THE POWER OF BLACKNESS

HAWTHORNE POE MELVILLE

BY HARRY LEVIN

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Hawthorne

Poe

Melville

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Preface

To begin a book with a personal word is, as I have learned from Hawthorne, rather an act of diffidence than of presumption. It would be presumptuous indeed for me to venture, without the preliminaries of explanation or apology, into a field which is being so expertly and so intensively cultivated today. One who is by profession a student of literature, and by birthright a citizen of the United States, would be doubly remiss if he were not keenly interested in the work of the major American writers; but he might well be deterred from commenting on them at any length by the current reorganization of American Studies into a specialized academic discipline. This is a logical and productive consequence of that movement toward self-examination and rediscovery which has been under way since the First World War, and which has gained particular momentum since the Second. During the course of the forty-year discussion, which has sensitively reflected the course of contemporary history, the tone has gradually tended

to change from the self-critical to the self-congratulatory. To observe both of these tendencies in a single witness, we need only juxtapose the earlier and later writings of Van Wyck Brooks. It should be added, in fairness to Mr. Brooks, that his two positions have been neither mutually inconsistent nor untypical. Rather, they have represented a cultural progression which, in moving from the rebellions of youth to the consolidations of middle age, has replaced an old-fashioned colonial viewpoint with an up-and-coming sense of national importance.

In practice, of course, that happened a hundred years ago. In theory the lag was so protracted that, if you look up Melville in the four-volume *Cambridge History of American Literature* (1917–21), you will find that he occupies less than four pages. Graduate schools have recently been doing their utmost to compensate for previous neglect; and the investigation of *Moby-Dick* might almost be said to have taken the place of whaling among the industries of New England. Through the groundwork laid down by such scholars as M. C. Tyler and V. L. Parrington, American literature has long been utilized as a source of historical documentation. Yet it has largely remained for non-academic men of letters, most perceptively in the case of D. H. Lawrence, to stimulate the process of critical revaluation. The contribution of the late F. O. Matthiessen was based on his capacity to span those broad areas of differing awareness, to assimilate the relevant findings of scholarly research and esthetic criticism, and therewith to give us our most comprehensive view of our classic writers, in their relationship with one another and with their age. As it happens, it was my good fortune, while an undergradu-

ate in Harvard College, to have been among Matthiessen's first students. I wish I could go on to claim the benefits of the broadening curriculum that was signalized by his arrival. But my interests then, I must confess, were all too narrowly bound to the classical and the European. When our minds met, it was usually upon the common ground of the English Renaissance.

An older mentor, nearing the end of his teaching career, was Irving Babbitt who used to say: "America is where Europe goes when it dies." A snobbish and—I would now agree—shallow dictum, and not the best measure of Babbitt's approach to comparative literature; but it served a purpose if it reversed our inherent provincialism, and taught us whence America drew its vitality—the direction to which my appendix will revert. It was in the year after graduation, while browsing at the British Museum, that I started to read Henry James and to learn that, if one looks far enough, the horizons of culture are all-embracing; the important matter is the whole continuum, given one's particular connection at some point. Returning to my university, I found myself becoming conscious of the traditions it exemplifies, as they have been chronicled by some of my senior colleagues. I had the privilege, which I mention by way of ever-grateful acknowledgment, of following *American Renaissance* from draft to draft. If I also mention the fact that I suggested the title, as the author has characteristically attested in my copy, it is because I think that should be deprecated. Matthiessen had wanted to call his book, after an apt phrase from Whitman, *Man in the Open Air*. The publisher wanted something more descriptively categorical. My groping formulation may

have caught Matthiessen's liberal idealism, his warm feeling for the creative potentialities of American life. But it left out that "vision of evil" which clouds the hopeful picture from time to time, that note of anguish which foreshadowed the tragedy he was himself to enact.

My belated wanderings homeward, so to speak, have met with much other stimulus and encouragement. My largest debt, which I do not specify here because it continues to enlarge, is at least declared in my dedication. The generosity of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, during the year 1943–4, provided me with the leisure to accumulate a backlog of reading upon which I have been subsequently relying. A seminar, open to graduate students at Harvard University and Radcliffe College, has provided a beneficial testing-ground for some problematic ideas. Occasion to lecture on Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville came with a course offered at the University of Paris during the winter trimester of 1953, as a part of the program for the *Agrégation d'Anglais*, and again in the summer of that year at the Salzburg Seminar, where America finds Europe so alive. The present volume is the direct outgrowth of a series of public lectures which I delivered in Berkeley during the spring semester of 1957, as first incumbent of the Mrs. William Beckman Professorship of English Language and Literature at the University of California. For the honor of that invitation and the pleasure of that experience, I cannot sufficiently express my gratitude—especially to Professors James D. Hart, Vice-Chancellor of the University, and Henry Nash Smith, Chairman of the English Department, both distinguished authorities on American literature. I should

express further thanks to Mr. Alan Pryce-Jones, Editor of the London *Times Literary Supplement,* for his kind permission to reclaim my anonymous article, "Castles and Culture," from the issue of September 17, 1954.

