic sense of humor sometimes targeted at and triggered by such dreadful events as deaths. His dark humor seems so natural to him that it would be over-interpret, if not totally misinterpret it to construe it as an Aristotelian legacy.

not enjoying, for the characters who fall victims to this everlasting trickster, yet the author seems to feel a vicious pleasure in throwing his creatures to the big bad wolf.

'[...]. The man is old, or verily – I might be tempted to turn back and smite him on the nose. Ah, Robin, Robin! even the barber's boys laugh at you, for choosing such a guide! You will be wiser in time, friend Robin.' ('My Kinsman,' p. 5)

The narrator cannot be but exasperated and completely dumbfounded by the surprisingly unwise behavior of this youth. Here, we are aware that it is Robin himself who is actually uttering these words. Yet, this self-deprecation can certainly be identified with the deprecation by the narrator, and ultimately by Hawthorne himself. Here again, we see the brilliant linguistic and stylistic act by which the author can turn seemingly maturing thinking into another level of humor, this time donning the scathing disguise of irony, under which Hawthorne can hide to laugh at the predicament of his puppet Robin. But we won't say more about this aspect for the moment. We just want to emphasize the annoyed tone of Robin which pinpoints the incongruity of the situation.

As Robin drew night, he saw that the passenger was a man in years, with a full periwig of grey hair [...]; and at regular intervals he uttered two successive hems, of a peculiarly solemn and sepulchral intonation. [After Robin inquired after the lodging of his kinsman] [t]he citizen [...] turned a long countenance upon Robin, and answered him in a tone of excessive anger and annoyance. His two sepulchral hems, however, broke into the very centre of his rebuke, with most singular effect, like a thought of the cold grave obtruding among wrathful passions. ('My Kinsman,' p. 4-5.)

More than just dramatic equipment or a characterization device, laughter in this scene (which epitomizes and sets the tone for other laughing scenes in the tale) seems to emanate not so much from the devil itself as from Hawthorne himself. The impish reaction functions as an invisible thread that links the author to his fictional world on which he bestows a distant and humorous and amused glance.

The devilish laughter is a recurring feature in most of Hawthorne's fiction and the characters endowed with such a quality (or "defect" would be more appropriate) are said to possess a devilish nature or worse, to be possessed by the devil. The louder they laugh, the more explosive it is, the more evil the heart from which it burst forth. To Hawthorne, this laughter seems to be more complicated than it sounds. It would be absurd to assign only one-sided and definitive interpretation to this godly gift (Here, we cannot but think of the psychological and psychoanalytical interpretations of Hawthorne's fiction that Crews put forward in his well-known book entitled *The Sins of the Fathers* and that would assign to this physical manifestation a more conscience-related hidden meaning). More than hinting at some dubious and uncanny happenings to come, the laughter hints at an incongruous network of relationships established between author, characters and readers in their dealings with Old Nick. Indeed, on the one hand, Young Goodman Brown meets with a stranger whose description makes his dabbling

with the dark world very clear, and yet he fails to realize it. This dramatic irony, even rather tragic irony, is the cause of all Young Goodman Brown's mishaps. When the devil<sup>7</sup> laughs, it thus intimates this imminent threat to Brown's soul, and at the same time, and perhaps more importantly, alludes to and echoes, not to say ridicules, Brown's naive judgement, or the lack of it. It all comes to designing laughter as a subtle hoax. Hawthorne may have intended us readers to laugh at Brown, but also to connive if not with the devil *per se* at least at Brown's expense. The same can be said of the above quoted passage where Robin meets with the old passenger whose sepulchral laugh should have been a more than sufficient signal of alert.

