

A Study of Orientalism in Nathaniel Hawthorne's Literary Works

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ABSTRACT

Nathaniel Hawthorne and the Romance of the Orient is a model of scholarship in every way -perceptive, incisive, illuminating, and full of wisdom and insight and will undoubtedly prove to be the definite study of Hawthorne's "Orienda." It fulfills a greatly felt need and sets Hawthorne in a broader context than ever before. It corrects an imbalance, induces a major reevaluation of Hawthorne, alters our image of him as man and writer, and thus enhances our understanding and appreciation of him in significant ways. This Study attempts to explore Orientalism in Hawthorne's literary works.

KEYWORDS: Nathaniel Hawthorne, Orientalism, Literature, Imagination, Religion.

INTRODUCTION

The central force in Hawthorne's intellectual development was New England Puritanism. It fascinated even when it sometimes repelled him. It exercised a pull on his imagination which a lifetime of varied experience did not loosen. When Hawthorne did stray beyond New England, it was to western and southern Europe where he had lived for a time in the 1850s. Not for him the wide-ranging, cosmic imagination of Emerson, Thoreau, or Whitman which was almost as much at home in the East as in the West. This is what Hawthorne scholars have, more or less consistently, believed. Mistakenly, says Luedtke, who argues that contrary to what is commonly held, Hawthorne's "world, in fact and imagination, was larger, richer, and more chromatic than we have known" (xxiv), and that the richness and complexity of this world owe not a little to his explorations of the East which "played a significant role both in Hawthorne's choice of life and in the development of his tales and romances," helping "shape the form, characters, and themes of his writing" (p.xvi).

Orientalism and Hawthorne

Ever since Arthur Christy's pioneering study, scholars have shown great -and often competent -interest in the Oriental connections of the major writers --of the American Renaissance, producing in the process a kind of minor critical Renaissance themselves. Luedtke, who argues for the centrality of Orientalism as a factor in Hawthorne's life and art, is in the same tradition. The main sources through which Hawthorne acquired his knowledge of the East, Luedtke points out, were his father's logbooks; the abundant literature of travel and discovery Hawthorne is known to have read; Arabian, Persian, and Indian literary texts; the Oriental tales of eighteenth-century England and France (such as Voltaire's *Zadig* and Johnson's *Rasselas*) and the verse narratives of Byron, Southey, and Moore.

Most Oriental studies undertaken by scholars of the American Renaissance have focused on the importance of Indian scriptures and mythologies to the transcendental poets and essayists. Less attention has been paid to the impact of the Near and Middle East, and their traditions of storytelling, on writers of the American prose romance (p. 144). Luedtke bravely sets out to correct the imbalance and in the process finds that unlike the Transcendentalists -who were drawn Eastward by scriptural and poetic material from India and Persia (Luedtke might have added China) Hawthorne was attracted by the adventure, storytelling, and exoticism that for centuries had made the 'gorgeous East' the most common stereotype of Asia, and an antithesis to the West (p.68).

One may agree with Luedtke's general position but demur with his emphasis and wonder whether at times he has not underestimated components other than the Near and Middle East in Hawthorne's Orientalism. For example, Iac Tharpe (1972) has made a very persuasive case that in "Rappaccini's Daughter" and "Roger Malvin's Burial" Hawthorne used motives and situations from The Ramayana and Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*. Parallels as striking as many Luedtke himself argues for also exist between *Shakuntala* and *The Scarlet Letter*, both of which hinge upon a

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father's failure to acknowledge his child, and upon the mother's understanding and forgiveness of the failure. Both Shakuntala and Hester are women of great beauty, and the men are tempted irresistibly, so to say. Hester dominates the novel as Shakuntala dominates the play. The dominant motif, with symbolic overtones, in Shakuntala is a signet ring; in Hawthorne's novel, the scarlet letter. Shakuntala's son Bharat plays with and tames wild animals and is called "sarvadamana" ("All-Tamer"). Similarly, a wolf is said to leave Pearl unharmed. It is well known that Sir William Jones' translation of Shakuntala (1789) was republished in *The Emerald*, a Boston periodical, and as early as 1791 Thomas Jefferson acquired a copy of the 1790 reprint of the book. Act I of Jones' translation was published in the *Monthly Anthology* and *Boston Review*, a magazine Emerson is known to have read during his Harvard years. Thoreau refers to Shakuntala in *Walden*. There is, of course, no conclusive evidence of Hawthorne having read Kalidasa's play, but there seems to be basis for Tharpe's view that "Hawthorne scholarship too much inclines to confine Hawthorne's reading to the list of books borrowed from the library."

