

Leaps and Bounds: Hawthorne's Strategies of Poetic Economy*

ELENA ANASTASAKI

Nobody, I think, ought to read poetry, or look at pictures or statues, who cannot find a great deal more in them than the poet or artist has actually expressed. Their highest merit is their suggestiveness.

(Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Marble Faun*, *The Hawthorne Treasury* 1351)

Nathaniel Hawthorne's works, especially his late romances, display an innovative form of poetic economy which engages the philosophical thought resulting from some major advances of science in his time, incorporating, not so much the discoveries themselves, as the new paths they open in interpretation.¹ Hawthorne's case is particularly interesting not only because of this incorporation, but also due to the author's conscious use of them coupled with his moral resistance to them. His critical view goes indeed against the general enthusiasm with which the majority of his contemporaries welcomed the advances in fields of science deemed dubious by him, and the moral and metaphysical issues they seemed to tackle.

Hawthorne liked experimenting with the structure of his narratives.² His works are often structured in clusters of passages or scenes overloaded with minute, even seemingly redundant, information, bordering on the superfluous, which are connected with each other in an elliptic and often abrupt way. Against this background I would like to map the stylistic strategies Hawthorne uses to bridge those gaps, in an attempt to illustrate how these connections, which at first glance

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seem like arbitrary leaps,³ function within the narrative, giving an interesting effect of plush economy, of profusion emanating from these elliptical connections, paradoxically achieving the effect of excess. Hawthorne's poetic economy gives a sense of overabundance of expression in a narrative in which at times—in a constant play on too much versus too little—so much has been omitted that, if closely inspected, his late romances stretch, and could even be viewed as almost defying, the definition of the genre.

A Closed Circuit:

Electricity, Mesmerism, and the Romantic Aesthetics

Romantic aesthetics heavily drew on electrical science as an analogy for figuring poetical creation and aesthetic experience as both material and transcendent.⁴ Hawthorne thus came into an already subsisting network of thought, well established within English Romanticism and enthusiastically received in the new continent by the Transcendentalist movement. It has been observed that in Hawthorne's romances, "each event of the story is like an electrical junction, where circuits of metaphor of varying size and function are joined" (Gable xiv). This structure could be viewed as the basis for the way Hawthorne bridges the "gaps" in his narrative, using several stylistic strategies which reflect this notion of connecting things without getting them into contact, so to speak, but through a kind of immaterial but specific and systematic way which is primarily stylistic. These include, among others: a vocabulary working suggestively (either by clustering around significant semantic fields or through evoking associations of ideas); a web of connected metaphors that give a sense of coherence by implication of a hidden system; auto-referential stylistic patterns within the work itself; recurring patterns in characterization and symbolism as well as in the structure of scenes, and even at the level of the structure within sentences. The notions of secrecy and of hidden

connections by means of a hidden force are strong underlying elements to many of those stylistic strategies.⁵

In Hawthorne's time, the electric imagery had already been appropriated not only in literature, but also in the rhetoric of a variety of discourses ranging from religious to political abolitionist visions, and even in expressing aesthetic power.⁶ Electric imagery runs through the Transcendentalist writings, and Emerson even links it specifically to the function of the artistic creation; in his 1844 essay "The Poet" he incites him with these words:

Doubt not, O poet, but persist: Say "It is in me, and shall out." Stand there, balked and dumb, stuttering and stammering, hissed and hooted, stand and strive, until at last rage draw out of thee that *dream*-power which every night shows thee is thine own; a power transcending all limit and privacy, and by virtue of which a man is the conductor of the whole river of electricity. (283)

Hawthorne did indeed feel like he was undertaking this role of "conductor" and, feeling the weight of the responsibility this entailed, often expressed his reservations. The electrical analogy was more than mere imagery to Hawthorne, who combined it, in his view of the artistic production and its relation to its audience, with another discovery of his time around which a lot of dubious practitioners were attracting a credulous crowd, the discovery of animal magnetism.⁷ Hawthorne was sceptical towards this new pseudoscientific craze and mistrusted this practice, believing magnetizers to be manipulators imposing their own will on their patients through their powerful intellect.⁸ For Hawthorne the soul was sacred and had to be approached with reverence; and mesmerism, closely connected to spiritualist practices, could be violating it. Therefore, when he refers to the artist's function as one similar to a mesmeric medium, Hawthorne is expressing his fears that something unwholesome and dangerous is inherent to his activity.⁹ As Samuel Chase Coale mentions, Hawthorne, who viewed the mesmerist as a domineering master overpowering the medium as a victimized slave,

regarded this despicable master-slave relationship as [...] morally repellent. As a writer of what he called romances, he often saw himself as a kind of mesmerist/medium in which he used the very forces he himself morally opposed to describe and produce the techniques and strategies of his art. His writing exhibits significant parallels with mesmerism and examines the psychology of idolatry—the compulsive veneration of certain objects as icons—that he sees operating within it. The structure and development of his romances, the texts themselves, participate in the very dark forces he despised. (Coale 3)

