

From Colonial Literature to American Transcendentalism

N.SENHADJI

Studying a text like Of « Plimmoth Plantation (1630) » by William Bradford immersed us into Puritanism and its emergence in Europe and America and so we explained how the Pilgrims of Plymouth and the puritans of Massachusetts Bay were products of the Renaissance and Reformation. We had to understand two main events occurring in the XVIth cent: the rebirth of classical learning in the Renaissance and the protestant separation from Roman Catholicism that took place during the Reformation. Puritans were extreme reformers, dissenters intent on purifying the Church of England by a strict adherence to the theological system derived from John Calvin (1509-1564). What characterized American puritanism is that there was no mediation between God and Man (the ecclesiastical hierarchy was abolished) and that man's will is corrupt. This is what puritans took from Lutheranism and from Calvinism, they retained:

- The total depravity of man derived from the original sin of Adam; man is sinful and doomed to damnation.
- Unconditional Election: man has no freedom of will, is subject to a miserable slavery. However a few predestinated men will be saved through God's arbitrary and eternal decree.
- Limited atonement (or redemption): Christ died for those who are to be saved (the elect) and for them only.

American Puritanism was an attempt to find a workable form of Calvinism safeguarding the political, social and ethical unity of the colony: Theocracy.

Such important concepts were important to grasp in order to study the literature of colonial America and the reasons that led puritans to sail to America fleeing the religious persecutions in Europe and the disappearance of their culture by staying in Holland. We could better understand the beginning of W. Bradford's text which opens with « Being thus arrived in a good harbour and brought safe to land, they fell upon their knees and blessed the God of heaven... » and he narrates the ordeals of the puritans when they settled on the American continent. American literature started with expression of religious ideas and was meant to encourage piety and holiness, to give moral lessons as in the sermons and numerous biographies such as Cotton Mather's life of William Bradford. Devotion and faith filled the poems of Michael Wigglesworth, Anne Bradstreet and Edward Taylor that is why their religious ideas were filled with a biblical style of writing. The latter should be simple and useful for divine truth to reach even the ignorant. Even W. Bradford declared that he would write the history of Plymouth Plantation in « a plain style, with singular regard into the simple truth in all things. »

Puritans were known to be intolerant but they were against the practice of different religions in their midst because they had fought so hard to build their New Jerusalem in New England that is why they were harsh on religious and social deviants such as Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Baptists and Quakers, whores, actors, radical, democrats etc...

But change was inevitable and new religious leaders protested against strict Calvinism in favor of a more genial Christianity as in the writings of Roger Williams. Diversity, the American tradition of pluralism progressively replaced religious and social unity. Even the writings of Jonathan Edwards, the last great statement of Puritan ideal could not stop the change.

What Americans retained from Puritanism was the idea of freedom from oppressive government, the value of learning and education, a sense of purpose since they were intent on building their « city upon a hill ». It also gave them a sense of duty to their God, their nation and their fellowmen who should not be judged by their birth but by their lives. It also spurred

the creation of the beginning of American literature and indirectly contributed to the flowering of American Romanticism which expressed itself in transcendentalism. The latter was paved for by a movement called unitarianism which lies in its liberal rationalism and its opposition to the doctrines of inherited guilt, loss of free will, eternal punishment (Calvinist concepts). The movement in America was a reaction against the restricting orthodoxy of New England Calvinism, and was to a large extent the result of scientific thought. It was this movement developing in the 17th and 18th centuries which helped develop transcendentalism which announced 'the potential divinity of man'. Transcendentalism is a monism holding to the unity of the world and the immanence of God in the world.

