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SUPERAR A SI MESMO E A SOCIEDADE. O PARADOXO DA SUBJETIVIDADE NOS ROMANCES DE HAWTHORNE

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***RESUMO**:*
Este artigo retoma a discussão acadêmica sobre a noção de autonomia em The Scarlet Letter, *de Nathaniel Hawthorne. Hester Prynne, sua célebre protagonista, desperta a atenção de leitores modernos como um modelo de autossuficiência e inconformismo heroico, ainda que o autor lhe negue uma recompensa substancial por seus atos de autoafirmação. Hester é condenada a viver o resto de sua existência como uma proscrita, e, ainda pior, como alguém que se vê como tal. O argumento desenvolvido aqui parte da inabilidade de Hester de transformar agência autônoma em uma identidade plena, satisfeita consigo, para encontrar em um romance posterior do autor,* The Blithedale Romance, *uma abordagem complementar do caráter paradoxal do sujeito hawthorniano.*

***PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Nathaniel Hawthorne. Subjetividade. Sujeito liberal. Romance. Romantismo.*

***ABSTRACT**:*
This paper sets off from the scholarly discussion around the concept of autonomy in Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter. *Its famous protagonist, Hester Prynne, strikes modern readers as a champion of self-sufficiency and heroic non-conformism, although the author denies any substantial reward to her self-assertion; Hester is doomed to live the rest of her existence as an outcast, and even worse, as someone who deems herself as such. The argument developed here is triggered by the fact that Hester is unable to transform autonomous agency into a fulfilling identity, and then finds in the author's later novel,* The Blithedale Romance, *a complementary approach to the paradoxical character of the Hawthornian self.*

***KEYWORDS:** Nathaniel Hawthorne. Subjectivity. Liberal self. Novel. Romanticism.*

1. Psychological novels about liberal selves

In the teaching practice, it has become commonplace to associate Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) with the growing tendency of mid-19th-century fiction toward psychological scrutiny. In it, Hawthorne proved his ability to employ recurrent themes of the western literary tradition in a whole new light — namely the problems of guilt, repentance, vengeance, forbidden love affairs — by introducing refined psychological analysis into the fictional discourse. Such association suffices when one's goal is to highlight Hawthorne's significance to the posterior tradition. Authors such as Edgar Allan Poe and Henry James left very emphatic declarations of

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indebtedness to his contributions (POE, 1969; JAMES, 1879); they are also the ones, in the Anglophone tradition, who stand out for their careful handling of the human psyche, with the deciphering of complex emotional phenomena that, in fact, never ceased to be of our interest as readers of fiction.

Providing narratives with psychological depth, however, has become part of novelists' agenda since the 18th century. In 1785, the German novelist Karl Phillip Moritz gave his work *Anton Reiser* a very suggestive subtitle: *ein psychologischer Roman* ("a psychological novel") – by then, the parallel between novels and the study of the psyche was in no way a novelty in Germany. Eleven years earlier, in one of the first theoretical approaches to the genre, Friedrich Blanckenburg (1965, p. 3-8) also relied on this formula, claiming that the novel is the epic of bourgeois societies — a formulation that encloses a paradox, since epics are all about a heroic age prior to the modern world. As the text progresses, Blanckenburg finally deciphers his statement, coming to the point of associating novelistic discourse with psychological analysis. Indeed, epics were representative of ancient civilizations, reflecting their social and religious values: much of these narratives is about the conflict between the will of the gods and the determination of a handful of outstanding men. The novel, by its turn, being a product of the era of the individual, shifts the narrative perspective to the inner life of the characters.