Art's mesmeric influence and its effect, likened often, in an enthusiastic way by the artists themselves, to the effect of electricity, "rather than suggesting art's potential to foster the transcendence of individual identity, [...] exemplified for Hawthorne the danger that it might become merely a means to control other people, that it might allow the artist to infiltrate the individual's sacred spiritual self" (Gilmore, *Aesthetic Materialism* 66). Thus, his moral conflict treated thematically in many of his writings—starting with "The Devil in the Manuscript," where the artist is viewed as a cold observer committing the "unpardonable sin" of breaking his tie of sympathy with the rest of humanity—also has its counterpart in the actual impact the artist's production might have on its audience, and it is similarly reflected in the narrative structure.

Both electricity and mesmerism are conceptual frames of analogies conveying the sense of an invisible, unifying material (electricity, magnetic fluid, ether), which is exactly what Hawthorne needed, not only to fill the gaps between the disconnected scenes that form the narrative of his romances so as to create the illusion of continuity, but also to impart the influence of his mind on his audience in order to lure them into his magnetic field,¹⁰ which was the realm of his work. To do this, Hawthorne developed a number of narrative strategies based on these kinds of electric and mesmerising connections.

Language and its function and power are at the centre of this view of the artistic creative force as a mesmeric activity. Transcendentalists viewed language as a symbolic reflexion of the truth where "the literal meaning of a word refers to its physical meaning, and its figurative

meaning expresses a corresponding spiritual, moral, or emotional meaning" (Roger 450). They "advocated the 'spiritual' view in their theories about the nature of language. They proposed that by recognizing the correspondences between nature and spirit and the way in which language connects nature to spirit, we would see the unity of all things" (Roger 438). Hawthorne did not share this optimistic view and explored all through his work the limits of language to convey the truth, as well as the dangers arising from its inherent insufficiency and even deception. In a letter from May 19, 1840 to his future wife, Sophia Peabody, he expresses his mistrust in the following terms:

I have thought a thousand times, that words may be a thick and darksome veil of mystery between the soul and the truth which it seeks. Wretched were we indeed, if we had no better means of communicating ourselves, no fairer garb in which to array our essential selves, than these poor rags and tatters of Babel. Yet words are not without use, even for purposes of explanation—but merely for explaining outward acts, and all sorts of external things, leaving the soul's life and action to explain itself in its own way. (*The Letters 1813-1843* 462)

And in his *American Notebooks* he writes: "When we see how little we can express, it is a wonder any man ever takes up a pen a second time" (250). With this view in mind, we can perceive Hawthorne's narratives as a basic frame supporting what is left unsaid, either by choice or by impossibility of expression. As Gordon Hunter has demonstrated, the wilful omissions, "the positing of the unsaid as a vital feature of novelistic discourse, creates a manifold rhetoric for interpreting Hawthorne's romance art" (3), bringing the rhetoric of secrecy at the centre of Hawthorne's narrative production. However, I would argue that, rather than being an intentional further blurring of clarity on the part of the author, this rhetoric of secrecy should be viewed as an attempt to turn the tables on the language's inherent impossibility of expressing "the soul's life and action," in order to convey the unsayable by accentuating its absence, and creating in his work "the sense that more is being said than the words can account for" (Gable xi).

The author achieves this effect with a variety of narrative “tricks” which create an expanding effect while they are functioning as agents of poetic economy. I will focus on the most recurring strategies which are: the use of objects/images as concentrators of meaning and carriers of the sensation of “wholeness”; the metafictional comments drawing attention to the narrative structure and its “gaps”; the use of silence as a means of bringing to the fore the unsayable; and the “dream mode” as a reading frame where indeterminacy can be maintained allowing contradictory interpretations to coexist. Needless to say that those are not clearly separated methods but are interrelated and combined in order to achieve the overall intended effect.

The first of the narrative strategies mentioned above, the use of a central dominating image or object, is a well known characteristic of Hawthorne’s works. I will attempt here to elucidate how it works as a device of poetic economy. As Samuel Chase Coale has noted, “[a]t the center of Hawthorne’s fiction, the main focus of his art, a mysterious image or object, teases and glowers. It suggests an impenetrable mystery, a kind of immense vacancy or presence that no amount of moral scrutiny can ultimately define or explain” (77).—Indeed, we are all familiar with the scarlet letter and its function in Hawthorne’s romance. For these objects/images to work in such a complex way, Hawthorne needed to go beyond the mere conventional symbolism of things, as well as move away from allegory as a frame in which those objects/images would operate.¹¹ Of course, conventional symbolism is extensively used, since it has the advantage of affording the author a springboard for his further development.