Ultimately, Hawthorne appeals to the readers' connivance: we side with him in this humiliating (for Brown) situation. It partially legitimizes the devil's deportment as, like him, we are tempted to feel ourselves superior to him. His ignorance is not ours, and we are thus reassured. Yet, can we not detect in this laughter another tone of mockery, a veiled layer of import which only the truly conniving reader can reach out, and which is nevertheless aimed against himself as well? For, if we can laugh at Brown for his seemingly innocent and thoughtless behaviour, it is *because* we see *him* being made a fool of by the devil. It would only take a snapping of Hawthorne's fingers to reverse the situation. This time, Brown may well be the one to laugh. In this respect, Goodman Brown may well be Robin's real kinsman as they share the same characteristic naïve innocence, an innocence which would better deserve the name of lack of shrewdness, the very quality Robin thinks he is blessed with. We'll come back to this other typically (verbal) ironic device. For now, our point is about the ironic reversal of situations by which the characters are not aware of their being ridiculed by the overall happenings. Let's return to this episode towards the end of 'My Kinsman' where Robin is going to attend 'some prodigious merrymaking', the object of which he thinks is some exterior and unknown one. The biting irony Hawthorne contrives here is precisely the reversal which turns the attendant of the show the subject of it, or rather the butt of it. Indeed, Robin does not realize (cannot in fact, maybe because of an overwhelming 'shrewdness!') that the very own object of his quest, which he took so seriously and endeavoured to hard to carry out in a shrewd and stern manner, is going to be the very object of this carnivalesque procession. He is near to be crowned the fool of fools.

As it stands, Young Goodman Brown and Robin play the bad role, that of the scapegoat, by whom understanding and realization may become achievable and invade our minds and hearts. Hawthorne thus abides by the seventeenth-century English critic Dennis's remark that "the design of Comedy is to amend the follies of Mankind by exposing them<sup>8</sup>" and succeeds in indulging in a satisfying humorous feast. Rather than urging the outside reader to be sympathetic with those victims, instead, Hawthorne makes the latter look so pathetic that it cancels altogether whatever pathos may be

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<sup>7</sup>Here, we take for granted the symbolic interpretation according to which this stranger impersonates the Devil. When we refer to the devil, we thus allude both to this character and the one he is supposed to represent.

<sup>8</sup>Cited in *The Comic Imagination*, "Introduction: The Great American Joke", *op.cit.*, p. 4

felt in such awful entrapping. Too much pathos kills pathos... Aristotelian pathos becomes marred, only the mocking shadow of itself.

The classification established by R. Dusenbery in his essay already cited has its worth, but only a limited one. Let's summarize in a few words the four categories of characters he discriminates according to the kind of laughter they utter. Basically, children symbolize their innocence and spontaneity; the laughter of unmannered people (tavern and city people) betrays their corruption; materialistic men of the world have a long and loud laugh; the characters guilty of intellectual pride mock the world and themselves through their laughter; the last class includes satanic persons whose laughter provokes chaos on the earth<sup>9</sup>. Though we adhere to the symbolic importance of such interpretations<sup>10</sup>, we would like to qualify his findings. Indeed, where should we put Hawthorne's laughter? And the reader's? Some reviewers will rightly argue that they fall out of these categories because they don't belong to the diegetic fictional world. Yet, we may as rightly create two extra categories: one which would include those who laugh at sorrow (and more particularly at others') and would legitimately be assigned to the gentle yet unsympathetic reader; the other class would be a one-man class, Hawthorne's privileged preserve. His arises above all other laughters. His is at one and the same time the first and ultimate to resonate.

As [Robin] turned to leave the room, he encountered a sneering glance from the bold-featured personage whom he had before noticed; and no sooner was he beyond the door, than he heard a general laugh, in which the *innkeeper's* voice might be distinguished, *like the dropping of small stones into a kettle*. ('My Kinsman,' p. 7; our italics)

Can we not identify this innkeeper with our own author? Hawthorne is the ultimate keeper of the mansion that is his fictional world, and he cannot help but laugh at the silly creatures that populate it. The stones that drop into the kettle epitomize, more concretely than symbolically, his harsh tone of disapproval.

