Nowhere Somewhere
Writing, Space and the Construction of Utopia

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Utopianism in

The Scarlet Letter

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“A man recently fired for his political views is hardly likely to think that political consensus exists in his own political culture – and, as he quite gratuitously chooses to identify himself in ‘The Custom-House’ however ironically as the Loco-foco Surveyor, that is, as a radical, an egalitarian Democrat, he is hardly trying to assimilate himself to a consensus position”: this comment, made by Charles Swann at the end of his text on The Scarlet Letter in Nathaniel Hawthorne: Tradition and Revolution, led me to take a deeper look at my interpretation of The Scarlet Letter (Swann, 1991: 94).

My reading of The Scarlet Letter has been strongly influenced by Sacvan Bercovitch’s views on 19th-century American Literature. Focusing mainly on The Scarlet Letter, this Americanist has developed a thesis centred around the contradictions of the so-called American Literary Renaissance. As is generally accepted, this thesis represents a significant contribution to the field of American studies, namely when he states that “[American] literature from its origins is so often obsessed with the idea of America, and (…) that idea, as it was made exclusive property of the United States, is so often transparently ideological” (Bercovitch et al., 1986: 419).

As many Americanists have pointed out, Bercovitch’s main areas of interest are the issues surrounding “American ideology” and the concept of “America”
as a symbol. And, in this way, we may say that his primary aim is to make us see how this ideology instrumentalized the American Literary Renaissance. In fact, the understanding of Bercovitchian theory takes for granted that “American ideology” and “America” are the fundamental notions of that theory, and their genesis is located in Puritan New England. As for American ideology, Bercovitch points out that “American” modifies “ideology”, since the adjective “American” supports the very symbolic and mythical meaning of “America”.

As is widely known, it was in seventeenth-century New England that the Puritans imposed a singular model of their colony, which they saw as a “Promised Land”, as a “City upon a Hill”; in other words, the place where they imagined Utopia could be achieved. In fact, as Lyman Sargent states in “Utopia Americana: Ambivalence Toward Utopianism in the United States”, published in 2002: “The Puritans were coming to America to build a society in which it would be possible to live the life they believed God meant them to live, a life that could not be lived in Europe. In this, they were clearly utopians” (Sargent, 2002: 77).

When the Puritans reached the East Coast, to the north of Virginia, in 1620, this first group began a great migration that would come to an end in 1840, as abruptly as it had started. This migration carried with it the thought that would embody the colony itself, which would later spread this same thought throughout the whole Union. The colony’s self-image was geared towards an ideal harmony between religious ministers and political leaders, based on the confluence between the sacred and the profane. This confluence was achieved through inflammatory speeches made by John Winthrop on board the Arbella. The above-mentioned self-image was that of a community of chosen people, a “community of saints” destined to build the place of happiness right there, in that New Land. It was a community made up of people with a mission, namely that of preparing the millennium, the end of time.

The Puritans were looking for a land that they believed had been given to them by God and which therefore they regarded as sacred. Thus, they invented another Promised Land – “America” – a “New Canaan”, invested with full God-given rights. In brief, the Puritans redefined and took for themselves the biblical promises of the Old Testament. Therefore, as Sacvan Bercovitch had already said in 1976 in “How the Puritans Won the American Revolution”, centuries after the biblical exodus led by Moses, another “Moses” led this other “exodus”, this time towards the west, beyond the rigors of the Atlantic Ocean, and was followed by another Chosen People, whose purpose in life was believed to be to represent God’s eternal glory on earth (Bercovitch, 1976).
Prolonging and taking for itself the messianic prophesies of the Old Testament, a New Jerusalem was invented: “America” seen as a replica of the old Canaan, but now led by the Puritans, a migration based on the conviction that the future would bring to this people and this land the divine Will. In the future, the destiny of the colony, built on the triumph of the Puritan order over amoral and chaotic nature, would lead to progress and to a brighter period which would announce the beginning of a new Golden Age. In this way, while the Puritan patriarchs imposed a strict social order and an intimate relationship with God, their utopic mentality invented their “America”, the symbol of God’s Will, the Chosen People’s reward.