Thus, for instance, in *The Marble Faun*, while part of the characterization of Miriam does not follow conventional patterns but is rather implied by an abundance of the dark female prototypes which inhabit her artistic work, Hilda’s characterisation is drawing heavily on the purity symbolized by the dove. On closer inspection, however, we realize that Hawthorne “overuses” this symbol—a whole chapter is dedicated to it, Hilda lives in a “dove-cote,” she is presented in a white dress amidst doves in flight “like a dove [...] herself, the fair,

pure creature," and is called by her friends "the Dove." Hawthorne also combines this imagery with the figure of the Virgin—the title of the chapter describing her studio is "The Virgin's Shire," and she is "sacrificing herself" in her art by a selfless cult to "Raphael, whom she loved with a virgin's love" (*The Hawthorne Treasury* 1133-39). The author blends these two images in such a way as to make the word "dove" a cluster of meanings far more complex than the mere symbolism of purity and innocence, giving a sense of roundness of character, paradoxically, by hiding as much as the word charged with all those connotations is supposed to reveal. Any subsequent reference to that image then brings into play this enriched, specific and intricate net of associations, allowing for a denser meaning.

The main object/image running through each of Hawthorne's romances has long been viewed by critics as the unifying element of his works. Edward M. Clay points out that in his "best romances this dominating symbol is equated with the *permanent* and *universal* values of the human heart. *The Scarlet Letter*, *the Pyncheon House*, and *St. Peter's Cathedral* are explicitly referred to as 'hearts,' and these symbols become what we might call 'time-filaments' which join all men—past and present—who are capable of experiencing these heart-felt values into a single 'magnetic chain of humanity'" (Clay 506). In addition to this function, however, those objects/images also act simultaneously as unifying agents within the plot and between literal and metaphorical meanings—and Hawthorne tries to lead the reader to such a reading of them¹² (we will return to this point later)—, but they also act as clusters of condensed meaning which serve the poetic economy of his work, while enriching it with multiple layers of interpretation. An interesting case in point is the image of the snake; Hawthorne used it in a symbolic way in his short story "Egotism; or the bosom serpent" (1843), but the use he makes of it in his last unfinished work, *The Dolliver Romance*, shows how much further he developed this technique towards the end of his literary career. In this romance, the serpent in the opening scene dominating Dr Dolliver's chamber is charged with multilayered and contradictory, benevolent and malevo-

lent, symbolisms. From the tempting serpent of Eden, to the symbol of Asclepius (Dr Dolliver is an apothecary), or even the Ouroboros snake (symbol of the cycle of life, of unity, of eternity, of auto-sufficiency, but also of everlasting life, which is the central theme of Hawthorne's last romances), not to mention the allusion to the Bible in the chapter title: "The brazen serpent."¹³ Thus, once the richly charged nuances of the object/image are lavishly set in place, the image of the serpent is used to continuously shift the reader's perception of both character and plot, permitting the author to bring into play all those nuances with a single word.

Hence, Hawthorne's narratives, when closely inspected, are discovered to be a series of disconnected scenes which are often strung together in a disjointed way. Hawthorne was conscious of this, and often had recourse to posing as someone retelling a real story, gathering and piecing together fragments of true reports, and apologetically avowing his awkward attempts to fill in the missing connections with his own conjectures. In *The Marble Faun*, in a chapter aptly called "Fragmentary Sentences," he is describing his narration as

a task resembling in its perplexity that of gathering up and piecing together the fragments of a letter which has been torn and scattered to the winds. Many words of deep significance, many entire sentences, and those possibly the most important ones, have flown too far on the winged breeze to be recovered. If we insert our own conjectural amendments, we perhaps give a purport utterly at variance with the true one. Yet unless we attempt something in this way, there must remain an unsightly gap, and a lack of continuousness and dependence in our narrative; so that it would arrive at certain inevitable catastrophes without due warning of their imminence. (1159-60)

These "unsightly gap[s]" are more often emphasized than not, sometimes even seeming to be gratuitously provoked. Hawthorne presents *The Marble Faun*, his last completed novel, in 50 short chapters with titles, thus fragmenting the romance structurally as much as in terms of content and constantly drawing attention to its structure and narrative. The structural break of chapters is sometimes placed when a scene is still developing, disrupting even dialogue (see for instance ch.

4), and metafictional comments pointing to the disjointed nature of the narration (such as "continuing the conversation which was begun, many pages back," 1140; and "we forbore to speak descriptively of Miriam's beauty earlier in our narrative, because we foresaw this occasion to bring it perhaps more forcibly before the reader," 1131) are scattered throughout the novel, paradoxically bridging gaps by over-emphasising them, or even creating gaps in narration where they were not likely to be found given the continuity in content at the moment they occur (i.e. the example of disrupted dialogue). In fact, the function of this artificial breaking is two-fold: on the one hand it is taking the attention away from the real gaps, and on the other hand it is disrupting continuity, allowing for new connections of a different kind to be established, connections based on gaps and omissions.