What seems to be Hawthorne's sarcastic temper may well constitute his best weapon to cope with a stern, austere, mirthless Puritan philosophy of life which he strove to curb as best he could. Far from denying the existence of evil in the world, he preferred to laugh the matter off. Robert Allen Durr

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<sup>9</sup>R. Dusenbery, p. 288

<sup>10</sup>Notwithstanding the seeming contradiction between children's innocent and gay laughter on the one hand, and Dusenbery's construing laughter as "gradation of evil" on the other, unless he sees innocence as the zero degree of the scale.

in his essay entitled “Hawthorne's Ironic Mode,» published in the 1957 December issue of *The New England Quarterly*, wrote that

[Hawthorne] was at odds with [the intellectual temper of his age] because the transcendental philosopher, like the reformer, disregarded one factor which to Hawthorne was basic: the real and unavoidable existence of evil and, concomitantly, the original corruption of the human heart. (p. 492)

This unfailing recognition is at the root of his unfailing humor and irony. The “Good Creature”, the vicious predilection in this New England world envious of his strict morality, is yet another caustic judgement against Hawthorne's hypocritical attitude: they condemned drinking as a hundred-year-old traditional vice, and yet indulged in its consumption. One of the root of evil is here made the object of a grotesque in an attempt to laugh at the contradictions of this Puritan tradition.

## II.

Behind a laughter there is a cry. This almost proverbial statement superficially evidences what Louis D. Rubin, Jr. reminds us of in his introductory essay of *The Comic Imagination*, “The Great American Joke”:

The highest accolade we give to a humorist is when we say that even so he is a 'serious' writer – which is to say that although he makes us laugh, his ultimate objective is to say something more about the human condition than merely that it is amusing. (p. 4)

This both alludes to the moral duty of the seriously humorous writer, the didactic function behind such an incongruous move, and to the fact that seriousness is at the bottom of everything. Along with this axiomatic principle, there is another one which is almost systematically applied to humorous writings: that of incongruity. Grossly stated, this means that a writers resorts to humorous pith when he feels a discomfiting gap between what is and what should be. Thus, humor would be a means to achieve a counterpoised depiction of two worlds completely afar from one another but which should in fact fuse together: the ideal and the real. Humor, in this perspective, appears to be endowed with a Janus-like quality, looking at reality yet, at the same time, looking jealously towards ideality. The critical quality of the former conceals and reveals the critical yet saddened sensitivity of the latter.

Incongruity can be, in the hands of ill-intentioned writers, or merely dexterous ones, better used as a way to mislead the readers. Resorting to humor can thus be conceived as a deceptive strategy. Seen in this unflattering light, it is akin to lie and it furthers the already blurry relationship it has with truth and reality. Why a lie? We can envisage another interpretation, more positive. Indeed, it is no longer a deception if we accept the fact that what the humorous writer depicts as a real world is in effect a mocked real world, where “mocked” means “ridiculed”, but also points to its plasterboard,



stage-like quality. The characters wandering in their sorrowful universe are deluded, willy-nilly deceive others in their blinded state.

'No, no, neighbor!' cried Robin, flourishing his cudgel, and then thrusting its larger end close to the man's muffled face. 'No, no, *I'm not the fool you take me for*, nor do you pass, till I have an answer to my question. Whereabouts is the dwelling of my kinsman, Major Molineux?' ("My Kinsman," p. 10 ; our italics.)

Again, Hawthorne cannot help but grinning at the foolishness of his character. We could almost see him sighing with exasperation as he writes his story! Indeed, Robin is so absolutely persuaded that he is in the right and justified in his search, won't be made a fool of by other ignorant and inferior people. He believes in his high status and is convinced that he deserves respect and obedience (see the assertive cry 'No, no!' twice repeated) from others. In his very wish to be taken seriously in his inquiry for his relative, the townspeople cannot refrain from being submerged by a feeling of despise at the futility of such a quest. The bitter irony and truth are hard to swallow, so to speak, and Robin, despite all he can say or do (or threat to do) to defend himself and his earnestness, is exactly the thing he does not wish to be taken for: a fool. He is so blinded to his own self-sufficiency and self-conscious pride that his behavior becomes totally disproportionate to the situation (threatening an old man is not quite a proof of courage or shrewdness). The crucial point made by Hawthorne here is that the reader should not follow in Robin's footsteps and try to keep his mind clear, distinguish reality from fiction, and not be ridiculed in turn. They need reconsider and relativize their position in the universe. In this delusive game, the readers fall short of becoming the real manipulated victim if it wasn't for all the comic stones thrown by Hawthorne on our path to truth.