The three authors I have studied are amply surrounded with a secondary literature, from which I have profited in such ways as are indicated by the highly selective bibliography. The respective biographical facts, condensed to the barest chronological outline, are appended for cross-reference. It should become evident, if it is not already, that the actual substance of this book is incidental to its method of interpretation. My central concern is with the workings of the imaginative faculty, particularly in what may be called fabulation: man's habit of telling stories as a means of summarizing his activities and crystallizing his attitudes. These fantasies, as projected by modern fiction through its principal vehicle, the novel, have been more and more consciously regulated by the conditions to which they have owed their existence. I have tried elsewhere to analyze a few examples of this realistic trend, beginning with Cervantes and continuing with certain French novelists of the nineteenth century. Some years before, I devoted a monograph to the strategic example of our time, James Joyce, whose writing oscillates so ambiguously between realism and symbolism. Following the symbolistic undercurrent, I am now led back to our nineteenth century. "At heart, the American novelists were all transcendental. The scene was a symbol; they scarcely had the patience to describe it; they were interested in it only because it pointed to something more important. Even Poe, who sneered at Concord, was equally an imaginative Trancendentalist: *Mardi* and 'The Fall of the

House of Usher' and *The Scarlet Letter* were all of one brood."

So Lewis Mumford recognized in his pioneering study, latterly reprinted, *The Golden Day*. Yet interpretations persistently stress the American scene for its own sake, discuss our literature in the framework of ideology more often than art, and treat the romance as an anachronism retarding the full development of Critical Realism. Misunderstanding has been abetted by the notorious lack of adequate tools for dealing systematically with prose fiction. Novels, unlike poems, are bulky and seemingly amorphous objects. Hence critics tend to ignore their form except on the level of style, regarding virtually everything else as content, rehearsing the story rather than criticizing it, and moralizing over the behavior of the characters. We have just begun to understand that themes lend a work its structure as well as its subject-matter, and that patterns created by images are no less significant than patterns created by words. In an essay published separately under the title of *Symbolism and Fiction*, sketching some of the methodological problems which confront—and sometimes confound—the interpreter, I looked forward to the possibility of a literary iconology. This book is a very tentative effort toward the approximation of that possibility. The theme has greatly facilitated the undertaking; for it would be hard to find a simpler image conveying a more universal idea, designated so explicitly and elaborated so variously. The body of writing examined sets the procedure for the examination: Hawthorne with his historical consciousness, Poe with his analytic rigor, Melville with his archetypal imagery.

The demonstration required that they be presented

on their own terms and, as far as possible, in their own words. Thus, while tracing configurations of symbolism, I have respected the integrity of the symbols; I have not attempted to reduce them to a literal plane, though there are points at which psychological inference can hardly be avoided. Much depends on the original language, quoted directly or echoed in paraphrase; but, since none of our writers was wholly consistent in spelling and punctuation, I have slightly regularized the texts. Since these are available in many forms, and so many of them are short, it has not seemed necessary to include specific page-reference. A fairly close familiarity with the material is taken for granted. Perhaps the reader should be warned that, when I retell a tale, my version may not be well rounded; it may be designed to emphasize latent elements, for reasons which should be discernible from the context. Some of the minor and marginal illustrations may scarcely seem to be worth allusion in passing; yet they play their part by revealing how pervasively their authors were obsessed by the power of blackness. Lest I seem to be superimposing an obsession of my own upon them, I might add that much more textual evidence accumulated than I could finally use. However, I was looking for thematic significance rather than for statistical incidence. I did not expect to discover a key that explains everything, but rather a touchstone that brings out characteristics.

The resulting triptych—to shift to a closer metaphor —may resemble a set of photographic negatives. But we stand in slight danger of forgetting that black is merely one side—the less popular side—of a famous polarity. The union of opposites, after all, is the very basis of the American outlook: the old and new worlds, the

past and present, the self and society, the supernatural and nature. Those concepts will be the coordinates of our study, an arbitrary but convenient scheme for testing its range and relevance on the dramatized levels of place, time, characterization, and plot. Each of these, in turn, forms a kind of archetype, an elemental shape assumed by the collective imagination: a journey, a house, an alter ego, a dream. "Following darkness like a dream," the value of the pursuit will probably lie in the detailed applications we are able to make along the way. Our theme will concretely link two broad assumptions: the symbolic character of our greatest fiction and the dark wisdom of our deeper minds. Together they constitute what I would rather describe as an antithesis than as a thesis, since they act in opposition to more publicized influences, blandly materialistic. Which is the true voice of America? Tolstoy's opinion may pertinently be cited in this regard. In a letter to an American correspondent, he speaks of Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, and others among our compatriots who have inspired him. Why, he asks, do we Americans pay so little heed to our poets and moralists, and so much to our millionaires and generals?

H. L.

Berkeley
June 4, 1957

For Perry and Betty Miller

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The Power of Blackness

I

The American Nightmare

TRAVELERS on stormy roads at night—or so the tale goes—sometimes encounter a stranger in old-fashioned garb, driving a large black horse and accompanied by a child. Always he inquires the way to Boston; usually his open carriage seems to be heading in the wrong direction. Gradual curiosity discovers that the wayward driver set out for his destination many years ago and, caught in a thunderstorm, made an equivocal vow: "I will see home tonight . . . or may I never see home!" There is a sequel which follows him to the end of his ghostly predicament. Finally he arrives at Boston, only to witness his ruined estate being auctioned off. When he tries to establish his identity, he is admonished by a voice from the crowd: "Time, which destroys and renews all things, has dilapidated your house and placed us here . . . You were cut off from the last age, and you can never be fitted to the present. Your home is gone, and you can never have another home in this world." This story of "Peter Rugg, the Missing Man," published first