The Rhetoric of Silence

We have seen how Hawthorne viewed language as a particularly powerful manipulative tool which, however, had certain limitations in conveying internal and abstract things, mainly "the soul's life and action"; those, in Hawthorne's work, are paradoxically expressed through silence. The mesmeric power of language is emphasized in *The Marble Faun* in its capacity to alter exterior events and relationships which can remain dormant but productively present only for as long as silence is kept:

Nothing is more unaccountable than the spell that often lurks in a spoken word. A thought may be present to the mind, so distinctly that no utterance could make it more so; and two minds may be conscious of the same thought, in which one or both take the profoundest interest; but as long as it remains unspoken, their familiar talk flows quietly over the hidden idea, as a rivulet may sparkle and dimple over something sunken in its bed. But speak the word, and it is like bringing up a drowned body out of the deepest pool of the rivulet, which has been aware of the horrible secret all along, in spite of its smiling surface. (1250)

That is indeed the way Hawthorne's narratives "flow quietly over the hidden idea, as a rivulet"; his deliberate drawing attention to the gaps are these "sparkles" and "dimples" calculated to make known that there *is* something underneath the surface hinted at by a tangled web of implications which gives Hawthorne's work an "almost postmodern indeterminacy" (Roger 433). But, despite Hawthorne's much studied rhetoric of allusions to alternative possibilities, his strategy for an all inclusive narrative is one of silence. Silence is indeed the mode that allows for multiple possibilities; the only way to make missing pieces present, to include "everything," is to bring them into the narrative by their absence, either through "hints"—by means of those objects or images we have discussed as concentrators of "what is not present"—, or by the silencing of anything that would bring the "drowned body" to the surface, inducing chaos and bringing the narrative to a stop.

Author and reader are like those two people described in the quote above, whose "familiar talk flows quietly over the hidden idea" as long as "it remains unspoken." It has, however, to be constantly present to both conversing minds, and that is the goal towards which Hawthorne's narratives are always aiming: to maintain the mystery, while feeding the desire to have it revealed, but only to the extent of keeping the sparks. Thus, an overabundance of detail is given around an idea, but never enough so as to disclose it. This balance between too much and not enough needs to be constantly maintained, and in order to do so Hawthorne has to strategically place his "spark generators," objects or images allowing simultaneously for poetic economy and implication of overabundance in terms of layers of meaning. In the second edition of *The Marble Faun* his disappointment in failing to keep that balance, at least for a sizable portion of his audience, is evident.¹⁴ His added "Conclusion" opens thus:

There comes to the author, from many readers of the foregoing pages, a demand for further elucidations respecting the mysteries of the story.

He reluctantly avails himself of the opportunity afforded by a new edition, to explain such incidents and passages as may have been left too much in the dark; reluctantly, he repeats, because the necessity makes him sensible that

he can have succeeded but imperfectly, at best, in throwing about this Romance the kind of atmosphere essential to the effects at which he aimed. [...] The idea of the modern Faun, for example, loses all the poetry and beauty which the Author fancied in it, and becomes nothing better than a grotesque absurdity, if we bring it into the actual light of day. He had hoped to mystify this anomalous creature between the Real and the Fantastic, in such a manner that the reader's sympathies might be excited to a certain pleasurable degree, without impelling him to ask how Cuvier would have classified poor Donatello, or to insist upon being told, in so many words, whether he had furry ears or no. As respects all who ask such questions, the book is, to that extent, a failure. (*The Marble Faun* 1407)

This "certain pleasurable degree" of curiosity, keeping the reader pondering on the unspoken idea without feeling the compelling need to be "told in so many words," is what Hawthorne is aiming for in weaving his web of those charged object/image concentrators, modelled on the way electricity and mesmeric powers work invisibly on an added layer over the seemingly flowing continuity of life which is represented, in terms of narrative, by the plot. This simultaneity distinguishes Hawthorne's pattern from allegory giving it "an organic structure [...] filled with the same vital principle with which nature is filled" (Gable 38).

