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Frontier Psychology and the American Landscape in "Roger Malvin's Burial"

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Among many other Hawthorne's tales, "Roger Malvin's Burial" allots an unusually important role to the natural setting. As Donohue pointed out some thirty years ago, three of five sections in this tale, or, three quarters of the story, are set in the forest—the depths of the wilderness.[1] While many aspects of this Hawthorne's early work have been carefully and diversely studied,[2] surprisingly little attention has been paid to this "one key feature of the tale," that is, the wilderness landscape in which the main action of the story is unfolded. This neglect of natural setting for the critics' part is partly explained by the generally accepted proposition that Hawthorne did not share that Romantic worship of nature with Emerson or Thoreau. But in this tale, Hawthorne explores the early American psychology connected with landscape or nature, and thus we can assume, as James McIntosh recently maintains, "the relation between character and setting is more continuously central to the effect of the story because the setting has an interest in itself unusual for Hawthorne."[3] The setting in this tale is not only a symbol or a metaphor of some state of mind or psychology of the characters, nor just the arena of a moral play in the story, such as found in Hawthorne's other tales and romances. It is more than a mere background. The landscape in "Roger Malvin's Burial" has its own meaning which is interdependently related to the nature of the main characters, the action of the story, or even some implications in the narrative. What Leo B. Levy suggests about the landscape of *The Scarlet Letter* can be also applied to this historical story: the character of "Roger Malvin's Burial" "originates in the analogous relationship between landscape style, the emotions of the characters, and the emergent themes of the work."[4] Our concern here is to reexamine what meanings the landscape has in the story, whether it is the wilderness or the frontier; so that we might obtain another perspective in which we could consider the cultural and historical context of this tale. And in the attempt we will also be able to shed the light on some implicit psychological motifs that Hawthorne seems to weave into this unique frontier story.

In the first part of the tale, which prefaces the story per se, the reader is informed of the historical event on which this romance is based. The narrator states that this particular incident of Indian warfare called "Lovell's Fight" may show us some "heroism" or "chivalry" of man if we see it in the light of imagination. And he declares that he should relate the fate of a few people involved in the fight which was fought for the defense of the frontiers in 1725. It may be important to emphasize the narrator's reference to the frontier and his statement that the battle "was not unfortunate in its consequences to the country" because of the resultant peace in those frontier regions for several ensuing years. According to McIntosh, in "Roger Malvin's Burial," which was to be included in the unrealized collection of his short tales, *Provincial Tales*,[5] Hawthorne explored one feature of New England history, that is, "the matter of the frontier" He then observes that "Hawthorne's interest in frontier psychology led him, it seems, to work out a special relation between his frontiersmen and their wilderness environment."[6]

Frontier in American history has been considered to be an area between civilization and wilderness where the people living there always had to face the threat of savageness—"Indians", wild animals, harsh natural environments, or even that savageness usually hidden in the heart of so-called "civilized" man—and had to fight for their own survival and their families' life. Frontier is in a sense a symbol of any neutral area which belongs to neither regions: a neutral zone not only between civilization and wilderness, but also between the real world and the fantasy, reason and feeling, the consciousness and the unconsciousness, or even life and death. We can say that the former is usually symbolized as a town or community, specially that of Puritans, and the latter as the deep forest or the wilderness like those in Hawthorne's works such as *The Scarlet Letter* or "Young Goodman Brown" among others. It is a zone where both of the two "may meet and each imbue itself with the nature of the other," as narrated in "The Custom-House." It is no wonder that the narrator of "Roger Malvin's Burial" should declare at the very beginning of the tale that this fight for the defense of the frontiers is "naturally susceptible of the moonlight of romance," even though there may be Hawthorne's intention of an ironical effect created by the gap between the historical facts and the prevailed legends of Lovewell's Fight.[7] We will find all these trials in the frontier, the neutral zone between life and death, —the fight against wilderness for his survival, security of his property or life of his family— in the story, specially in the fate of Reuben Bourne.