Speaking of wilful deception may be a way to akin Hawthorne to God. Characters (and readers) are played upon by the whims of an author who vicariously enjoys their mishaps. He plays the ultimate playwright, who directs his pawns in a stagey world of which he alone possesses the key to mystery. He sends signs for us to interpret. In the last sentence of "My Kinsman," we can spot one of these clues to the unfolding of the mystery, here the mystery being the grasping of Hawthorne's humor. '[...]. Or, if you prefer to remain with us, perhaps, *as you are a shrewd youth*, you may rise in the world, without the help of your kinsman, Major Molineux.' ("My Kinsman," p. 17; our italics). It being uttered by the gentleman, the sentence, and the phrase "a shrewd youth" in particular, become endowed with a forceful quality, and a totally meaning import. Yet, the attentive reader will not fail to notice that the recurring phrase about Robin's pretended shrewdness is here the only occurrence which is not uttered by Robin himself to himself but by someone exterior to him. Does this final reversal induce a reversal of meaning, and ultimately of our reading, turning a negative interpretation – Robin is in fact devoid of this quality – into a positive one – which privileges a more literal reading and holds Robin's shrewdness

as the (fictional) truth? We do not think so. On the contrary, we clearly assume that it furthers and definitively prorogates the negative reading. He is not shrewd; he has become so thanks to all the trials he has gone through.

This realization of adulterated truth, or more accurately truthful lies – the world you are observing is your world but should not be like this and yet – is achieved through shrewd caution at not taking things at face value. Just like Robin doubts the truthfulness of the pretty mistress's words, the reader should also doubt the veracity and sincerity of Hawthorne's words: “Now her voice was the sweetest Robin had heard that night, the airy counterpart of a stream of melted silver; *yet he could not help doubting whether that sweet voice spoke gospel truth.*” (*'My Kinsman,'* p. 9; our italics.) Sometimes, this coming to terms with the real intention of the author takes place at the end, when the harm is done, or the joke played. As Robert Allen Durr rightly notes in his already cited essay: “There are passages [...] where it is not until the very last sentence that we bring ourselves up short to realize the satiric intent which has operated tenuously throughout.” (p. 487)

When the unveiling of the seriously farcical joke that Hawthorne has been playing down on us happens at the very last minute, it can either be as sarcastically orchestrated as the whole preceding development or, conversely, be as quiet and controlled in tone as it has been restlessly ironic. Again, here, the episode of the “prodigious merrymaking” in *'My Kinsman'* helps us illustrate our thought. Indeed, the fact that Robin feels the necessity to laugh may well influence our reading of the forthcoming event as it throws an illuminating light on the past ones. Moreover, Hawthorne masterly ridicules his plasterboard hero. If the latter has not had the heart (nor the chance) to laugh yet since the beginning of his journey, the reader certainly had more than one opportunity to enjoy this “prodigious merrymaking” that is Robin's quest for his relative. The author himself is, as we said, enjoying his character's predicament and would like his audience to react as lightly (and critically) as himself. In other words, in this scene, Robin is put in the readers' shoes to realize the whole absurd import of his quest. He has to take passively part of an outer fun show to achieve this brutal realization, so brutal that he cannot help bursting into a madly loud peal of laughter.

Speaking of intention allows us to move on to a related question, that of the purpose of humor. What end does indulging in a comic mood serve? Reading Hawthorne's short fiction, one feels that a unilateral answer is hardly conceivable as he is decidedly bent upon multiple approaches. His humor can be labeled a didactic one, designed to, if not mend and right wrongs, point out human defects, thereby perpetuating the tradition of seventeenth-century writers like Swift. Hawthorne thus differs from his Concord friend Ralph Waldo Emerson as the latter did not really hold laughter close to his heart. Without completely distrusting this typically human trait in the attempt to improve mankind, the Transcendental philosopher believed and hoped that such a device would eventually no longer be needed to reach nobler heights: this is what John Bryant intimates in his *Melville And Repose: The*

*Rhetoric of Humor in American Renaissance*: “Emerson, too, would have [us] 'safe from laughter.' [the words are by the Boston critic E.P. Whipple whom he also quotes] Transcendence obviates it. 'Man thinking' does not need to laugh.” (p. 43)