"Then there will be readers who will know how to read"

In order for both of the above mentioned levels to run parallel, Hawthorne's texts require an analogous way of reading, which is one of constant shifting of perspective. In a passage from his *American Notebooks* Hawthorne develops his view of the relation between literal and figurative meaning as a question of perspective: "Letters in the shape of figures of men, &c. At a distance, the words composed by the letters are alone distinguishable. Close at hand, the figures alone are seen, and not distinguished as letters. Thus things may have a positive, a relative, and a composite meaning, according to the point of view" (183). But Hawthorne is asking for an extra capacity in the reader, the one of seeing simultaneously from *both* perspectives (the "composite

meaning" mentioned above), which is modelled on the electrical pattern we have discerned in his writings. Schlegel had already foreseen such a reader for the new

lightning on the horizon of poetry [...] soon it won't be simply a matter of one thunderstorm, the whole sky will burn with a single flame, and then all your little lightning rods won't help you [...]. Then there will be readers who will know how to read. In the nineteenth century everyone will be able to savour the fragments. (269)

The idea of a kind of fluidity connecting things as before unconnected, combined with the stimulating abrupt shocks and jerks afforded by the electricity metaphor, correspond to this dual reading pattern which, in order to fully apprehend the text, requires to have both modes running parallel. It is that aspect of Hawthorne's works that lead Deborah L. Jones to see "Rappacini's Daughter" (1844) as a "paradigm of the 'autodeconstructive' narrative" (155). From a slightly different perspective, but noticing the same aspect of Hawthorne's works requiring a different reading than the conventional one, Patricia M. Roger sees this same tale as a reflexion of Hawthorne's concerns with the theories and debates of his times concerning language and its ability to fully convey meaning and points out:

The paradox of Beatrice's position as apparently physically poisonous and spiritually pure illustrates Bushnell's idea. The tale's contradictory interpretations of poison as repellent yet alluring and deadly yet invigorating are also instances of coming near "to a well rounded view of any truth." In order to reach a "well rounded view" of truth we must try a number of different perspectives and determine possibilities for meaning by combining the insights gained from different viewpoints, as Hawthorne suggests in his *Notebooks* entry on the "letters in the shape of figures of men." (Roger 451-52)

In this same tale, Hawthorne incorporates a semi self-derisory editorial note, presenting his tales as the works of M. de l'Aubépine¹⁵ and inciting the reader who wishes to take any enjoyment out of his tales to "take them in precisely the proper point of view," a point of view

similar to his example with the letters mentioned above; that is a vantage point from which one can *simultaneously* see both interpretations run parallel so as to be able to discern a new picture being formed when combining the interpretations supported by the text. For, otherwise, the author warns us, "they can hardly fail to look excessively like nonsense" ("Rappaccini's Daughter" 387).

In his last unfinished romance, Hawthorne further elucidates this way of reading so as to extract the true meaning of a text which, in his view, cannot be conveyed in the conventional way. His main character, Septimius, is pondering for months over an ancient manuscript containing the secret of the elixir of life; the text is described as written in a simple language but having recourse to some sort of cipher every time something important is to be disclosed, mirroring the way Hawthorne's own texts are written. The text is said to have a "magnetic" influence on Septimius's mind, who, as a student in theology, is well acquainted with all the traditional methods of interpretation—the literal, the allegoric, the moral and the anagogic.¹⁶ However, the first sentence Septimius manages to decipher is revealed to him in a mystic way, illuminating itself suddenly on the manuscript and in his mind in a non-sequential way, that is, without being written word for word in the manuscript; it is a kind of creative revelation. In order to take full possession of the manuscript's secrets, Septimius needs to combine all those different readings together.

This schooling of the reader into a new way of reading has also been detected in Hawthorne's prefaces. In his *A Thick and Darksome Veil* Thomas R. Moore has shown how:

By presenting polar oppositions in his prefaces, he [Hawthorne] requires his reader to consider two positions, two terms, two concepts, and to choose between them, that is to say, he forces an interpretative role on the reader, an ultimately empowering position. A methodology for the reader to derive meaning evolves from the imposed choice between opposed terms, from the attempt to remove veils, and from the confrontation with ambiguity. (76)

Emerson speaks also of a similar way of reading in his "American Scholar" and affirms: "There is then a creative reading as well as a

creative writing. When the mind is braced by labor and invention, the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusion. Every sentence is doubly significant, and the sense of our author is as broad as the world" (*Nature and Selected Essays* 90).

This peculiar way of reading by making "mental leaps" described early by Schlegel, and then by Hawthorne and Emerson, and which seems to be required in order to fully grasp the entire meaning of the text, was also what caught Hawthorne's attention in a peculiar work forwarding a bold theory concerning the writings of Shakespeare which eventually got published with his help and prefaced by himself. This was written by Delia Bacon who advanced the so-called Shakespeare-Bacon theory, shocking literary circles with the premise that Shakespeare's plays were in fact written by a group of English Scholars, a secret club, who included Sir Francis Bacon, Sir Walter Raleigh and Edmund Spenser. Emerson was converted to her theory and helped her meet Hawthorne in 1856, while the latter held the position of American consul in Liverpool, a meeting that led to him financing and prefacing the publication of her book *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakespeare Unfolded* in 1857. In his preface, Hawthorne put emphasis on the unorthodox way of reading that prompted Delia Bacon to come up with her theory, a way of reading similar to the one Septimius is engaged when reading the manuscript:

She had been for years a student of Shakespeare, looking for nothing in his plays beyond what the world has agreed to find in them, when she began to see, under the surface, the gleam of this hidden treasure. It was carefully hidden, indeed, yet not less carefully indicated, as with a pointed finger, by such marks and references as could not ultimately escape the notice of a subsequent age, which should be capable of profiting by the rich inheritance. [...] Finally, the author's researches led her to a point where she found the plays claimed for Lord Bacon and his associates,—not in a way that was meant to be intelligible in their own perilous times,—but in characters that only became legible, and illuminated, as it were, in the light of a subsequent period. ("Preface" ix)

In this process, the author's "mesmeric influence" is the conductor providing the direction towards which the reader's own creativity will move in order to reach such a reading.

The secret of such a reading should thus be looked for in the way a particular text is structured. As Coale suggests, in Hawthorne's works, "[t]his dynamic dialectic, which involves his 'fetishized iconology' and psychological conceptions, underscores the structure and helps generate plot" (23). In his notes concerning one of his aborted romances Hawthorne indeed mentions the way the plot clusters and expands around a central scene or image which constitutes the core of the narrative: "I have not yet struck the true key-note of this romance, and until I do, I shall write nothing but tediousness and nonsense. I do not wish it to be a picture of life; but a Romance, grim, grotesque, quaint, [...]. If I could write one central scene [...] all the rest of the romance would arrange itself around that nucleus!" (*The American Claimant Manuscripts* 58). Plots are thus created as concentric propagating circles around the objects/images dominating the story, rather than as linear narratives.¹⁷

Hawthorne's intention is indeed not to give "a picture of life," for that would put demands on the narrative which would exclude his electric connections and his mesmeric transportations. In order for author and reader to blend those two perspectives into one and still keep an illusion of flowing continuity while drawing attention to the gaps, Hawthorne has recourse to the kind of narrative (dis)continuity that we experience in dreams. Dreams, when we try to narrate them, are indeed perceived as texts and almost always lack continuity; their gaps are revealed as soon as we try to retrace the story and give an account of it. The mode Hawthorne's romances are written in is modelled on that of dreams,¹⁸ and, as Joseph C. Pattison has successfully argued, it is also the adequate point of view for their reading: "The logic form of dream language make these electrifying transformations clear and credible [...]. Dream works by the principles of intensity and association, not the laws of space and time. Picture dominates all else in dream. It makes abstract ideas tangible and animates otherwise

dead metaphors" (366). As Hawthorne himself has expressed it in his preface to *The Blithedale Romance*, his aim is to create a similar atmosphere to the way he viewed his own stay at Brook Farm as "essentially a daydream, and yet a fact" (*The Hawthorne Treasury* 853). This dream-like quality permeating Hawthorne's narratives allows not only for the abrupt discontinuity in the narrative but also for the double—literal and metaphorical—interpretation of key events to run in parallel, mutually exclusive and yet both valid. This drawing from the jolted sequence of events that governs dreams allows for a poetic economy which appeals to a narrative experience with which the reader is familiar and which calls for a blending of both rational and associational interpretative methods.

Hawthorne's indeterminacy is what allows for this double reading that, in order to be achieved, needs to remain unsaid, to vaguely appear through the gaps without ever being brought to the surface. Poetic economy in Hawthorne is thus more than just the right amount of disclosure, it is the very characteristic of narrative his works are dependent on in order to communicate the unsayable; for Hawthorne's messages lie in the gaps.¹⁹ However, taken to its extreme, this mode has within itself its own annulment, suspending everything in the forever frozen time of the undetermined narrative, it is deferring resolution and, ultimately, meaning. Once we step out of the dream mode, the lack of decisive meaning threatens to bring the whole narrative edifice down. Hawthorne at his best is managing to keep the reader's curiosity levels to that "pleasurable degree" which keeps interlocutors locked in a vicious circle, never venturing further, but always conversing over the "hidden idea" in which they take "the profoundest interest" not despite, but because of, its inherent impossibility of verification. And to that, Hawthorne is not ready to make any concessions. Thus, after having clarified in his added "Conclusion" many points of the plot left undetermined in *The Marble Faun* by means of an interview with the characters, in his seemingly earnest last question to Kenyon about whether Donatello did indeed possess furry ears, he has him replying mysteriously "I know, but may not

tell, [...]. On that point, at all events, there shall be not a word of explanation" (*The Hawthorne Treasury* 1409). Some things are simply best left unsaid.