That is to say, the very configuration of modern secular life allows for this shift in the focus of the narrative discourse. Unlike ancient epics, novels do not consist in the mere depiction of marvelous deeds, since old-fashioned heroism is a product of a naïve age that entertained itself with tales of monsters and demigods; instead, they mostly deal with the inner movement of the common person's psyche (BLANCKENBURG, 1965, p. 17-18). Modern individuality had to be discovered, its paradoxes unfolded and properly formulated in narratives interested in ordinary problems, in order to be attractive to ordinary readers. Such an argumentation anticipates much of today's common association between the novel and modern selfhood itself. By doing so, the critic was able to legitimize the place and value of the novel within the literary canon in a time when most of the great works of our tradition were still to be written, and products of this genre were, as a rule, considered subliterary for not being part of the classical tradition.

Both Blanckenburg and Moritz wrote in the era of the Enlightenment, a time of renewed interest in the human condition and, above all, of optimism towards the potential of analytical approaches. In this context, the novel proved itself an exciting medium to amplify knowledge about our collective experience as communities, nations, and species. The fact that it gained more psychological overtones during the 18th century seemed to serve the larger purpose of the Enlightenment worldview: the more one understands human beings and society, the closer one is to changing them. If novels and plays from this time insist on delivering a moral message to justify their utility, it is due to the priority that Enlightenment thinkers gave to the public's intellectual growth (BECKER, 1964, p. 7, 11-12).

Around 1780 Immanuel Kant declared autonomy as a philosophical duty of every human being interested in achieving maturity (KANT, 1990, p. 20); French and American revolutionary constitutions went further and declared the means to develop one's persona as an inalienable right held by every citizen. The so-called 'liberal self' is the outcome of this age: it shares the late 18th century's celebration of the individual autonomy and is of our interest here since it is the central figure of novels from the Late

Enlightenment to Romanticism (MILLINGTON, 1990, p. 558-559). In them, the portrayal of complex, problematic characters works intimately with the employment of psychological analysis and, in some cases, of social criticism – proving that the novel is a privileged medium to handle with issues related to modern life, thereby becoming a tradition of its own.

These are very sketchy statements about debates that took place throughout the 18th century. Above all, however, they are considerations that force us to be more specific when explaining the uniqueness of Hawthorne's psychological fiction, written half century after such discussions, at a time when liberal ideals of autonomy were part of the common sense. The issue starts when we turn to literary history and realize how neglected Hawthorne's critique of the liberal, atomistic model of subjectivity has been.

In the particular case of North American literary studies, the association between the liberal self and freedom remained unchallenged roughly until the 1970s. Three decades earlier, Lionel Trilling went so far as to elect "the expression of individualism" as the best expression of American culture – "the image of the embattled individual, struggling against an unappreciative, conformist society, routinely has been advanced by critics as a proper focus for disciplinary study" (TRILLING, 1940, apud ALKANA, 1996, p. 18). Interestingly enough, literary historians of that time proliferated an image of American poets (and their characters) as misunderstood outcasts; the personal experience of authors seemed to support a certain interpretation of their major protagonists. We can mention the stereotypes of Thoreau, as well as the main character of *Walden*, as irascible non-conformists; or Melville and his Bartleby as men hovering at the brink of insanity, unable to adapt to modern society; and finally, the somber Hawthorne as a counterpart of Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*, individuals striving for fulfilling lives made impossible by a conservative environment. Authors and characters faced the tragic fate of carrying a liberating message (the former in their writings, the latter embedded in their deeds) in a time unripe to understand it properly. These representatives of the liberal spirit would stage a kind of martyrdom tale, as it were, which allegedly characterizes the arduous history of menkind's progress. But at the end

> [he] could be reliably credited with the ability to work for social change in the world. The battle over the symbol of the individual thus was largely resolved: champions of aesthetics and advocates of social change could claim the individual for their own. (ALKANA, 1996, p. 22)

Ironically, both progressive and conservative critics in the US argued their cases taking for granted individual agency as the proper methodology for contesting social coercion; therein lies the core of the democratic spirit (WEIMAN, 1977, p. 196-206).