We must not deduce from our analysis that Hawthorne was completely devoid of sensitivity, that he was as stone-hearted as Ethan Brand. On the contrary, it would not be absurd to say that his sensitivity triggered his humor. Because he felt deep, deep down the injustice, the inhumanity and the ever-again necessity of the atrocities his Puritan ancestors made themselves guilty and shameful of, he could summon his natural humor to deal with his feelings. Or was it to quiet them down? Did he want to make fun of himself and his over-sensitive attitude towards his burdening past, as if to condemn himself to an everlasting destiny of sorrow and guilt? Or, on the contrary, did he want to mock his ancestors' and contemporaries' lack of sympathy by trifling with his characters and destinies? Whatever the reading, one cannot deny the underlying sympathy – whether original (in Hawthorne's heart) or aimed at (in the readers') in his humor: “While the function of laughter is in 'exposing all actual defect', the satiric exposure broadens human sympathies<sup>11</sup>”.

Hawthorne knows how to make use of the tear-tinkling device that is exclamative intonation. Indeed, in 'Wakefield,' the narrator often indulges in some exasperated yet saddened remarks, like the following one, which is near the beginning of the tale, when Wakefield is lost amidst the crowd and is afraid of being spotted by his wife or some stranger: “Poor Wakefield! Little knowest thou thine own insignificance in this great world! No mortal eye but mine has traced thee.” ('Wakefield,' p. 77). Those exclamations are imbued with a double feeling: commiseration and despise. Maybe it is despise in commiseration, or the other way around. We feel that we must feel sorry for Wakefield but at the same time we cannot help but grinning at his “insignificance” which he fails to realize. With Hawthorne, we cannot be all merry or all gloomy; there has to be a juncture crossroads where both feelings can meet and then go on their own way.

### III.

This last part is going to be a proposed stream of thoughts. Studying the different episodes in Hawthorne's tales where we sense some humor at work, we cannot but help thinking of the relation this humor has with its linguistic manifestation. How is language used by Hawthorne to convey those different humorous effects? Does this not reflect Hawthorne's literary stance, which at once is an ideological and aesthetic position? More than an ideological stance or theoretically classical conviction indeed, humor in Hawthorne's works in general and his tales in particular seems to be an aesthetic stance, a stylistic tour-de-main which allows his performer to play with words, with language, and

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<sup>11</sup>*Melville and Repose*, op.cit., p. 42

ultimately to enjoy his literary art for its own sake. Hawthorne seems to, if not outrightly advocate (due to his deep-rooted Puritan conscience), at least propose an aesthetic approach to humor writing and a belief in humor for humor's sake. One has to read between the lines to realize the far-reaching implications of such a stand. Indeed, if one satisfies oneself to a superficial and perfunctory reading, one has a remote chance of grabbing Hawthorne's aesthetic and pithy humor. One Ariane's thread is materialized in the semantic network that the author elaborates throughout his tale. In 'My Kinsman,' for example, the constant repetition of the adjective "shrewd," and other lexies related to it ('cunningly', 'shrewdness') creates an ironic isotopy which partakes in this verbal humor.

As Hawthorne takes the risk to explore the obscure and pernicious depths of the human mind, heart and soul, he does so by using a somewhat inappropriate language, or turn of language. We do not intend to claim that Hawthorne is nowhere serious or constantly adopts a tongue-in-the-cheek tone vis-à-vis the tragic issues he tackles. We are just putting forward an aspect of his style and aesthetics which may be overlooked because apparently in complete contradiction with the latter feature of his works.

One element worthy of attention and study is Hawthorne's tendency to (voluntarily) merge together various modes of humorous writing categories. At times, one is quite at a loss as to what position adopt before a specific situation. Indeed, irony, sarcasm and satire fuse together to confuse the readers, unable to judge, dazzled as they are by the hybridity of Hawthorne's style. The meaning of the peculiar laugh of the passenger Robin meets is one species of this hazy style: "I have – hem, hem – authority" ('My Kinsman,' p. 5). The bracketing seems to be pointing to another level of meaning, maybe a level without meaning, at least in the diegetic world. Should we not hear in this 'hem, hem' the chuckling author, perhaps crying with laughing over his sheet of paper? In this perspective, the only *raison d'être* of this laughter would be to emphasize the self-conscious fictionality of the whole thing. The author trifles with his material that is language: he shapes, molds and gives life to his words and thoughts in such a way that witticism can lurk behind humorous remarks. Hawthorne winks at his audience, offering them a profane performance. This indeed, in the eyes of some Puritan principled men, may be a bad taste joke, but for Hawthorne, at least partially, it may be his way of glancing back at History and into his story.