School of Fine Arts
Athens, Greece

NOTES

¹The art of telling a story revolves around "gaps," at least this is what various theorists claim, and it depends on the successful bridging of these gaps whether a story is considered to be well-crafted or not. Wolfgang Iser asserts that "[e]ven in the simplest story there is bound to be some kind of blockage, if only because no tale can ever be told in its entirety. Indeed, it is only through inevitable omissions that a story gains its dynamism. Thus whenever the flow is interrupted and we are led off in unexpected directions, the opportunity is given to us to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections—for filling in the gaps left by the text itself." Noting that, "since this formulation is carried out on terms set by someone else, whose thoughts are the theme of our reading, it follows that the formulation of our faculty for deciphering cannot be along our own lines of orientation" (Iser 55 and 68). Frank Kermode also draws attention to the subject: "Blanks and gaps: to read is to fill them on the evidence of conflicting and ambiguous clues"; he goes on to talk about "indeterminacy gaps" (Kermode 109). The more successful the bridging of those gaps, the tighter the structure of the narrative and the more successful the poetic economy of the text, which lies mainly, in a sense, in disguising itself, that is in making those gaps promote rather than obscure the narrative by smoothing the breaks they introduce and by covering up their existence. The ways of creating the illusion of continuity and of an uninterrupted flow of narrative time vary according to an author's personal style, but they are also influenced by cultural ideas and constructs. Poetic economy, despite its abstract nature as a formative tool in the process of artistic creation, is also subject to cultural context.

²The case of "The Haunted Mind" (1837) and its second person narrative is one example of many.

³It is to this first impression of Hawthorne's narrative structure, as well as to the innovative nature of his devices, that my title makes allusion.

⁴As Paul Gilmore points out, since Schlegel both the process of artistic creation and of its reception had been seen in terms of an electrified circuit; an idea that found fruitful soil in England, too. As early as the 1790s, "Coleridge became friends with Sir Humphrey Davy, the leading English electric scientist of the age, and was deeply engaged with both the mechanical associationist thought of David Hartley and Priestley and the radical politics of Priestley and William Godwin. [...] As a subtle aether permeating the universe, electricity offered a

bridge between the physical and the spiritual, between the inanimate world of Newtonian physics and life itself” Percy Shelley would later take Schlegel’s “electrical poetry” a step further, in his “A Refutation of Deism” (1814) hinting at electricity as “an imponderable, physical force analogous to, if not identical with, thought itself” (Gilmore, *Aesthetic Materialism* 20, 25, 73-74). See also Jason R. Rudy, *Electric Meters*.

⁵Secrets are always interwoven in Hawthorne’s plots, be it a family secret, like in *The House of the Seven Gables*, or a personal secret like in *The Scarlet Letter*; a strategy culminating to the introduction of the secret of the text itself, as it is exemplified in the ancient manuscript in Hawthorne’s unfinished novel *Septimius*. For further discussion on the theme of secrecy in Hawthorne’s work see Gordon Hunter, *Secrets and Sympathy*.

⁶Cf. Gilmore, “Aesthetic Power: Electric Words and the Example of Frederick Douglass.”

⁷Around the Boston area there was much mesmeric activity. According to contemporary estimates, by 1843 there were more than two hundred professional magnetisers. Cf. Gable 14.

⁸Hawthorne exposes his views on the matter in a letter from October 18, 1841 to his future wife, Sophia Peabody, after she had expressed her intention to visit a professional magnetiser: “Now, ownest wife, I have no faith whatever that people are raised to the seventh heaven, or to any heaven at all, or that they gain any insight into the mysteries of life and beyond death, by means of this strange science. [...] I think that they are to be accounted for as the result of a physical and material, not of a spiritual, influence, *Opium* has produced many a brighter vision of heaven (and just as susceptible of proof) than those which thou recountest. They are dreams, my love [...]. And what delusion can be more lamentable and mischievous, than to mistake the physical and material for the spiritual? What so miserable as to lose the soul’s true, though hidden, knowledge and consciousness of heaven, in the mist of an earth-born vision [...] but do not degrade high Heaven and its inhabitants into any such symbols and forms as those which Miss Larned describes—do not let an earthly effluence from Mrs. Park’s corporeal system bewilder thee, and perhaps contaminate something spiritual and sacred. [...] And thou wilt know that the view which I take of this matter is caused by no want of faith in mysteries, but from a deep reverence of the soul, and of the mysteries which it knows within itself, but never transmits to the earthly eye or ear” (*Selected Letters of Nathaniel Hawthorne* 96).