Around 1965 the immediate association between the liberal self, freedom and collective progress began to be challenged. The question now was whether (apolitical) individualism had not become the mode of conformity *par excellence* in modern societies. "Frustration over the self's inability to deliver on an implied promise of liberation would seem to have fueled the poststructuralist drive against the humanist preoccupation with – and formulation of – the concept of 'subjectivity'" (ALKANA, 1996, p. 1). Finally, in 1970, Northrop Frye left a very eloquent description of the critical situation faced by Literary Studies departments over the US, which deserves to be recalled:

> In North America, at least, most of us take in, through the pores of our primary education, a concerned belief in democracy, as an inclusive social ideal that works toward giving equal rights to all its citizens. This ideal, many now feel, was kidnapped at the beginning by a social movement which was really oligarchical in tendency, based on various forms of exploitation […], which built up a hysterically competitive economy on a thunderous cannonade of advertising and other forms of systematic lying, and finally began to spill over into imperialistic crusades like the Vietnam war. The result is that many people, especially in the under-thirty age group, feel alienated from their own society. (FRYE, 1970, apud WEIMANN, 1977, p. 215)

A revaluation of the multilayered relation between subject and society, voiced by Frye, Foucault and others, had to be done in the name of a new, more authentic liberation of the self — only a reformulation of human agency and fulfilling reassertion of the individual in the public life could grant this. Interestingly, recent studies show that late 18th-century literature was rich with alternatives to the values of liberal selfhood (considering authors from Lessing to Schiller, who witnessed the birth of the European liberal ideology). The fact that such a critical tradition has been object of academic revaluation serves as the driving force to this article; there is an open terrain for reinterpretation of Hawthorne's novels which allows today's academics to shed a new light on his participation in the philosophical debates of his time, as well as to better understand his resistance against the basic tenets of liberal ideology.

A good starting point to this approach is biographical in nature. Dealing with Hawthorne's uneasy relation with his generation, his early biographer Henry James formulates:

> The generation to which he belonged, that generation which grew up with the century, witnessed during a period of fifty years the immense, uninterrupted material development of the young Republic; and when one thinks of the scale on which it took place, of the prosperity that walked in its train and waited on its course, […] there seems to be little room for surprise that it should have implanted a kind of superstitious faith in the grandeur of the country […] This faith was a simple and uncritical one, enlivened with an element of genial optimism, in the light of which it appeared that the great American state was not as other human institutions are, that a special Providence watched over it, that it would go on joyously for ever. (JAMES, 1879, p. 141-142)

This article relies on James and the recent critics' considerations to claim that not only did Hawthorne show skepticism towards the utopic dimension of the notion of selfhood promulgated by late Enlightenment and Transcendentalist thinkers, but he also formulated a coherent critique to the liberal self in two of his novels: *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Blithedale Romance*.

2. Hester Prynne: a liberal self *avant-la-lettre*?

Let us turn back to *The Scarlet Letter* and consider its relatively simple plot. Hester Prynne is a recent migrant to a Puritan settlement in New England who struggles to adapt to the new life. Her presence amid this retrograde community feels awkward at first, but she soon makes the acquaintance of the solicitous minister Arthur Dimmesdale

– a bright man with intellectual leanings like her, eager to attain the leadership of the local parish. Since Hester's husband is absent, she and the reverend give vent to their mutual attraction and end up engaging in a sexual relationship. As her pregnancy becomes visible, she is imprisoned.

All this is communicated to the reader prospectively. The first scene of the novel presents Hester walking onto a scaffold to face public condemnation for her sin. For some reason, she silences about Dimmesdale's part in the 'crime'. Throughout the rest of the novel he is portrayed as a tormented man, divided between his hidden love for Hester and the prestige he enjoys amid the Puritans — a prestige which he is not willing to jeopardize. Local parishioners decide to release Hester from jail under the condition she should wear a scarlet letter A on her bosom, so that other members of the community are able to recognize her as a repenting sinner. After accepting the punishment, she begins to live as a single mother at a remote cottage. Much of the conflict narrated thence is a mere consequence of the traditional tale of forbidden love: Hester is ostracized and doomed to bring up an innocent child, Pearl, whose place in society is denied. To all effects, Pearl is a child with no future, "a born outcast of the infantile world" (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 197). Against all expectations, the girl becomes a happy and radiant being, at times uncontrollable, and apparently dedicated to tormenting her mother with inconvenient questions.