The first two chapters in Luedtke's book, largely biographical and historical, recreate Hawthorne's heritage and examine his readings in material dealing with the East, using mainly Marion Kesselring's inventory of his borrowings from the Salem-Athenaeum, chiefly in 1826-1838, and Arlin Turner's identification of references in the six issues of the *American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge* that Hawthorne prepared in 1836. The third chapter deals with three "early tales" -all written before 1830 -Fanshawe, "The Wives of the Dead," and "The Gentle Boy." Luedtke argues that these tales "dramatize precepts of destiny, resignation, and hospitality that eighteenth-century moral philosophers and religious scholars associated particularly with the devoutness of Islam" (p.xxiii), and makes a persuasive case for Johnson's famous Oriental fable *Rasselas* as having been the dominant influence on Fanshawe, Voltaire's *Zadiq* on "The Wives of the Dead," and Muslim -specially Turkish -historical and religious chronicles on "The Gentle Boy."

The fourth chapter is a study of *The Story Teller*, the two-volume book of sketches and tales Hawthorne unsuccessfully tried to publish in 1834 and issued piecemeal thereafter in periodicals as annuals. The "Oriental element" which had remained muted and situational in the "early tales" figured prominently in the origin, structure, and themes of *The Story Teller* (p.105). Not only does the narrative frame of *The Story Teller* follow Oriental models but the "dominant theme of the tales told by the Story Teller is one of journeying and homecoming" (p.121). In "The Great Carbuncle", Luedtke finds a "generic similarity to 'the dreamer awakes' theme in *The Arabian Nights*" (p.124), while he suggests the possibility of Beckford's *Vathek* and Southey's *Thalaba* being among the sources for "Young Goodman Brown."

The fifth chapter evaluates the role of the East in Hawthorne's view of the Romance. "The architecture of Hawthorne's 'cloud castles' is Eastern in origin," Luedtke says (p.xxiv). Somewhat disappointingly, the chapter has little to do with Oriental influence in Hawthorne's formulation of his concept of Romance -which is what one would have expected the chapter to be about -but is concerned primarily with the Eastern origin of analogies of certain Hawthorne symbols, such as caverns, hieroglyphics, talismans, carbuncles, and adamant.

The last two chapters study some of Hawthorne's "remarkable" heroines -Beatrice Rapaccini, Hester, Zenobia, and Miriam in particular -in an Oriental context and yield some of Luedtke's most exciting interpretations. Each of Hawthorne's three dark heroines of the 1850s -Hester, Zenobia, and Miriam -"bears the name of an Eastern queen or prophetess and holds in her hands the lives and destiny of men" (p.217). Thus, the Eastern antithesis is particularly critical in his probings of the male-female relationship" (p.xxiv). Highly illuminating is Luedtke's study of Beatrice Rapaccini in the context of the "poison-damsel" -the *visakanya* -of the East, and his analysis of the Blithedale community as "a middle ground between the plain moralities of New England and the gorgeous possibilities of the East" (p.198).

Luedtke's study is rich in insight. Luedtke convincingly shows that the Puritan element in Hawthorne's ancestry has been overstressed and that insufficient attention has been paid to the equally important travel-adventure-exploration aspect of Hawthorne's heritage. He rightly points out that Hawthorne's "post facto account" in "The Custom-House" of his "Puritan forebears as being the primary influence" on him is "at least semi-fictional and constructed more from later readings in local history than from experience" (p.21). Luedtke not only provides a much-needed corrective to prevailing interpretations of Hawthorne's heritage but also, more importantly, relates his insight to Hawthorne's fiction by demonstrating that "Finding one's destiny, and one's Faith, at home after a world wearying search later would become a major theme in Hawthorne's fiction" (p.11), and that "the male protagonists of Hawthorne's tales and novels are predominantly travellers, pilgrims, wayfarers, and sightseers" (p.31).