One of the functions of humor we alluded to earlier is a didactic one, or at least seemingly didactic. Indeed we argued that humor was a powerful weapon in the war against vices. Seventeenth-century English writers thought so and ardently believed in the deep power that surface humor and irony could unleash. Indeed, humor, irony and satire achieve the same goal, though using different means (as far as linguistic and rhetorical means are concerned). These deliberately ambiguous postures are not without danger, a danger precisely provoked by (and, paradoxically, averted) the technical devices resorted to. Rhetorical questions, puns, caricatures (through hyperboles), irony – dramatic, tragic, comic, situational, verbal, metafictional – present the potential liability to be misinterpreted by

the audience to which they are addressed. Misunderstandings are around the corner and can annihilate the possibility of reaching the author's actual and original aim.

If the reader choose, let him do his own meditation; or if he prefer to ramble with me through the twenty years of Wakefield's vagary, I bid him welcome; trusting that there will be a pervading spirit and a moral, even should we fail to find them, done up neatly, and condensed into the final sentence. Thought has always its efficacy, and every striking incident its moral. ('Wakefield,' p. 76)

Here, the moral intent of the tale is clearly stated. Hawthorne does not shy away from an outright didacticism. This characteristically moralizing idiosyncrasy should not, however, mislead us and induce us to overlook the sarcastic and ironical tones that lie underneath the surface and that the author adopts more often than not. Both modes – ironic and humorous<sup>12</sup> – seem, under Hawthorne's pen, to intermingle, to interrelate: because he is ironical, he can venture to preach a moral lesson, and as he sermonizes, he twists his moral, or at the very least, the telling of the moral. Does it adulterate the latter or, on the contrary, give more strength and relevance to it? Here again, a bit of both.

This perniciously ambiguous and ambivalent effect has been noted: it is inextricably linked to the exercise, the nature of which requires the author to be aware of and go along with the rules of the game. Hawthorne was no exception. He even seemed to be enjoying it. One other relevant stylistic item is the rather typical tendency to modalize his discourse. Indeed, the adverb “almost” is one which recurs in Hawthorne's short (and even long) fiction. It partakes of his whole rhetorics of appearance and reality. It also blurs the borderline between the narrator's involvement in the telling of the story, thereby marring, or at least questioning his reliability, and the character's diegetic focalization in the unfolding of the story. This blurring can be construed as yet another way of conveying ironical or humorous signals to the readers at the character's own expense.

He holds out his hand; she gives her own, and meets his parting kiss, in the matter-of-course way of a ten years' matrimony; and forth goes the middle-aged Mr. Wakefield, *almost resolved* to perplex his good lady by a whole week's absence. ('Wakefield,' p. 77; our italics.)

What is “almost resolved” supposed to mean? Was Wakefield totally at the origin of this mock-epic adventure (see the use of the word “equipment and the overall mock-melodramatic emotions underlying the farewell scene)? Was there a chance of him giving up the whole journey altogether? Was he forced to carry it out? Who made him? If Wakefield has a part of responsibility in this fatefully

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<sup>12</sup>Here again we use the term “humorous” as a hyperonym.

foolish choice, who was in charge of the other part? All these questions haunt the text just as Wakefield haunts the vicinity of his own house for twenty years. The uneasiness and incongruous awkwardness of the situation are even more dramatized by the uncanny smile that Wakefield bestowed on his wife on his departure. We are told that after that fateful day, the smile will “flicke[r] across all her [Mrs Wakefield] reminiscences of Wakefield's visage.” (p. 77) This silent and inner laughter is fraught with contradictory (to us) feelings: hap and distress, selfishness and sympathy (for his wife), pride and shameful foolishness. This same foolishness seems to be the prevailing feature and the “almost” rhetorics of the tale helps alluding in an ironical way to the other, wiser alternative that Wakefield could have opted for: “*Almost repenting of his frolic*, or whatever it may be termed, Wakefield lies down betimes, and starting from his first nap, spreads forth his arms into the wide and solitary waste of the unaccustomed bed.” ('Wakefield,' p. 78; our italics)

