

Review

Arne Axelsson, *The Links in the Chain: Isolation and Interdependence in Nathaniel Hawthorne's Fictional Characters*. Studia Anglistica Upsalensia 17. Uppsala. 1974. 190 pages.

The work of Nathaniel Hawthorne has been the subject of such a vast amount of criticism that it would seem nearly impossible to find any fresh approaches to it. Nevertheless, the Swedish scholar Arne Axelsson has explored a neglected field in his *The Links in the Chain: Isolation and Interdependence in Nathaniel Hawthorne's Fictional Characters*.

Axelsson advances the thesis that relations between people are the main subject of Hawthorne's writing and states that 'the isolation-interdependence theme is the very kernel of Hawthorne's fiction' (p. 171). As a general statement, this is not in itself a new insight in Hawthorne criticism; many readers have noticed how expertly the author describes relationships between people, and in his biography of 1948, Randall Stewart maintained that Hawthorne is 'an analyst of human relations, of the nice relationship of person to person, of the adjustment of the individual to society.' However,

only Axelsson has proceeded to make an extensive analysis of the personal relationships of most of Hawthorne's characters and has classified them according to a number of different relations they enter into with their fellow human beings. Not surprisingly, the author finds that most of Hawthorne's characters are isolated rather than related to others, and he provides us with a list of eight different types of isolation, each treated in separate chapters. There is also a chapter on 'interdependent' characters. This is the structure of the book, and though Axelsson has made an effort to concentrate and avoid repeating himself, he has not succeeded. Hence, his book tends to read like a mechanical listing of characters' responses according to the framework of the thesis, and the inevitable result is a definite weakening of its readability in spite of the validity of its approach. This is a doctoral dissertation, and such flaws are to be expected in works of that category. The point is that they should have been dealt with before the actual publication of the book.

As already indicated, I agree with Axelsson when he maintains that Hawthorne 'concentrates on man's relationship with man rather than on man's relationship with God or the universe' (p. 18). I also appreciate his claim, when he is speaking of the author's concept of the chain of being, that 'Hawthorne's chain is horizontal, not vertical' (p. 23). Hawthorne was a humanist more than anything else, his foremost concern was to describe the constellations between the individual and the group, his morality was derived from observations of inter-personal relations, not from metaphysical precepts. His 'unpardonable sin' is not perpetrated so much in defiance of any deity above man as of the human collective here on earth. Above all, this sin consists in a rupture of the social environment. Hawthorne was almost obsessed by the madness and misery that was the outcome of such ruptures, and he is a master at rendering subtle nuances of interpersonal relations. His work is thus in keeping with recent discoveries in psychiatry, particularly the theories of the British psychiatrists D. Cooper and R. D. Laing, who regard, for example, schizophrenia as a breakdown in human communication rather than a 'disease' which the patient contracts from out of nowhere.

Much traditional Hawthorne criticism has concerned itself with analyses of his style, imagery and symbolism and has commented upon his philosophy, theology, his psychology of the individual, his use of myth, ritual, folklore etc. The question is whether these approaches ever reach the centre of the author's concern, which I,

agreeing with Axelsson, believe to be his penetrating analysis of the dynamics of social interaction. Many critics simply register this concern without really appreciating its importance.

One thing which I miss in Axelsson's book is a placing of Hawthorne in the context of American intellectual and literary history. One might point out the contrast between Hawthorne and the transcendentalist cult of the self-reliant individual that was established by Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman and their followers. Their ideal of the self-reliant man, which, incidentally, was wholly in keeping with the reigning social and economic ethic of the time, is subjected to piercing criticism in Hawthorne's work and in that of Melville, too. Both Ethan Brand and Captain Ahab can be seen as demonic caricatures of the Emersonian ideal image of man. The belief in individualism has always been a cornerstone in American social thinking, and there is a strong tradition in American literature, from Whitman to Jack Kerouac, that has upheld the cult of the self. Books like Axelsson's emphasize another tradition, the belief in community as the basis for any viable society, and show how a writer like Hawthorne explored the menacing forms unfettered individualism was apt to assume. However, Axelsson himself has left out any analysis of Hawthorne's relation to his society and his contemporaries and has treated the isolation-interdependence theme in a manner which in itself is somewhat 'isolated' from its natural context.

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