The Puritan colonization planted the seeds of a social utopian project that also aimed at unlimited American progress. In fact, those responsible for the Puritan colony inculcated in people’s minds the utopian myth of “America’s” election (in theological terms), glory and progress by means of political and religious speeches. This vision was announced by Puritan thought itself, since economic progress meant the confirmation of divine choice. It is, thus, in this colonial past that Bercovitch sees the origins of a national ideological consensus. This would come to shape not only social conflicts, since the Puritan prophecy resulted (and still does result) in the turning of these conflicts into rites of consensus, but would also come to shape the literature of the American Renaissance itself.

I will now interrupt my thoughts on Bercovitch’s thesis to focus more clearly on Bercovitch’s appropriation of the concept of “ideology”. As he develops his own understanding of the American Literary Renaissance, he takes it to be an “ideological state apparatus”, evoking Althusserian concepts. However, just as he emphasizes the emergence of a “rhetoric of consensus”, dominant and “hegemonic”, he has also brought into his own theory Antonio Gramsci’s notions on how culture materializes ideology.

In 1971, Althusser stated that each “ideological state apparatus” contributes to the reproduction of (imaginary) relationships between individuals and their own living and production circumstances. In “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”, Althusser writes that each of these apparatuses contributes to that single result in its own way:

The political apparatus by subjecting individuals to the political State ideology, the ‘indirect’ (parliamentary) or ‘direct’ (plebiscitary or fascist) ‘democratic’ ideology. The communications apparatus by cramming every citizen with daily doses of nationalism, chauvinism, liberalism, moralism, etc., by means of the press, the radio and television. The same goes for the cultural apparatus (the role of sport in chauvinism is of the first importance), etc. The religious apparatus
by recalling in sermons and the other great ceremonies of Birth, Marriage and Death, that man is only ashes, unless he loves his neighbour to the extent of turning the other cheek to whoever strikes first. (Althusser, 1972: 146)

Althusser sees “ideology in general” as the very system of ideas and beliefs that works together with political and economic praxis. It is the means through which individuals are guided and governed by the “ideological state apparatuses”, thereby becoming “subjects”. Ideology is then perceived as a kind of mechanism that constructs and forms “recruited” subjects from among the individuals, by means of what Althusser calls “interpellation”. Ideology is, therefore, a basic element of social formation, and its function is to maintain unity to avoid the questioning of the society which is built upon it. Following a post-structuralist approach one could say that discourse is the very material nature of ideology, while the target of discourse is the subject, the individual in society.

James H. Kavanagh wrote in an article published in 1990: “[ideology] has the function of producing an obvious ‘reality’ that social subjects can assume and accept, precisely as if it had not been socially produced and did not need to be ‘known’ at all” (Kavanagh, 1990: 311). It is precisely that “reality” that Bercovitch sees as embedded in the American Literary Renaissance, and in particular in The Scarlet Letter.

But Bercovitch has also been emphasizing that the consensus which arose in New England in the seventeenth century resulted from a process of politicization of the Puritan ideology. This ideology was imposed in order to homogenize, to mould “America”, which in turn “reflects a particular set of interests and assumptions, the power structures and conceptual forms of modern middle class society in the United States, as these evolved through three centuries of contradictions and discontinuities” (Bercovitch, 1986: 419). But I defend the idea that since utopianism was behind American national ideological consensus it facilitated the control of social conflicts – as, for example, happened during the American Revolution –, as the absorption of the prophecy of divine choice has transformed (and still transforms) these conflicts into rites of assent. According to Bercovitch’s theory, rhetoric is one of these rites and it is present in nineteenth-century American literature and in The Scarlet Letter, in particular.

The critic defends the idea that to be American is to be like Hester Prynne, who moves from the Old to the New Continent and then again back to the former, only to then go back to New England, as if by necessity, for penitence. Thus, in my view, this geographic movement symbolizes a process of “Americanization” of socialization, which will make Hester think like a real Puritan.
In a book published in 1991 Sacvan Bercovitch states about *The Scarlet Letter*: “It is not enough to have the letter imposed; you have to do it yourself, and that involves the total self – past, present and the future; private and public; thought and passion and action, or if necessary inaction”. And the critic goes on in this way to develop his theory and states that “it is not too much to say that *The Scarlet Letter* began the institutionalization of an American literary tradition” given that “*The Scarlet Letter* has proved [their] most enduring classic because it is the liberal example par excellence of art as ideological mimesis” (Bercovitch, 1991: XIII).