Because of the divinity pervading the world, everything in the world is a microcosm containing all the laws and meaning of existence. James D Hart states in *The Oxford Companion to American literature* that « the soul of each individual is identical with the soul of the world, and latently contains all that the world contains. Man may fulfill his divine potentialities either through a rapt mystical state in which the divine is infused into the human, or through coming into contact with the truth, beauty and goodness embodied in nature and originating in the Over-Soul ». In fact, transcendentalism was a philosophic and literary movement (1836-1860) that reacted against 18th cent rationalism and the restricting orthodoxy of New England Calvinism. The first spokesman of transcendentalism was Ralph Waldo Emerson who was himself influenced by T.S Coleridge, W. Wordsworth, Th. Carlyle and German idealism. The sacred book of the East, the traditions of Plato and neo-Platonism, British philosophy (J.Locke, Berkeley, D.Hume) also influenced his idea of the supreme importance of the individual, the superiority of intuition to intellect, the presence of a spiritual power in both nature and the individual human being. In the *Divinity School Address* (1838) and '*The Oversoul*' (1841), he rejected institutional form of religion and strongly affirmed that 'God incarnates himself in man'. The Over-Soul is « *that great nature in which we rest... that unity within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other* ». This is an important concept Emerson expressed in *Nature*, *The Divinity School Address* and in *the Over-Soul* as a basic concept of transcendentalism. The Over-Soul is a pervasive spiritual presence from which all things emanate.

Transcendentalism saw each human being as a singular unique self and as an integral part of the entire rhythm and pulse of nature. Emerson states in *The Over-Soul* that *the heart in thee is the heart of all, not a value, not a wall, not an intersection is there anywhere in nature but one blood rolls uninterruptedly an endless circulation through all men, as the water of the globe is all one sea and, truly seen, its tide is one*. In his essay *Nature*, Emerson showed the power of Nature on the individual and the intimate link between the two. He says that *the current of the Universal Being circulates through me ; I am part or particle of God* . For the transcendentalist, everything that lives is holy, life delights in life and to be in harmony with oneself is to be in contact with the *uncontained and immortal beauty* that is in everything around us.

Nature, of course, provides us with commodity, namely, satisfying our basic needs but its service in the soul is more important because it is aesthetic, intellectual and especially moral.

Concerning the **intellectual** service that nature bestows on the individual, it is threefold:

- 1- *Words are signs of natural facts.*
- 2- *Particular facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts.*
- 3- *Nature is the symbol of spirit.*

Emerson says that by making language and words closely cling to facts and events, we cling to the literal as well as to the Spiritual truth. He carries on expressing the fact that by relating words to the specificities of nature, we are relating words to the spiritual essence that runs through both nature and human nature. Emerson says in 'Language' in the essay *Nature* that every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that states of the

mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture. An enraged man is a lion, a cunning man is a fox, a firm man is a rock, a learned man is a torch. A lamb is innocence, a snake is subtle spite... Light and darkness are our familiar expression for knowledge and ignorance; and heat for love... »

He also illustrates that particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts by giving us examples taken from the proverbs of nations in which a natural fact is selected as a parable of a moral truth ; for example :

A rolling stone gathers no moss; a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush; A cripple in the right will beat a rater in the wrong; Make hay while the sun shines... (language)

Emerson makes a constant relationship between fact and spirit:

A fact is the end or last issue of spirit. The visible creation is the terminus or the circumference of the invisible world. (language:)

Quoting a French philosopher, he adds that *material objects are necessarily kinds of the substantial thoughts of the creator*, that *visible nature must have a spiritual and moral side*. We believe that Emerson goes as far as saying that as every object unlocks a faculty of the soul, we come closer to Spirit and Spirit is the Creator, God. This is the reason why this domain of knowledge becomes a new weapon in the magazine of power.

The most fundamental service of nature is **moral** because the soul of each individual being divinely connected to the 'Over-Soul', a man can learn the rhythms and laws of nature.

Emerson was the great apostle of transcendentalism, expressed its main tenets and Thoreau was his disciple, living according to its basing principles. In his work *Walden (1854)*, he expressed the idea that he went to the woods: *because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quiet necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life.*

In going to the woods, he turned words into action. He wanted to live and see truly. He wanted to experience life and nature in his body and in his mind and share it with the reader. His first book which he produced while living at Walden is *A week on the concord and Merrimack Rivers (1849)* introduces us to his distinctive style following the rhythmic flow of description and his spontaneous thoughts. He tried to be as sincere and as simple in his account of his own life as possible. He contributed to *The Dial*, the transcendentalist magazine and was active as a surveyor and botanist. His record of his sojourn at Walden in his book *Walden* has been referred to as an autobiography, a philosophical narrative, an ecological journal, a spiritual diary. It is a fusion of experience and reflection.