His Puritan background somewhat went in the way, put a restraint on both his thoughts and writing. Humor was a way out for him, a veiled safety exit through which he could evacuate all the pent-up frustrations and thus keeping a mental balance which could, in return, feed his imagination. With Hawthorne there seems to be an interdependent mechanism at the origin of his writing. He uses his Puritan religious and ethical legacy to motivate his imagination which invokes and stimulates his humor, thereby enabling him to remain faithful to his deep-hearted principles, which are partially in contradiction with that legacy. Thus, to him, the latent eventuality of being misinterpreted might not have affected him: the surface story would still be in harmony and in keeping with the Puritan thoughts and morals that it is supposed to follow. It would take only distorted or unsafe minds to read anything else but the letter of the story. In Hawthorne's case, subversion is more pungent when undertaken in a surreptitious manner.

Louis B. Wright, in his essay entitled “Human Comedy in Early America,» states that “writers of diaries and journals often provide insights into the life of the times that are entertaining and humorous, even though the authors themselves did not intend to be comic<sup>13</sup>.” This can be partially accounted for by the changing values – whether they be moral, religious or social – that were obtaining at the time of the writing. We, readers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, do not read, perceive, understand or even accept the same sets of values as nineteenth-century readers. In Hawthorne's case, though, it seems rather the other way around. Sometimes, he may have intended (we prefer to remain cautious) to be comic but was nevertheless taken seriously, at least in his own time and place. Accepting this potentially subversive aspect of Hawthorne's writing is one step toward a rediscovery of his heart and mind where, despite the considerably dark space allotted to gloom and sorrow, there was some room left for lightness and, if not happiness, at least comedy. Man, Hawthorne understood that, is a two-fold creature, made up of two contending yet coexisting entities, gloomy sorrow and wan joy. Hawthorne paralleled the earthy and

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<sup>13</sup>In *The Comic Imagination*, p. 23.

hybrid grossness (to use Hennig Cohen's phrase<sup>14</sup>) of human nature with the earthy and heterogeneous grossness of the nature of comic language. Hawthorne thus alternates between light humor and grave seriousness, as he goes back and forth from a grave humor to a light seriousness. His characteristic tendency to set his decors on the border that separates the fictional and the historically real world, has a stylistic pendant in this register-based swinging. In the words of Melville in *Moby Dick*, "There is a wisdom that is woe; but there is woe that is madness."<sup>15</sup> Amidst the darkness of the world and the inner blackness of the human heart, man must not, at least should not, lose his soul. To counteract the horrifying maze of the latter, Hawthorne used language as a means of humorous amazement. Man should, if he wants to keep his mind whole and sane, divert from the orthodox austere road to take a more heterodox because less severe path.

One further element which may comfort us in our interpretation of Hawthorne's tales as being (masked) versions of comic performances, is the fact that some of his tales can actually be regarded as, this time, openly humoristic stories.

The fact, thus absolutely stated, is *not very uncommon, nor – without a proper distinction of circumstances – to be condemned either as naughty or nonsensical. Howbeit, this, though far from the most aggravated, is perhaps the strangest instance, on record, of marital delinquency; and, moreover, as remarkable a freak as may be found in the whole list of human oddities.* ('Wakefield,' p. 75; our italics)

This preliminary comment is interesting in more ways than one. The prevailing negative tone (see our italicized phrases) presents the judgements that we may be inclined to utter yet should not, if we are to believe the narrator's word for it. In effect, the negative is double: the narrator, on the one hand, admits in a round manner the casual quality, the relative commonness of the related fact ("not very uncommon" means in fact "rather common") and, on the other hand, prevents our liably (and legitimately?) radically unfavorable opinions towards this "not very uncommon" story. Why should the narrator feel obliged to introduce the "story, told as truth" in such a preventive and defensive way if not to achieve the reverse aim? Indeed, only by hinting at and, at the same time, dismissing right from the beginning, the possibility of construing the story to unfold as "naughty or nonsensical" does he pave the way for such an interpretation and, in fact, validate the latter as the one and only interpretation to be found in the moral of the tale. Thus, the negative and modalizing linguistic devices are the very tool by which Hawthorne contrives this reversal of interpretation, and, thereby, his humorous fit.