Luedtke is brilliant in his analysis of Hester's "Eastern origins" (p.183) and shows how "the outlandishness [emphasis Luedtke's] of Hester and Pearl implies their non-Western character," and how Hawthorne "weaves a pattern of geographical-cultural images to represent Hester's alienation from the people of Boston" (p.183). What we experience as the genius of *The Scarlet Letter* is not the rich domestic life of seventeenth century New England

alone but the counterweight which that grave and orthodox culture provided to Hawthorne's 'Oriental' flights of imagination (p.220).

Luedtke is equally effective in his analysis of the relative failure of *The Marble Faun* which he perceptively attributes to the loss not only of native footing but also of tension between the foreign and the domestic as he moved the locus of his fiction even closer to the geographical and historical source of the romance in the East (p.220). Less convincing, however, are the parallels Luedtke suggests for Zenobia with the militant queen of the Palmyrene Empire (pp.208-209), and for Miriam with Cleopatra and with the Old Testament prophetess who was the sister of Moses and Aaron (p.218). Inevitably, there is much in Luedtke's study which is speculative and hypothetical. A major problem with locating sources and parallels is that any ideas and images are not traceable to a single unmistakable source but are rather encountered in a large variety of sources from different cultures, belonging at times to the common heritage of mankind. In such a situation, identifying the precise source for an author's use of an idea or image becomes highly problematic. For example, Luedtke attributes Hawthorne's use of caves and caverns as a symbol to *The Arabian Nights* and the Gothic Oriental tales. Yet the cave is a very common symbol in Western literature also, and one does not have to go beyond Plato and Spenser to find it. Similarly, to say that "it is likely that Coverdale's narrative role was suggested by a long caravan of real and legendary travellers" (p.199) is to ignore a number of nearer -and more plausible -sources.

At times, the search for Oriental analogues pushes Luedtke into misinterpretation and overstatement. Luedtke's reading of "The Village Uncle" as a "quiet tale of wooing and home" (p.125) is highly questionable and ignores the strong undercurrent of irony which, as numerous critics have pointed out, subverts the story's surface defence of domesticity. Similarly, Luedtke's conclusion, in his analysis of "The Wives of the Dead," that Hawthorne's "world view," as Sir Richard Burton's, "was Oriental in its profound sadness for the misery and sorrow of man" (p.93) seems to say the least overstated. Although Hawthorne had dwelt long and broodingly over the dark aspects of human existence, he also had a sunny side to his temperament and art. Even if one were to accept the view that there is such a thing as an "Oriental world view" which is characterized by "profound sadness for the misery and sorrow of man," it would be difficult to maintain that Hawthorne's world view was identical with or similar to it.

At times the parallels and sources seem too remote and inconsequential to have much interpretive value. For example, the parallels Luedtke suggests for "Young Goodman Brown" do not enlarge our understanding of the story in any significant way, casting not so much light as "darkness visible" on the subject. Sometimes the parallels are simply trivial. One wonders what use to make of a statement such as this:

The wretched cold Coverdale suffers from his travel and the feverish dreams that ensue might have been suggested by the severe head cold Hawthorne contracted on his first nine-mile walk from Boston to West Roxbury in April 1841 (pp.199-200).

Similarly, a hypothesis such as this leaves no one any the wiser:

If the current of Hawthorne's life had carried him to the Holy land, like his friends Herman Melville and George William Curtis, or around the Cape of Good Hope to the East Indies, in the path of his father, he would have left a set of fascinating Asian notebooks and perhaps produced works of such emphatic Orientalism as *Clarel* and *Nile Notes of a Howadji*. He did not (emphasis mine) (p.xxii).

Such remarks tend to lend a chattily casual quality to the proceedings. A certain amount of the speculative and the hypothetical is, of course, inescapable in a study of this kind, and it is to Luedtke's credit that in general he has kept these elements down to the minimum. Usually, Luedtke does not assert but demonstrates, abstains from making exaggerated claims, and offers ample and persuasive supportive evidence. This makes his study a model of sanity and moderation. The book is written in a lucid, highly readable style. Although Luedtke shows an occasional weakness for the Hawthornesque polysyllabic -"consanguineous" (p, 16), "proximitous" (for near, p.22), "consubstantiation" (p.167), and "parturitions" (p.168) -usually he steers well clear of the pompous and the pontifical on the one hand and the banal on the other.