Hester's isolation allows her time for introspection, during which, according to Eaton and Pennell (2014), "she engages in independent thinking, allowing herself to consider ideas that the Puritans would label antinomian, as she places faith and love above obedience to moral law and social custom". Even though the authors' interpretation is coherent with the outcome of Hester's experience, nothing in the narrative indicates that the protagonist's acquired mental independence grants her any level of well-being. This is an important detail. She seems rather to avoid visiting the local market as much as she can; nowhere but home is she able to escape from the hostility of the locals[2] (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 185-6; 190-2). Such a picture barely changes during the novel. In a late market scene (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 320) we read: "as was usually the case wherever Hester stood, a small, vacant area – a sort of magic circle – had formed itself about her [...]". Indeed, part of the intensity of *The Scarlet Letter* derives from the fact that Hester's suffering never ceases. Even so, she manages to change her life in some ways and provide Pearl with a more prosperous future.

Dimmesdale faces a less fortunate destiny. For one thing, he is free from public humiliation. His burden, however, proves to be unbearable too as he enters a turmoil of guilt and self-destruction. Being deeply religious, Dimmesdale seems to be convinced of the destiny reserved to the hypocrite, as stated in the Bible: "a hypocrite with his mouth destroys his neighbor: but through knowledge shall the just be delivered" (Proverbs 11:9, in King James Bible). Here Hawthorne shows a very lucid — and somewhat materialistic — interpretation of the puritan logic of punishment: divine correctives forestalled in the Bible does not come by God's direct intervention, but is rather inflicted by the believer's conscience unto himself. While Dimmesdale fears that the knowledge of his past liaison will be revealed (chapters XI and XVII), he is already receiving his punishment. His penance gradually intensifies after the appearance of a certain doctor Chillingworth, whom we know to be Hester's absent husband, finally

[2] See HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 185-6, 190-2. Such a picture barely changes during the novel. In a late market scene (p. 320) we read: "as was usually the case wherever Hester stood, a small, vacant area – a sort of magic circle – had formed itself about her [...]".

back from captivity, and fully aware of the secret shared by his young wife and the minister. The man, perhaps out of sheer vanity, will not accept to show up in society as a cuckold. “I will not encounter the dishonor that besmirches the husband of a faithless woman”, he claims in chapter IV, requesting the identity of the man who fathered Hester’s child, “the man who has wronged us both” (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 182). She refuses to tell him, but promises to keep the secret of her former husband’s identity. Thus, he is able to dedicate the rest of his years to destroy his rival both physically and mentally. By doing this, Chillingworth simultaneously manages to add to Hester’s suffering.

Many traditional literary themes are present here: the love triangle, the experience of alienation, the self-estrangement of the sinner, the blind will to avenge an offense, and even the baroque approach to life as a process of spiritual endurance, all usual to Anglophone readers since the Middle Ages. The differential in Hawthorne’s work primarily lies, as stated above, in his ability to compensate the lack of action with brilliant descriptions of his characters’ minds. We follow Dimmesdale’s moral dilemmas leading him to insanity, whereas experiencing a very different mindset once we come across to Chillingworth’s cold objectivity, a tone characteristic both of his *modus operandi* and of the hollowness of a life dedicated to the demise of another human being. Each of these men has his own reasons to be doing what he does, in a way that the conflicts of the novel unfold as if propelled towards an inevitable outcome – one could say that there is much of the dynamism of the tragedy here (MORE, 1904, p. 48; MATTHIESSEN, 1941, p. 349).