In the first paragraph of the story proper, after the account of the Indian fight by the narrator, the reader is suddenly led into the depths of the forest—into the wilderness—and explained the scenic background. Here described is one of the typical American landscape which any landscape painters of Hawthorne's own time would like to take as their picture's subject: that is, a picturesque landscape of the American wilderness untouched by human hands.[8] The scene is set in the deep forest with a gigantic rock surrounded by oak trees and other hard-wood trees which "supplied the place of the pines, which were the usual growth of the land." The fact that Hawthorne substitutes at this scene the oak trees for the evergreen trees has been closely studied by critics. Granting that the oak tree is "a central image of the story,"[9] most critics agree that the image of "a young and vigorous sapling" is reflected in young and still innocent Reuben Bourne. Though severely wounded and weary, Reuben's youthful vigor and his possibility of future growth (or maturity) are sure to be reflected in the lively sapling and cheerfully hovering sunbeams.

The function of the rock in the story has also been the focus of many discussions.[10] In this enigmatic scene, the hieroglyphic rock is already presented as a gravestone, which seems to forebode the following action of the characters, or, for that matter, the development of the story itself. And the forgotten characters which seemingly form an inscription on the rock also help create the mysterious atmosphere about the wilderness landscape where the two weary and wounded travellers are now lying. Because it is inscribed in the forgotten characters, this rock, "a manifestation of nature," defies any human interpretation; it is, as William J. Sheick insists, "a symbol of the mystery apparently inherent in . . . nature" as well as in other things.[11] To Hawthorne nature seems rather forbidding and full of enigmas whose hidden moral meanings, if any, man cannot wholly comprehend, though it is true he is impressed with the grand landscape or wild nature.[12]

In this symbolic and rather mysterious description of the wilderness landscape, the two combatants who had to retreat from the fight against Indians are now laying their injured bodies under the trees. They are on the way home through the forest, but now one of them, the older one named Roger Malvin, finds himself seriously wounded and unable to continue the journey. Malvin requests Reuben, the younger one, to leave him there in the forest and go on with his homeward journey, and eventually succeeds in his persuasion. The question is the way Malvin convinces Reuben to do so. Some critics interpret that Malvin's words and his intention come truly from his good will or altruism: his friendship with Reuben, spirit of

chivalry, his parental love for his daughter and this young fellow warrior ("I have loved you like a father, Reuben") or his wish that his daughter would be happy with the youth. On the other hand, there are other views that Malvin's intention is rather egoistic, and that his persuasion is something not unlike a whisper of the Satan, a temptation which 'wiles' the youth into sin and moral agony as a result.[13]

It may be useful here to be reminded of some common types of characters or their relations in Hawthorne's tales. Gloria C. Erlich maintains that "[d]espite the apparent variety of period, setting, and character. . . a great many of his plots are really versions of the Fall, that a large number of his settings are new Edens, and that a conspicuous number of his characters are representative of Satan, Adam, and Eve."[14] The reader often finds as protagonists young men who have dangerously great ambition or curiosity, which finally lead the young to disasters in such tales as "Young Goodman Brown," "Rappacini's Daughter," "The Birthmark" and so forth. Usually the young hero has a fiend, a devilish person, and a beautiful girl or woman as his wife or a lover. The relationships between the fiendish characters and the female characters are usually very close as father and daughter in many cases, or sometimes husband and wife as found in The *Scarlet Letter.*