⁹In Hawthorne’s works the power of the artist is described more often than not in mesmeric terms. A good example of the artist’s power to dominate the mind of the other is the description of Holgrave’s power over Phoebe in *The House of the Seven Gables*: “Holgrave gazed at her, as he rolled up his manuscript, and recognized an incipient stage of that curious psychological condition, which, as he had himself told Phoebe, he possessed more than an ordinary faculty of production. A veil was beginning to be muffled about her, in which she could behold only him, and live only in his thoughts and emotions” (211). In *The Marble Faun*, Hawthorne’s romance dedicated to art and the artist, the magnetism of the artist is

mentioned sometimes as a sign of genius: "by the spell of a creased, soiled, and discoloured scrap of paper, you were enabled to steal close to an old master, and watch him in the very effervescence of his genius. [...] Raphael's own hand had communicated its magnetism to one of these sketches" (ch. 15, 1190); sometimes it is mentioned as a dangerous influence, like in the dialogue between two of the artistic figures in the romance, the pure Hilda and the dark Miriam: "Your powerful magnetism would be too much for me. The pure, white atmosphere, in which I try to discern what things are good and true, would be discoloured. And therefore, Miriam, before it is too late, I mean to put faith in the awful heartquake which warms me henceforth to avoid you" (ch. 23, 1237).

¹⁰In his *Septimius* manuscripts, where Hawthorne often links the mesmeric effects the ancient manuscript has on his main character with the power of the artist's work over the reader, having his protagonist escape its malevolent influence for a brief moment, he comments in a personal confession-like tone: "I know well what his feeling was! I have had it oftentimes myself, when long brooding and busying myself on some idle tale, and keeping my faith in it by estrangement from all intercourse besides, I have chanced to be drawn out of the precincts enchanted by my poor magic" (*Elixir of Life Manuscripts* 130), thus presenting himself as simultaneously the mesmerist and the mesmerised subject, falling for his own tricks, so to speak.

¹¹"The allegorical writer distorts reality to give it an imposed meaning; Hawthorne wished to clarify and refine reality, to allow us to see the meaning that is already inherent in it" (Gable 38). See also Deborah L. Jones, "Hawthorne's Post Platonic Paradise: The Inversion of Allegory in *Rappaccini's Daughter*."

¹²In one of his unfinished romances, *Septimius Felton*, Sybil interprets her own story of "The Bloody Footstep" spiritually, stressing the view that "everything, you know, has its spiritual meaning, which to the literal meaning is what the soul is to the body" (*The Elixir of Life Manuscripts* 95).

¹³See Numbers 21:1-9.

¹⁴Hawthorne had anticipated such a reaction of his audience and had tried to appease the reader within his narrative in the last chapter of *The Marble Faun*, flattering him while pretending to appeal to his sagacity and reminding him of the "rules" of the game: "The gentle reader, we trust, would not thank us for one of those minute elucidations, which are so tedious, and, after all, so unsatisfactory, in clearing up the romantic mysteries of a story. He is too wise to insist upon looking closely at the wrong side of the tapestry, after the right one has been sufficiently displayed to him, woven with the best of the artist's skill, and cunningly arranged with a view to the harmonious exhibition of its colours. If any brilliant, or beautiful, or even tolerable effect have been produced, this pattern of kindly readers will accept it at its worth, without tearing its web apart, with the idle purpose of discovering how the threads have been knit together; for the sagacity by which he is distinguished will long ago have taught him that any narrative of human action and adventure whether we call it history or romance—is certain to be a fragile handiwork, more easily rent than mended. The actual

experience of even the most ordinary life is full of events that never explain themselves, either as regards their origin or their tendency" (1401).

¹⁵One of Hawthorne's assumed *alter egos* (Aubépine in French meaning Hawthorn).

¹⁶These are the four principles of reading Holy Scriptures. The literal reading corresponds to a mimetic narrative which relates a clearly discernable story. The allegorical reading is a reading of spiritual conversion, a presentiment of the mystery. In the moral reading the literal meaning is converted into a moral virtue and invites the reader to feel concerned. Finally, the anagogic reading is the ultimate principle of all these conversions, the mystic sense *par excellence*; its finality is not to restrict sense but to diffract it.

¹⁷In a letter to Charles Putnam, Hawthorne wrote concerning his works: "there is one idea running through them like an iron rod, and to which all other ideas are referred and subordinate" (qtd. in Gable 39).

¹⁸Hawthorne even entertained the idea to "write" a dream, a narrative "which shall resemble the real course of a dream, with all its inconsistency, its strange transformations, which are all taken as a matter of course, its eccentricities and aimlessness—with nevertheless a leading idea running through the whole." (*American Notebooks* 240).

¹⁹In *The Marble Faun* he has Kenyon, one of his artist-characters, refuse to interpret the world in words because of their insufficiency to do so; the only means of conveying that message is a particular view of the whole, a view the artist can only capture in his work and which can only be perceived by the audience if he perceives that work as an "hieroglyph" to be interpreted: "'Nay; I cannot preach,' said Kenyon, 'with a page of heaven and a page of earth spread wide open before us! Only begin to read it, and you will find it interpreting itself without the aid of words. It is a great mistake to try to put our best thoughts into human language. When we ascend into the higher regions of emotion and spiritual enjoyment, they are only expressible by such grand hieroglyphics as these around us'" (1270).

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