Hester is also somewhat inflexible, although she radically differs from her counterparts due to her self-giving character. The very recurrence to prospective narratives disallows the reader to separate Hester’s impressions from the facts as they are narrated — after all, we only become acquainted with a great deal of the action via disperse voices. In chapter II, for instance, she leaves her prison cell to a scaffold set at Boston’s marketplace, where a public interrogatory is carried out. Before the local ministers start their exhortation, some pages are dedicated to register the gossip of local women. Through sparse conversations of unnamed characters, we are made acquainted with the symbols that will permeate the whole text. We are also informed of Hester’s alleged crime, of Dimmesdale unusual benevolence towards her, and of what kind of problems will lead the whole narrative.

> "Goodwives," said a hard-featured dame of fifty, "I'll tell ye a piece of my mind. It would be greatly for the public behoof if we women, being of mature age and church-members in good repute, should have the handling of such malefactresses as this Hester Prynne. […] If the hussy stood up for judgment before us five, that are now here in a knot together, would she come off with such a sentence as the worshipful magistrates have awarded? Marry, I trow not."
> "People say," said another, "that the Reverend Master Dimmesdale, her godly pastor, takes it very grievously to heart that such a scandal should have come upon his congregation."
> "The magistrates are God-fearing gentlemen, but merciful overmuch—that is a truth," added a third autumnal matron (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 161-162).

That is because Dimmesdale himself is part of the crime, as we know. Interesting is how these pieces of information appear in the text, and thus help to suggest the claustrophobic atmosphere of early New England settlements. The pettiness

of the puritan women leaves no doubt: even though we have many perspectives at play, they is not enough to render us suspicious of Hester's central position in the narrative. From its very beginning, Hawthorne draws the reader's empathy to the figure of Hester, and not to the hypocritical reverend, the local Puritans or the cruel husband. Early readers of the novel seemed to have faced her charisma, as well as the eloquence of Hawthorne's psychological scrutiny, as mere means to provide a moral lesson. Supposedly, Hester's overcoming of the obstacles turned her into an icon of the modern sense of autonomy and honesty towards oneself. An 1850 reviewer expressed such a view thusly:

> Her social ignominy forced her back upon *the true basis of life.* […] While Arthur Dimmesdale, cherished in the arms of that society which he had outraged, glossing his life with a false coloring which made it beautiful to all beholders, was dying of an inward anguish, Hester stood upon her *true ground*, denied by this world, and learning that *true wisdom* which comes through honesty and self-justification." (LORING, 1969, p. 46-7)[3]

Some categories evoked by the author of these lines certainly sound too abstract to modern standards of literary criticism. What could "the true basis of life" mean? Or, more importantly, how does the systematic violence acted upon Hester helped to emancipate her? It is certain that today's readers find the 19th-century expectation to draw moral lessons from literary products outdated; but even so, much of the tone of the quote above remains in the literary criticism of *The Scarlet Letter* to date.

Here we must be careful not to read it along the lines of the Enlightenment novel. Rather, its psychological dimension mirrors the social dynamics: Hester's stigma could be easily got rid of (she *wears* it, after all). She accepts to be guilty once a religious authority states she is so; no self-reliance can soothe her suffering:

> In fact, this scaffold constituted a portion of a penal machine, which now, for two or three generations past, has been merely historical and traditionary among us, but was held, in the old time, to be as effectual an agent […] as ever was the guillotine […] There can be no outrage, methinks, against our common nature—whatever be the delinquencies of the individual—no outrage more flagrant than to forbid the culprit to hide his face for shame; as it was the essence of this punishment to do. In Hester Prynne's instance, however, as not unfrequently in other cases, her sentence bore that she should stand a certain time upon the platform, but without undergoing that gripe about the neck and confinement of the head, the proneness to which was the most devilish characteristic of this ugly engine (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 165).