In "Roger Malvin's Burial," then, we can suggest that Malvin may play a part of Satan, the figure who seduces a young man into sin. Accordingly, this forest, or the wilderness which shows a peaceful and picturesque landscape, is an Eden where Reuben is to fall as Adam once did. It may be strange that the forest, or the wilderness landscape where man almost always encounters the evil or at best faces some temptation into sin in most stories of Hawthorne, can be compared to Eden, or the Paradise. But we can at least say that the Eden is also the place where man is led into temptation and ultimately falls. It is also noteworthy that Hawthorne "admires the wild splendor of the landscape when it is untouched by man, and like many people in the nineteenth century he regrets man's intrusion on nature."[15] Around the mid-nineteenth century when industrialization was already beginning to erode the American landscape, untouched nature and the wilderness landscape are the subject of admiration and longing clearly visualized on the canvases of the pictures by Thomas Cole, Asher Durand, or Albert Bierstadt. One might also remember the resolve of the early Puritans to make the wilderness of America their Promised Land, a new Eden. Or one may call to mind the dream of the frontiersmen to transform the virgin land into "the Garden of the world," which is "the image of an agricultural paradise in the West."[16]

But any Eden is to have an Eve who, whether consciously or not, causes an Adam to fall if phrased in the biblical term. Unlike the romances where female characters always seem to be divided into either of the two antithetical types (an archetypal type of Eve, a dark woman, or of Maria, a fair maiden), Hawthorne's short stories present more ambiguous or problematic images of women. Apparently the women or the wives in his many tales are gentle, affectionate and faithful characters, which seem to reflect the idea of 'home' or "the contemporary middle-class ideology of domesticity as a humanizing institution."[17] However, their innocence frequently turns out to be deadly to the young men. Though we cannot find the obvious images of such dark women as Hester or Miriam in the women who appear in the early tales, they certainly have some roles in the events which are likely to draw the protagonists into mishaps or the Fall.

Even Dorcas is not exempt from this lingering image of a tempter as Eve's descendant. It is only when Malvin refers to his daughter that he first succeeds in directing Reuben's feeling toward the desire for life and the pursuit of his own happiness. It cannot be denied that the decision of Reuben to go on with his journey with his companion left expiring in the wilderness is strongly connected with the existence of Dorcas along with his desperate hope to get some help for the dying man in time. It is a natural question asked out of Dorcas' filial anxiety, shortly after he comes back to the frontier and somehow recovers himself, that causes Reuben to turn his face from the truth to falsehood. And also it is her innocent belief, a false impression that Reuben took great care of her father by staying with him to his death and burying him, that would torment his conscience even more and aggravate his sense of guilt.

In this section of the story which deals with the return of Reuben Bourne to the settlement and his failure in a pioneer farmer, the setting is a frontier not only in the geographical or cultural sense as a historical context, but also in a psychological or moral sense. The frontier is, as I have mentioned before, a neutral territory between civilization and the wilderness, or the area where the two different may encounter. But the main focus of the narration here is the frontier stretching in Reuben's inner world. He is now torn between the truth and the falsehood, and becomes a kind of sleepwalker who wanders in the frontier between the real world and the fancy: the frontier which borders both the social world, where he is a survivor and hero of the Lovewell's Fight as well as a husband and master of a farm, and his recurrent fancy in which he is a murderer of his father-in-law, a base coward who left the dying but still living man alone in the wilderness with his vow to bury

his body still unfulfilled. As a result of this spiritual wandering in the frontier, Reuben Bourne, a neglectful husbandman, ruins the succeeded farm which is "under older cultivation, larger, and better stocked than most of the frontier establishments." The barren land itself is a symbol of Reuben's withered life as a frontiersman as well as the withered branches of the oak trees in the forest. For the frontier farmers in the nineteenth century devoted themselves to cultivating the land to transform it into a garden. Henry Nash Smith discusses that, "[t]he master symbol of the garden embraced a cluster of metaphors expressing fecundity, growth, increase, and blissful labor in the earth, all centering about the heroic figure of the idealized frontier farmer armed with that supreme agrarian weapon, the sacred plow."[18] Though a failure in one land as a pioneer, a frontiersman could always go westward into the wilderness to restart his life, at least so the American myth of frontier goes. Thus Reuben's family, Reuben himself, his wife Dorcas and their only son Cyrus, decide "to throw sunlight into some deep recess of the forest, and seek subsistence from the virgin bosom of the wilderness."