We thus agree with Hennig Cohen when he slyly propounds that "we have here [with the tale entitled "Mrs Bullfrog"] a comic version of "The Birthmark." He further affirms that "Although comic, Hawthorne is sermonizing as usual" and attracts our attention to the fact (which may contradict our

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<sup>14</sup>In *The Comic Imagination*, p. 90.

<sup>15</sup>Cited by Hennig Cohen's essay in *The Comic Imagination*, p. 95.

own interpretation) that “the story made [Hawthorne] uneasy and he confided in his notebook, “as to Mrs Bullfrog, I give up her to the severest reprehension.”<sup>16</sup> We do not, however, support this latter position (the sermonizing tone). For, this after-the-event sentiment does not erase the reality and sincerity felt at the time of the writing. Thus, the remorse Hawthorne feels is a poor eraser of the writing and artistic act, and may well be another cynically humorous gibe at his own cynical humor. This inclination to rewrite himself seems to constitute the characteristic key to fathoming the deepest and innermost recesses of Hawthorne's mind. He “manipulates language as itself the material of comedy<sup>17</sup>”

Before we conclude, we would like to take two examples of the meta-linguistic use of humor. The first one is found after the passage where the narrator recounts the chanced meeting between Wakefield and his wife after twenty years: “*Perhaps* he was so. [The narrator, here, takes on Wakefield's own self-pitying exclamation: 'Wakefield! Wakefield! You are mad!']” (“Wakefield,” p. 80; our italics) The second example is found just before the narrator's concluding moral: “As [Wakefield] passes in [here, he finally decides to cross the threshold of his hosedoor], we have a parting glimpse of his visage, and recognise the crafty smile, which was the precursor of the *little joke*.” (p. 81; our italics) Here again, the epistemic modality reinforces the narratological, diegetic as well as moral distance which parallels in the linguistic and metafictional world the spatial distance that Wakefield maintained during twenty years in the fictional world. The lexical item “joke” explicitly and outrightly condemns Wakefield's doings – his part of responsibility in not wanting to go back out of sheer self-centered pride – and condones this turn of event. Pride is despicable, all the more so when the its detrimental consequences affect other people. This moral message is conveyed through a metalinguistic device, as the word refers to the very thing that Hawthorne has been doing all along: taking his readers for a joking ride, as Wakefield took his wife for a ride.

Bitter truths need be sweetened down for mankind to be able if not to accept them at least to do with them and go along their lives as if there was nothing the matter. Serious humor, then, seems perfectly applicable to Hawthorne, especially regarding his predilection for contradictions and dualisms. Chiaroscuro effects and polarities become in this perspective manifestations of as well as translations from the real-to-ideal wished-for passage, thus denoting and connoting a certain resignation from the author's part. Indeed, this laughing mood protects him from the harsh reality: it is the mask and veil

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<sup>16</sup>In *The Comic Imagination*, p. 99-100.

<sup>17</sup>Arlin Turner, “Comedy and Reality in Local Color Fiction, 1865-1900” in *The Comic Imagination*, p. 173.. Turner, though, applies this to Mark Twain, and not Hawthorne.



behind which Hawthorne can observe passively the world, criticize it yet cannot alter it beyond his written caricature of it.

Is what George Core says of Henry James' *The Ambassadors* applicable to Hawthorne, namely that "The irony [of his tales] is dissolved by its comedy, even as the moral dimension is subordinated to the comic vision<sup>18</sup>". The interrelatedness and interconnectedness between irony, comedy and morality all betoken of the close relationship they have with language. Hawthorne's humor would in this respect be better qualified as a meta-humor since layers of interpretation are superimposed to form a miscellaneous fabric. He uses language to word his humor which, in turn, serves to hint at this linguistic device and designs. The interplay of language and humor may well be Hawthorne's own Puritan background.

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