There is not enough evidence of whether Hester agrees with this verdict or not. Anyhow, she has to face shame, a corrective worse than death in that environment. Regardless of her shame, she strives to create a productive way of life out of her disadvantageous position within that community. Therefore, one has to be careful not to suppose an autonomous and free-spirited Hester Prynne, a self-reliant, liberal individual *avant la lettre* living in mid 17th century. Such a view is anachronistic and, above all, rules out a crucial aspect of Hawthorne's critique of American cultural heritage.

This risk seems to have been neglected for a long time. Hawthorne scholars insist on turning his critique of the American past into a gesture of support for the ruling

[3] My italics.

ideology of the liberal selfhood, a misreading which may have derived from the overemphasis on psychological aspects of his works – one relates Hester Prynne's open-mindedness to the shallow worldview of her antagonists, for example, implying her victory over them (PERSON, 2007, p. ix). There is, however, much more to it. Even the rich tradition of feminist criticism set out by George Eliot (1969, p. 66) – an approach which in itself derived from a more socio-critical, less personalistic, view of art – many times overemphasizes an inner-psychological dimension of gender conflicts. Hester is deemed as the archetypical heroine of autonomy against the coercive order she knows to be incoherent with the basic tenets of Christian religion, and therefore fully embraces her unfavorable situation to rear a child by herself.

That is certainly a dimension of Hawthorne's contributions to the history of ideas; but the univocal praise to the heroic autonomy of a character like Hester seems to relativize the persistence of her sacrifice — and the novel, named after the very symbol of her exclusion, is a work about sacrifice.

> "When strangers looked curiously at the scarlet letter and none ever failed to do so—they branded it afresh in Hester's soul [...] in short, Hester Prynne had always this dreadful agony in feeling a human eye upon the token; the spot never grew callous; it seemed, on the contrary, to grow more sensitive with daily torture." (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 191-192)

Lastly, by praising Hester's autonomy as a solution to the problem of intolerance, one ends up conflating Hawthorne's progressive views about women with a bourgeois, atomistic conception of autonomy, which is the very focus of his criticism. His later novel, *The Blithedale Romance*, published two years after *The Scarlet Letter*, offers a more direct criticism of this ideal, and therefore will be analyzed before we go back to the conflict set between Hester Prynne and the Boston Puritans.

propose an approach to both novels trying not to lose sight of the following questions: 1) What can we say about the relation between the position of the individual in society and her personal fulfillment in Hawthorne's novels?; 2) How does the social inclusion (or alienation) fulfills (or frustrates) some basic communal urges of this individual?, and 3) Would it be possible to draw any theory of the self from Hawthorne's work?

By answering the latter question positively, I am also assuming that Hawthorne's involvement with thinkers such as Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and other Transcendentalists made him an apt interlocutor in the debates about individualism as an ideological, social and philosophical issue. Hawthorne left behind relevant thoughts on modern subjectivity in his novels so that rescuing their philosophical dimension is a productive way to approach the theme set down here.

3. The problem of egotism in *The Blithedale Romance*

In many aspects, *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) inverts the formula of *The Scarlet Letter*. If in the latter community imposes its values on the outcast, in the former a group of self-exiled individuals tries to rearrange society after their own liberal principles. The protagonist of *The Scarlet Letter* is a sympathetic human being with whom we identify, whereas Miles Coverdale, the narrator of *The Blithedale Romance*, proves to be both a petty human being and an unreliable storyteller. Many other

inversions could be pointed out, though a better starting point for our comparative analysis would be to consider the common tension that pervades these novels. In both of them, there is an inevitable conflict between individual and society, and some solution must be found for the sake of maintaining the order.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, since the presence of a sinner might threaten the stability of the Puritan settlement, Hester must be marked with the symbol of shame, serving as a (forged) living proof of the grim consequences of lust. In *The Blithedale Romance*, society poses a threat to the autonomy of a small group of individuals, and by assuming as much, they decide to start society anew by moving to a remote spot, the fictional Blithedale farm[4]. As the reader makes the acquaintance of each of these individuals, it becomes evident that previous frustrations with communal life led them to join the experiment. Four figures seem to be central here inasmuch as each portrays a form of selfhood, e.g. a philosophical stance with respect to the tension between self and community:

Firstly, we have the narrative voice, Miles Coverdale, a poet who suffers from an intense case of ennui. All indicates that lack of purpose in life and sheer curiosity, rather than idealism, leads him to Blithedale; he falls in love with all other three major characters, suffers from "too much sympathy" (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 767) towards them, but later claims to "wash [his] hands of it all" (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 782).

Secondly, Zenobia is among the most extraordinary of Hawthorne's creations, above all due to the memorable dialogues involving her character. By far the most expansive personality in Blithedale, she quickly assumes the leading role among her peers. The reason why she joins the project though is not wholly clear. Later we find her to be the daughter of a former millionaire, now an impoverished man, called Moodie, who wanders around Blithedale to check how she treats her young half-sister;

This younger sister, Priscilla, is Zenobia's direct opposite; "only a leaf, floating on the dark current of events, without influencing them by her own choice or plan" (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 779). Priscilla was born after her family's reduction to poverty, a fact that made her an introvert. As we will see later on, she proves herself the only unselfish figure in the novel, apt to partake in Blithedale's communitarian worldview.

Our fourth figure is Hollingsworth, a former blacksmith, now a self-proclaimed philanthropist. Almost a male version of Zenobia concerning his social abilities, Coverdale soon deems him a rival for the women's attention. He shows a profound skepticism towards communitarianism as such, and an utter lack of regard for those around him.

As much as they can be different, in all four cases the necessity for internal order draws the individuals out of their original community. Unsatisfied with 1850's America, the Blithedalers intend to revolutionize it, and plan to do so by following a seemingly reasonable line of thought: the Blithedale community is formed by people wishing to change society, therefore it has to turn out different from it.

George Eliot's summary of the novel remains unsurpassable:

> 'Blithedale' is an idealization of Brook Farm, where, about ten years ago, a few young and hearty enthusiasts, tired of moving on so slowly toward the millennium, took Destiny into their own hands, and set up 'Paradise

[4] The Blithedale Farm was based on the real Brook Farm, an early Fourierist experiment in which Hawthorne himself took part in 1841(WINNEAPLE, 2003, p. 144-51).

> Regained,' not by writing verses or romances, but by the more prosaic method of planting their own potatoes, baking their own bread, and cobbling their own shoes, as in the days before the Flood, when every man was his own master and his own servant, and political economy had not yet brought social death into the world, 'and all our woe' (ELIOT, 1969 [1852], p. 64).

The conflicts portrayed at the beginning of the novel may confound us here. Miles Coverdale, the Boston poet, tells how he has changed (even physically) after having to work in the fields. Putting his hand on the plow is supposedly a logical step since he and other intellectualized men had gone to Blithedale in order to be transfigured, as it were, by a new regime of work and leisure. Coverdale talks about the "spiritualization of labor", which was to be his "form of prayer" and dedication to the higher cause of humanity (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 688). The goal was to be a complete man, both able to guarantee his own survival in a rural environment and capable of intellectual expertise. However, during the narrative, Coverdale faces difficulties: at one point he claims to be so exhausted, and his hands so full of blisters from manual work, that he cannot write a single word (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 689-90). No longer can his mind engage in any intellectual activity whatsoever, to the point that, being a poet, he feels he is not himself anymore (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 710). He cannot do anything with his calling due to a radical change of regime, and therefore decides to give up that new dimension brought forth by the Blithedale experience. The result is self-estrangement. Instead of writing poems (e.g. creating), Coverdale starts to live as a mere spectator of the love triangle involving Priscilla-Zenobia-Hollingsworth, which he wants to be part of, though will not bother doing anything to achieve it. He admires Zenobia and cannot help finding Priscilla's ingenuity irresistible, but he never does anything about either. He has a homoaffective leaning toward Hollingsworth and reacts by subliming whatever urge comes upon him.