How to interpret Cyrus will also be an important key of the story. The meaning of children in Hawthorne's fiction can be roughly summarized as the following three points: 1) a role as an agent of redemption or reconciliation for adults, frequently for their parents, and sometimes a sacrifice to bring such effects like Cyrus or Ilbrahim in "The Gentle Boy:" 2) some characteristics inherited from his or her parent's nature, whether good or evil, which presents a child as a link of the fatalistic chain of human beings 3) mysterious sympathy or communion with Nature. In the character of Cyrus we can find all these traits when the narrator says that the boy "was loved by his father with a deep and silent strength, as if whatever was good and happy in his own nature had been transferred to his child." But more important here may be the reference of Cyrus as a future leader in the land, or in the frontiers. Many critics have discussed the biblical connotations in the name of Cyrus. Besides the obvious projection of the biblical figures such as Abraham, the first patriarch of the Old Testament, or Isaac, Abraham's son whom Abraham was about to sacrifice as a offering to God, one critic suggests another possible interpretation that the character of Cyrus is derived from the descriptions of biblical "Cyrus" before whom the Lord promised to "subdue nations."[19]

There may be, in my own view, another possible historical or cultural source of Cyrus, or young Reuben of his old happy days. In the latter part of the story where Reuben goes into

the wilderness with his family, the reader finds the paragraph which describes the reverie of a dreaming frontiersman. The picturesque landscape described here is one of the typical American landscapes of the virgin land which any pioneer or frontiersman might have dreamed in his fantasy. Or it is not too hyperbolic to say that this may be his ideal vision of the frontier life:

> O, who, in the enthusiasm of a daydream, has not wished that he were a wanderer in a world of summer wilderness, with one fair and gentle being hanging lightly on his arm? In youth his free and exulting step would know no barrier but the rolling ocean or the snow-topped mountains; calmer manhood would choose a home where Nature had strewn a double wealth in the vale of some transparent stream; and when hoary age, after long, long years of that pure life, stole on and found him there, it would find him the father of a race, the patriarch of a people, the founder of a mighty nation yet to be. When death, like the sweet sleep which we welcome after a day of happiness, came over him, his far descendants would mourn over the venerated dust. Enveloped by tradition in mysterious attributes, the men of future generations would call him godlike; and remote posterity would see him standing, dimly glorious, far up the valley of a hundred centuries.

It would not have been improbable for the readers of about second quarter of nineteenth century to see in this "dreamer" the legendary heroes of the frontier such as Daniel Boone, whose name, though dead in 1820, was "well established in western mythology." In the article which discusses George Caleb Bingham, an American painter of nineteenth-century, Angela Miller, referring to his picture *Daniel Boone Escorting Settlers Through the Cumberland Gap,* 1851-52, states that "the patriarch of the West appears as on Old Testament figure leading his people into the wilderness." And when she says that "an episode in the settlement of the American wilderness is associated with the biblical exile of Moses and his people, in which hardship and sacrifice are the prelude to the Promised Land," we are sure to perceive the remarkable similarity between the western myth of the frontier heroes and the images of the biblical patriarchs, and this fantasy of a dreaming pioneer the narrator describes here. All of them have the same vision of building a nation or implanting civilization in the wilderness.[20]

Cyrus and Reuben, too, might have had such a vision or daydream if their fate had been different. But the narrator seems to make it evident that they could not be such blessed patriarchs of a nation in the wilderness when he narrates that "[t]he tangled and gloomy

forest through which the personages of my tale were wandering differed widely from the dreamer's land of fantasy." The gloom of the forest or the wilderness surrounding them looks so dark and savage that it is not likely that they should have such a dream, and Nature, which has romantic sympathy with mortal pain and sorrow, makes a "pitying sound" for them. Now again in the same wilderness where his haunting fancy originates, Reuben Bourne is not full awake nor dreaming, but sleepwalking between the real world and the fancy. And the words of Dorcas that remind Reuben of the day when he deserted his father-in-law, the twelfth of May, only lead him further into his obsessed fancy. Reuben's belief that "a supernatural voice had called him onward and that a supernatural power had obstructed his retreat" or his sleepwalking like a mesmerized person remind us of the conventions of Gothic fiction of which Hawthorne, too, made use in some of his works. But there is no mesmerist here in the wilderness but the voice coming from the depth of his own heart, whether it is his unconscious or Freudian super-ego.