Walt Whitman was to say of Thoreau's *Walden: Who touches this book, touches a man* because of its unique, personal experience at a certain place and at a certain time. Thoreau showed that man should take what he only needs from education, reform, clothing, shelter and furniture.

Walden evinces a seasonal transit from one spring to another corresponding to the spiritual growth of the hero. In the first spring only youth, innocence, animal-man are developed and the hero develops progressively in the seasons of autumn and winter to emerge spiritually in the next spring like a chrysalis being transformed into a butterfly or like a snake sloughing his old skin.

Renewal is the main theme and spirituality is mainly symbolized by the pond which, Thoreau says, is *lying between the earth and the heaven and partakes of the color of both*. At *Walden pond*, he learns about himself by learning about nature. The rhythms of seasonal renewal correspond to the renewal of spirit, of human nature with nature at large. Thoreau and all transcendentalists were on *the alert to find God in nature – to know his lurking places*

(Thoreau as cited in Richard Gray: 142) and they also saw nature as both a material and mystical presence.

The other close disciple of Emerson was Walt Whitman. In his poetry, he identified himself with his country. Poetry, his nation and life itself were all a matter of process energized by rhythm and change. When Whitman celebrates himself, he celebrates the sacredness in all human-beings, as part and parcel of God:

*I celebrate myself and sing myself,
and what I assume you shall assume
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.*

This identification of the *I* is with all kinds of people without losing one's identity and it is also a discovery of the self in the other. The reader is also included in this triangular relationship and momentarily during the time of the poem, we are transported in an act of communion abolishing temporal, spatial and cultural gaps. Whitman achieves a transcendent unity with the world; the summer *grass* is a symbol of mystical insight and union with nature and spirit. His *Song of Myself* solves the problem of contact between *I* and *you*, the individual is no longer isolated and Whitman reacts to the debate between individualism and community by encompassing not only his compatriots but all humanity even abolishing the notion of time since for the poet, we all form the *Oversoul* and the soul of each individual is identical with the soul of the world, and latently contained all that the world contains.

In terms of form, Whitman wrote an epic poem of his nation concerned with spiritual possibility rather than historical achievement, it is the poet's development and all what it is associated with which are at the centre of his poem and provides its main substance. The protagonist is not the third-person hero of traditional epic, a prince or aristocratic hero but the poet himself as representative, democratic person. The poem is open and does not follow a conventional, linear way but goes backwards and forwards, existing in space rather than in time and the reader brings his meanings to the poem. This form will later influence such poets as Ezra Pound, W.C Williams and many others in the 20th cent. The poem *Song of Myself* is a journey of discoveries where the poet consumes an embrace with his soul experiencing mystical ecstasy:

"Loafe with me on the grass, lose the stop from your throat,
Not words, not music, or rhyme I want, not custom or lecture, not even the best,
Only the lull I like, the hum of your valved voice.

I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer morning

How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn over upon me," (section5)

The poet is literally consuming an affair with his soul and as it is always the case for Whitman, it is both physical and spiritual since nature and spirit mirror each other for the transcendentalists but for Whitman, this physical embrace has sexual undertones for the poet liberates the self, abolishing taboos.

Walt Whitman not only has an affair with his soul but also with the earth as his lover:

"Smile O voluptuous cool- breath'd earth!
Earth of the slumbering and liquid trees!
Earth of the departed sunset-earth of the mountains misty-topt!...
Far-swooping elbas'd earth-rich apple-blossom'd earth!
Smile, for your lover comes."

The poet is a cosmic lover of the beauty of the earth! With its voluptuous landscapes and the reader feels the physicality and joys of existence in memorable lines full of energy and vitality. The identity of the Self for Whitman is a search to be united with his soul and with the earth, the cosmos in a transcendental union achieved through a mystical journey and trance, in what Emerson called *The OverSoul*: that great nature in which we rest in which all

our particular beings are united. Being united with the earth, the soul, he is also looking for an encounter with his fellowmen and especially with the reader, the full loop of the “Over-soul” being complete:

“I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

...