Luedtke, however, leaves some unanswered questions. Granting Hawthorne's lifelong fascination for travel in fact and fiction, is there not a deep-rooted -and typically Hawthornesque ambiguity at the heart of his attitude towards travel? In one story after another -"Young Goodman Brown," "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," and "Ethan Brand," to name but a few -Hawthorne shows travel as producing an effect radically different from that intended by the traveller. In many stories the travellers and wayfarers seek solace and fulfilment in homecoming after a tragic and wearying journey. Is there not, then, an implication that travel is often futile and accomplishes little?

Then there is the all-important question of the quality of Hawthorne's Orientalism, the quality of his response to Oriental ideas and situations. Western writers who have used Oriental material have ranged in the quality of their response all the way from penetrating and insightful to merely superficial and external. Where does Hawthorne belong in this spectrum? Which aspects of the Orient fascinated him most, and why? How deeply did he comprehend the Orient, and how accurately did he depict it in his fiction? To what extent did he assimilate his readings in Oriental material? To what extent did he possess the sympathetic imagination indispensable to meaningfully approaching cultures remote from one's experience and radically unlike one's own? These are fundamental questions which must figure prominently in any study of a writer's Orientalism, since it is questions such as these which enable us to evaluate the quality of his response to the Orient.

To a large extent, Hawthorne derived his knowledge from European interpreters and intermediaries. His own exposure to primary Oriental sources and materials -especially of a literary and philosophical nature -was minimal. The parallelism Hawthorne's works which Luedtke points out are frequently not with Oriental models but with European writers of Oriental tales such as Voltaire, Johnson, and Beckford.

More importantly, Hawthorne seems to have been interested in the East mainly for its exotic value. It is the external and somewhat superficial aspects of Oriental life which held his attention, and which he excerpted for *The American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge* and used in his own fiction. He was preoccupied with the "Romance" of the Orient, as the title of Luedtke's book appropriately highlights -with the legendary, the fabulous, the exotic, and the arcane. One does not find in Hawthorne's Orientalism the inwardness of an Emerson, a Thoreau, a Whitman, or even a Melville, the splendid and profound act of imaginative understanding and reconstruction which enables a writer to enter into the spirit -the deeply held values, the cherished ideals -of another and remote culture, and appropriate its riches for one's own literary purposes. The Orient of Hawthorne's imagination is not only an "invention" and an intellectual construct, as Edward Said (whom Luedtke cites without comment) says in his brilliant but eccentric *Orientalism* that all such Orientals are; it is almost also entirely a region of "Romance" rather than a living and actual world of reality.

There is no reason, of course, why it should have been otherwise. Hawthorne made use of Oriental material as consistent with his literary aspirations and with the mind of fiction he was practising. Deep Orientalism was simply no part of his literary design.

A study of Hawthorne's Orientalism, however, cannot escape an analysis and valuation of the quality of Hawthorne's response to the Orient, and the quality, also -and not simply the extent of his use of oriental material in his fiction. It does seem that on this score Luedtke's study leaves the reader with just a shade of dissatisfaction, of expectation not fulfilled, since it does not critically examine and evaluate the quality of Hawthorne's Orientalism, which seems to me in many ways to be the crux of the matter.

These caveats are of course not intended to detract from the value of such a fine scholarly enterprise such as Luedtke's. Before Luedtke, the Oriental strain was believed to be rather peripheral in Hawthorne's life and art not at all a major strand as in Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. Luedtke has shown the fallacy of this view and has conclusively shown that Orientalism was a major element in Hawthorne's intellectual heritage and literary art. Thus Luedtke has done for Hawthorne what Arthur Christy has done for American Transcendentalism, what F.I. Carpenter has done for Emerson, what W. B. Stein and Charles R. Anderson have done for Thoreau, what Dorothee Finkelstein and H. B. Kulkarni have done for Melville, and what V. K. Chari and T. R. Rajasekharaiah have done for Whitman.

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