If we find in the figures of Cyrus or Reuben the projection of an ideal image of a frontier westerner of the first half of the nineteenth century, or a future leader of the frontiers, "a father of race, the patriarch of a people, the founder of mighty nation yet to be," it may be possible to recognize another archetype of westerners in Dorcas: a frontier woman. After Reuben and Cyrus "wander out in search of game" on the tragic day, Dorcas is left alone on the encampment, preparing their meal. When she spreads a snow-white cloth on the sylvan table, she creates in the forest that magic circle which, in the phrase of Joel Pfister, Hawthorne imbues this "domestic sentiment."[21] It is "that one little spot of homely comfort in the desolate heart of Nature." The narrator further states that, as she sang, "the walls of her forsaken home seemed to encircle her" and that "she no longer saw the gloomy pines, nor heard the wind." The image Hawthorne seems to want to create through the figure of Dorcas is that of home or the life in the frontiers, in which man struggles to conquer the threat of nature and often manages to succeed in shuttering it and creating domesticity even in the depth of the wilderness; on the other hand, in the wilderness the efforts of man are still frequently overpowered by the grandeur of wild nature. Dorcas is in a sense a symbol of domestication of nature or the wilderness, which is perhaps another projection of the nineteenth-century frontiersmen.

Applying Hutchinson's distinction between true and false heroism to the deeds of Malvin and Reuben, Robert J. Daly suggests that Reuben's tragedy partly comes from his reliance

on the false chivalric myth and his incomprehension of true heroism in the act of leaving Malvin, that is, choosing life over death; for, true heroism always results in the decision to take life over death. His definition of the true hero is stimulating when we recognize in Reuben and Cyrus an image of a failed frontier leader or an unsuccessful patriarch of a nation in the wilderness. Those visions of the idealized frontier figure are not realized by being killed as a child for Cyrus, and by killing his only son for Reuben. To Reuben, however, this tragedy started long before, from the time he did not tell the truth to Dorcas nor fulfilled his vow to bury Roger Malvin. According to Daly, "[t]he true hero is the man who founds a colony, who leaves the battlefield to journey into the wilderness and there become the founder of his nation, the man who chooses life over death." Either Reuben or Cyrus, thus, can not become the true hero, the true frontier hero. But when the narrator states that Reuben could finally fulfill his vow by the precious sacrifice of his own son and that "his sin was expiated—the curse was gone from him" and thus he could pray for the first time in many years, we may see at least a little hope in their journey into the wilderness.

Russel Nye insisted when he explains some social and cultural phenomena in America around the second quarter of the nineteenth-century that "[w]hen writers discovered how to exploit the American past and the American landscape, the novel became a powerful instrument for defining and developing the national personality."[22] We may then conclude that the American past and the American landscape described in this historical tale is also a powerful instrument for Hawthorne to explore not only the deep psychology of character, but also frontier psychology or the national fantasy of building a utopia in the American wilderness.

Notes

1 Agnes McNeill Donohue,"'From Whose Bourn No Traveller Returns': A Reading of 'Roger Malvin's Burial,'" *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 18 (1963-64), pp.1-19.

2 Diane C. Naples sums up the diverse focuses of the criticism of the tale as follows: "Hawthorne's Calvinistic psychology, his anticipation of Freudian concepts of repression and Oedipus complex , and his use of religious symbolism, the loss-of-innocence motif, and themes from the past." (Diane C. Naples, "'Roger Malvin's Burial'—A Parable for Historians?," *American Transcendental Quarterly* 13 [1971] pp. 45-48.) We should, of course,

add many other interpretations of this work that have provided since her summary.