I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,
I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
If you want me again look for me under your boot-sales.

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
And filter and fibre your blood.
Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you.

These closing lines are not a farewell to the reader, they are on the contrary a preparation for a personal encounter: we all belong to a monism in which God pervades everything in nature including man. Whitman says he is “untranslatable” because he and we belong to a mystical transcendental world of which only a few intuitive men can pierce. He also expresses the fact that you can find me in the grass you tread upon belonging to nature at large and symbolized in *Leaves of Grass*. It does not matter if you do not understand me but I will be good health to you and bestow energy and vitality to you. What matters and what constitutes our strength is that we are united in the divine world of nature which bridges all cultural, historical, spatial gaps. You will certainly find me since we belong to this great monism.

The link between writers of colonial literature (W. Bradford, Cotton Matter etc...) and the transcendentalists was that they were both convinced that every literal fact or event had a spiritual significance but with Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, every literal fact would give rise to a full range of meanings, multi-layers of interpretations as with *The Scarlet Letter*, title of Hawthorne’s novel and emblem of sin and guilt evolving into a symbol of redemption, charity and compassion. The letter A clasped on Hester’s breast, one of the four main characters, starts meaning “Adulteress” and finishes meaning “Admirable”. This novel invites us to reflect on the consequences of sin in a puritan community, rather than to follow a narrative action and Hawthorne presents a world which is emblematic, pictorial, magical to express emotions, feelings, guilt in a subtle and expressive way. As a romance writer, he mingles the imaginary and the factual in order to come as close as possible to the secrets of the inner life, the torments and obsessions of his characters which he does so well.

What must be said about N. Hawthorne is that he felt ambivalent towards Puritanism: he was immersed in it but at the same rebelled against it. His vision, like that of his ancestors, is symbolical and he was also obsessed by the notions of sin and guilt. But to their notion of sin, he gave them his own response in a splendidly imaginative work which was forbidden by puritans. *The Scarlett Letter* also shows the debate in American literature between the needs of the individual in confrontation with the demands of society. Hester Prynne, like, Anne Hutchinson, to whom she is referred to in *The Prison Door* is a rebel but she cannot live apart from society; as she showed herself different from the others, she is obliged to live on the outskirts of the town and yet close to it.

Dimmesdale is also in conflict with himself, hiding his sin to the community but unfortunately obsessed by it. His role as a respected minister cannot go along his private role as Hester's lover and Pearl's father that is why he is obsessed to a fatal point ending in his own collapse and death. Chillingworth is a leech, namely, someone who sucks the blood or feeds on another, a parasite but is far from being a doctor, the role he normally should have to cure Dimmesdale. He, in fact, sucks on Dimmesdale's guilt trying to satisfy his need for revenge. That becomes his reason for living and so he dies after Dimmesdale. Chillingworth shows us that evil lurks in every human heart and Hawthorne and Melville were to run counter to the bright side of transcendentalism represented by Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman by pointing out that not only good is present in man but a combination of both. Moreover, Pearl, being a child of nature, grows finally into a woman when she acquires this knowledge of evil, she will no longer be a member of the animal realm but an adult in the world. The debate between the self and society in *The Scarlet Letter* evolves around the introduction of the notion of sin which triggers a lot of conflicts and enables the reader to interpret the novel in an open way. The richness of this novel is that the reader can interpret it in many ways and we think it is Hawthorne's response to the strict, one-sided, unique way of interpreting the world around them of his ancestors, often as dichotomies: either good or evil, sinful, depraved or elect. He shows how intricate and difficult it is to decipher the human heart through symbols, metaphors, magical effects, the use of romance.

Richard Gray in *A History of American Literature* is right to point out that *The Scarlet Letter* is "an open text" because the narrator does not at any moment impose his point of view. He achieves this through "*a subtle manoeuvring of character, the equivocal commentary and symbolism* (206)" which opens on many interpretations among which the reader may choose.