Looking at *The Scarlet Letter* as “ideological mimesis” we understand the emergence of a “reality” which is integral to the novel. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne, and with her Nathaniel Hawthorne himself, prophesies the American Election, Progress and Glory. Thus, the novel does indeed prophesy what in my opinion is fundamental not only to the understanding of American history and culture but also to the understanding of some American literature itself. What I am referring to here, of course, is the vision of America as Utopia. It is in this way that *The Scarlet Letter* can and should, in fact, be understood as a rite of assent, confirming American Utopia – a theory which Charles Swann does not appear to adopt in his reading of *The Scarlet Letter*.

At the beginning of the novel, Hester Prynne is a rebel woman because she is totally against the deepest values and rules of that society and she believes in her capacity to assert herself as she is. Her rebellion comes through in her defiant attitude when standing on the scaffold, staring at the crowd who wished to witness her downfall. And it comes through as well in her exuberant embroidering of the letter “A”. But as the novel develops, the symbol “A” is recreated and acquires other meanings. When the novel begins, the “A” is the Puritan symbol of a sin, of a crime that Hester does not feel she has committed but of which the community accuses her. All the pride that Hester feels concerning her act of love is symbolized in this embroidering of the letter “A”; an exuberance to which Hawthorne alludes several times. In fact, on the one hand, the exquisite quality of her embroidery is a symbol of her rejection of the community’s view of her “crime”, and on the other, the rebellion that at first characterizes Hester finds expression in the concrete form of the embroidery. Hester, the rebel, believes it is possible for her to be herself. But the “A” she wears ends up turning her into someone adapted to society, and leads her on a journey from rebellion to resignation. What we witness in the novel is the recreation of a symbol which gives and permits different interpretations of a learning process, which transforms
Hester into an adapted and able woman (and the “A” is also the symbol of being able and adapted) destined to announce a very particular “reality”.

Hester’s initial rebelliousness contrasts with the image of the Puritan women, whose cruel opinions are imbued with a sadistic tinge enveloped in an inhumane and repressive morality. But Hester’s stance suggests from the start that she will overcome all the suffering that the “A” will cause her. Hester is a lonely woman who lives with her daughter outside a society that does not accept her and with which she does not identify. She is the object of society’s condemnation; however, she is accepted by nature, which seems to have a particular fondness for her. It is in the forest that she tears the “A” from her breast and lets her hair down loose, thus revealing her rejection of Puritan norms and regaining her image of a seductive woman. In the wilderness, in the world which is unknown and not yet conquered by the Puritans, Hester can affirm her dream of love and freedom, those rights that the world of the city denies her because her behaviour there will have to be conventional, controlled, artificial. And this is one of Hester’s discoveries. She discovers the need to abandon one world to look for another, since the universe is not limited to the city boundaries:

Is the world then so narrow? Exclaimed Hester Prynne, fixing her deep eyes in the minister’s, and instinctively exercising a magnetic power over a spirit so shattered and subdued, that it could hardly hold itself erect. ‘Doth the universe lie within the compass of yonder town, which only a little time ago was but a leaf-strewn desert, as lonely as this around us? Whither leads yonder forest-track? Backward to the settlement, thou sayest! Yes, but onward, too! Deeper it goes, and deeper, into the wilderness, less plainly to be seen at every step; until, some few miles hence, the yellow leaves will show no vestige of the white man’s tread. There thou art free! So brief a journey would bring thee from a world where thou mayest still be happy! (Hawthorne, 1938: 134)

Hester thinks that only a short journey is necessary for Dimmesdale to stop feeling the most miserable of creatures and to experience happiness in a new region beyond the frontier. However, this possibility is ephemeral because what is now unexplored, a promise still, tomorrow will be colonized and transformed into the law of men, a world inhabited by people who are forced to live within the limits set by institutional power. This is the learning process Hawthorne himself had to go through, and of which he writes in the introductory sketch “The Custom House“, which has been read by many critics simply as an autobiographical preface where he both portrays the decadent world of the Custom House in Salem, and describes some features that were the basis for the story of Hester Prynne.
But, in my opinion, this sketch – as Hawthorne calls it – goes beyond that. In the portico of the Custom House building one can clearly see the shape of an eagle:

Nevertheless vixenly as she looks, many people are seeking, at this moment, to shelter themselves under the wing of the federal eagle; imagining, I presume, that her bosom has all the softness and snugness of an eider-down pillow. But she has no great tenderness, even in her best of moods, and, sooner or later, – oftener soon than late, – is apt to fling off her nestlings with a scratch of her claw, a dab of her beak, or a rankling wound from her barbed arrows. (Hawthorne, 1988: 6)

After having gone through the experience of being fired, marginalized for political reasons and interests, Hawthorne has his own personal motives to point out the aggression that this eagle, a symbol of America, hides in her stance, although those looking for shelter under her wings believe that they will find there all the softness and smoothness of a feather cushion.

As we can see, there is a similarity between Hawthorne’s experience regarding this society and his novel’s heroine. Both are subject to punishment for having chosen options that go against the norm. Both pay the price of exercising their freedom of choice in a land that ends up denying them the right to that freedom. In my view, therefore, “The Custom House” forms the basis that allows us to understand that by telling Hester’s story Hawthorne is actually telling his own, thus problematizing a nation that believed (and still believes) it was made by God to be Heaven on Earth. But, although the narrator values the forest as Garden, as a place of individual freedom and happiness, in opposition to the city, he brings Hester from Europe back to Boston, ultimately denying that problematization.

At the end of the novel, the Hester that comes back to New England is no longer the rebel we first met. She is now a well-adapted, rehabilitated woman in the eyes of the community which rejected and condemned her; above all, she is now a vehicle of order. She believes in institutional order, and this is clear in the final pages of the novel:

But there was more real life for Hester Prynne, here, in New England, than in that unknown region where Pearl had found a home. Here had been her sin; here, her sorrow; and here was yet to be her penitence [...]. But, in the lapse of the toilsome, thoughtful, and self-devoted years that made up Hester’s life, the Scarlet Letter ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world’s scorn and bitterness, and became a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too. (Hawthorne, 1988: 177)
As Bercovitch very clearly states, “Christologically the ‘A’ she wears expands from ‘Adulteress’ to ‘Angellic’. Historically, as ‘the A for America’, it leads forward from the Puritan ‘Utopia’ to that ‘brighter period’ when the country will fulfil its ‘high and glorious destiny” (Bercovitch, 1981: 177).

Hawthorne makes Hester Prynne announce her strong conviction that the time of God and Eternal Happiness will come to that place:

She assured them, too, of her firm belief, that, at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven’s own time, a new truth would be revealed in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness. (Hawthorne, 1988: 177)

Although these final pages are imbued with some irony, the truth is that the prophecy recedes before us. The ideologically American “reality” emerges from The Scarlet Letter, and it glows. In this way, and through his heroine, Hawthorne becomes a kind of prophet “at once lamenting a declension and celebrating a national dream” (Bercovitch, 1982: 28). And if Charles Swann seems right in stating that “a man recently fired for his political views is hardly likely to think that political consensus exists in his own political culture”, on the other hand, he did not realize that, like Hester, Hawthorne ends up “[assimilating] himself to a consensus position” (Swann, 1991: 94).

By bringing into his novel the opposition city/forest, Hawthorne simultaneously gives us visions of both and he resolves this conflict in what Bercovitch calls a “moment of reconciliation” referring to Hester’s prophecy (Bercovitch, 1988, I).

Though it is clear that my reading of The Scarlet Letter is strongly influenced by Bercovitch’s theory, I would like to stress that this Americanist does not clarify one of the aspects which I think is fundamental to the understanding of this novel as a celebration of “America”. Physically Hester comes back to New England because she thinks that there “had been her sin; [there] her sorrow” (Hawthorne, 1988: 177). But in her mind she comes back to a “city” which is no longer Boston but a “city” in which she believes. Indeed, at the end of the novel, Hawthorne does not make his heroine come back to the city ruled and dominated by the men who once ostracized her and her dreams of love. She comes back in her innermost wishes and yearnings to “the City upon a Hill”; she comes back to the city of Utopia.
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