3 James McIntosh, "Nature and Frontier in 'Roger Malvin's Burial,'" *American Literature*, vol. 60-2, (May 1988), p.189

4 Leo B. Levy, "The Landscape Modes of *The Scarlet Letter*," *NCL*, Mar. 1969, p.377–

5 Cf. Richard P. Adams, "Hawthorne's *Provincial Tales*," *New England Quarterly* 30 (Mar. 1957), pp. 39-57.

6 McIntosh, p.189.

7 Robert J. Daly, "History and Chivalric Myth in 'Roger Malvin's Burial,'" *Essex Institute Historical Collections*, 109 (1973), pp. 99-115. See especially pp. 105–110.

8 "Beneath Emerson's counsel was the notion of a nature uncorrupted by man. That grandeur and tranquillity were not to be found only in a few eastern valleys and on the frontier where [Thomas] Cole had begun his painter's career." (*Art and Life in America*, p.200)

9 Cf. Virginia O. Birdsall, "Hawthorne's Oak Tree Image," *NCF* 15 (1960-61), p.181

10 For example, see "The Hieroglyphic Rock in Hawthorne's 'Roger Malvin's Burial'" by William J. Scheick published in *ESQ*, volume 24, (2nd Quarter, 1978). pp. 72-76.

11 *Ibid.* p.72.

12 For example, referring to *The American Notebooks*, Elizabeth Ann Kaplan comments in her doctoral thesis on Hawthorne's attitude toward nature as follows: "Hawthorne is impressed by the wildness and primitive grandeur of the landscape, but he feels alienated from nature." "Nature is grand and awesome but also remote and unapproachable." (*Hawthorne and Romanticism: A Study of Hawthorne's Literary Development in the Context of the American and European Romantic Movements*, 1970)

13 Gloria Chasson Erlich, "Guilt and Expiation in 'Roger Malvin's Burial,'" *NCF*, (Mar. 1972-4), p.380. Yoshitaka Sato recently presents another close study of Malvin's hidden "egoistic" motives as well as Reuben's and his skillful manipulation of Reuben's psychology, which ultimately led the young man to decide to leave his companion and go on. And according to Daly, "Roger" of Roger Malvin "is a common New England name for Satan," and *mal vin* means "came to evil" in French. He also suggests that Malvin's words or action "echoes Milton's description of Satan in *Paradise Lost*," p.103.

14 Gloria Chasson Erlich, "Deadly Innocence: Hawthorne's Dark Women," *NEQ*, vol. XLI, number 2 (June, 1968), p.164.

15 *Hawthorne and Romanticism*, p.17.

16 See Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York: Vintage Books, 1950), pp.138-39.

17 Joel Pfister, *The Production of Personal Life—Class, Gender & the Psychological in Hawthorne's Fiction,* (Stanford University Press: Stanford, California, 1991), p.14

18 Smith, *Ibid.*

19 For the biblical source of this tale, see, for example, W. R. Thompson, "The Biblical Sources of 'Roger Malvin's Burial,'" PMLA 78 (March 1962), pp. 92-96. Ely Stock , "History and the Bible in Hawthorne's 'Roger Malvin's Burial,'" *Essex Institute Historical Collections,* Vol. C (October 1964), pp. 279-296. The recent comprehensive study of the biblical "pretext" in "Roger Malvin's Burial" is presented by Hitoshi Matsusaka in his *Hawthorne Kenkyu —Zentext no Bigaku* (*A Study on Hawthorne— The Aesthetics of the Pretext*), (Obun-sha: Tokyo) 1995.

20 Angela Miller, "The Mechanisms of the Market and the Invention of Western Regionalism: The Example of George Caleb Bingham," contained in Chapter 4, *American Iconology —New Approaches to Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature,* Edited by David C. Miller, (Yale University Press: New Haven) 1993, pp.80—91

21 Pfister, p.15

22 Russel Blaine Nye, *Society and Culture in America, 1830-1860.* (Harper & Row, NY) 1974, p.91.