Again we cannot but agree with Richard Gray when he expresses the fact that:

"The Scarlet Letter is an extraordinarily modern book: expressing a relativist sense of experience in a form that is more fluid process than finished product. What is offered is not, in the manner of a traditional classic text, an answer issuing out of a belief in some absolute, unalterable truth, but something more like a modern classic – a shifting, disconcerting and almost endless series of questions."

A writer who stood apart from the main stream of American literature is Edgar Allan Poe. His concerns were not those of his contemporaries since they evolved around those of the psyche and troubled mind. Poe was influenced by the so-called "gothic romance", a type of writing characterized by preoccupation with supernatural phenomena which originated in 18th century England. Most of his stories concentrate on lonely individuals living in strange and aristocratic mansions or castles. The story of *The Fall of the House of Usher* immerses us straightaway in sadness, gloom and closure, ending as the title foreshadows it. The narrator is at once perplexed when he arrives at the gloomy house of Usher trying to comprehend feelings which assail him at confronting the house and its surrounding. Not only the décor is gruesome but also its inhabitant, his pale and wan friend, Roderich Usher who has just entombed his twin-sister and has called upon the narrator to relieve his disease of the mind. The Fall is not only that of the physical house collapsing at the end of the story but also of Usher and his family as he is the only descendent. Poe was a master of horror stories and those of ratiocination (detective stories using logical and deductive reasoning) but even in his horror stories as that of *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Poe always contrives to structure his stories as to enhance the main theme of strangeness and collapse: for example, in the midst of this story, the narrator tells a tale and in it sounds are described which are exactly those he actually hears on the spot: a door banging and falling, a violent storm outside ravaging the countryside, the song mentioned in the story *The Haunted Palace* is an exact replica of what

is happening to the house of Usher; The crack in the wall of the house at the beginning of the story is ominous of an impending fall which will eventually take place.

Everything is well contrived and thought out in Poe's stories that is why we can affirm, as Walter Nash puts it in "Odour of Chrysanthemums" that the level of articulation is interlocked with the level of information that is why when we look at how the text is constructed, we can derive a fairly good judgment of what the text is about.

It is true that this story forces us to enter darker levels of the house but also of the mind and as the narrator becomes more familiar with 'Usher', the house and its owner, we, the readers enter the fiction of Usher. These are two parallel journeys.

All of Poe's stories are of the same flavour: in *Ligeia* (1840), an aristocrat marries *Ligeia*, a strange, dark woman of great beauty and learning. He loves her but an illness has the better of her and she dies. Being deranged by this death, the husband moves house and remarries with Rowena Trevanion, a woman he does not really love. She, as well, in a strange manner, dies. When she is on the bier, it seems she comes back to life, the cerement falls, her long black hair streams forth and instead of Rowena, it is Ligeia who appears before the husband. She has been reincarnated in the body of Rowena.

In *The Black Cat* (1843) a man used to have a cat he tortured removing one of his eyes but this cat died. He brought another one but he came to hate it and he attempted to kill it with one axe. His wife interfered and he killed her placing the body in a cellar recess. When the police came to search the wife, they discovered nothing until a mewing (that of the cat behind a wall) attracted their attention. The police destroyed the wall discovering both the wife and the cat.

Although Poe was radically different from his contemporaries, he produced a distinctive work of art that remained for posterity.

Finally, we may conclude that American literature in the XIXth century has reached a pitch of consciousness thanks to such writers as Hawthorne, Poe, Melville, Whitman, Thoreau... This is what D.H Lawrence writes in his foreword to *Studies in Classic American Literature*:

"The further frenzies of French modernism or futurism have not reached the pitch of extreme consciousness that Poe, Melville, Hawthorne reached. The European moderns are all 'trying' to be extreme. The great Americans I mention just were it".

D.H Lawrence also makes the difference between Russian and American literature highlighting the idea.

Russian literature is explicit and hates symbols whereas Americans refuse everything explicit and always put a sort of double meaning.

Vocabulary: bier: a stand in which a corpse or a coffin is to be carried to the grave
cerement: cloth for wrapping the dead.
a recess: a remote, secret or secluded place.