All that happens because Coverdale is too self-absorbed. He takes the self-imposed mission to free himself from exterior pressure seriously and bets on following his instincts at any cost, even though they prove to lead him nowhere. Coverdale normally calls 'instincts' the traits he wanted to have associated with this new persona, that of a poet living in an experimental community. He feeds on images, and the result is that can barely act. The years pass by and all he does is to report loose facts about life: the summer in Blithedale was great, the fall not that much, then he quarrels with his former friend Hollingsworth and decides to leave the farm.

Coverdale's bad attitude is part of a broader issue in the Blithedale experiment: other community members are as self-absorbed as Coverdale is, and for this reason, the experiment fails altogether. Take Hollingsworth, for example, both Coverdale's dearest friend and despised foe, his rival and platonic lover (H HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 667; 692; 719). At the start of the novel, he is revealed as being a skeptic towards the Blithedale principles. "His heart […] was never really interested in our socialist scheme, but was forever busy with his strange, and [...] impracticable plan for the reformation of criminals", claims Coverdale (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 662-3; see also p. 650), complementing later how his friend envisioned to get rid of crime in society as a whole (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 679-80). In a way, Hollingsworth is portrayed as an obsessive version of the Enlightenment thinker, who needs to explain his wishes in terms of sound rules. Although he voices a plan to reform prisoners (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 747-9), he never talks about a single one he has met, nor does the novel portray this sector of society. He probably sustains such a plan like a bureaucrat who manages a

prison system from his air-conditioned office, deliberating about the fate of unknown men apathetically.

In Blithedale, perhaps for the first time, Hollingsworth finds himself surrounded by people who wish to reinvent themselves, looking for a way to reconnect with a communal body; people who expected to find *something* they were unable to in the neighboring Boston or elsewhere. He gradually learns to enjoy that harmonious atmosphere of optimism and brotherhood. Soon, and to the utter despair of Coverdale, Hollingsworth joins Zenobia, with whom he has long walks and excited conversations, each finds in the other a true friend and an intelligent interlocutor. From Coverdale's jealous perspective, the unexpected union could not possibly be attributed to the man's qualities, but to the woman's frailty. "Hollingsworth, like many other illustrious prophets, reformers, and philanthropists, was likely to make at least […] proselytes among the women" (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 698). When at the very end of the novel it becomes clear to Zenobia that Hollingsworth, whom she loves, has joined the community aiming at convincing local revolutionaries to join his own philanthropic society, she falls into despair and commits suicide (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 826-36).

Zenobia's suicide is to be understood in light of her parasitical relationship to Priscilla. Both sisters, who are always found together, share similarities with Hester Prynne. Like Hester, Zenobia is both a disagreeable and a seductive character. No one dislikes her in Blithedale; men and women are fascinated by her beauty and alluring personality to the point that some men compete for her attention, depite knowing how pathetic this may sound, as Zenobia is clearly too independent to be owned by a male. Priscilla, by her turn, shares Hester's passive endurance; at her first night in Blithedale, she appears as a fragile young lady knocking at the door of the Lyceum hall and claiming to be Zenobia's protégé. The latter accepts her half scornfully, half open-heartedly, pretending not to be acquainted with the newcomer (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 654). Only later in chapter XXII, they are revealed to be half-sisters. Whereas Zenobia had a splendid upbringing, with liberty enough so "her character was left to shape itself" (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 797), her young sister was "the daughter of [her father Moodie's] calamity" (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 800):

> There was a lack of human substance in her; it seemed as if, were she to stand up in a sunbeam, it would pass right through her figure, and trace out the cracked and dusty window-panes upon the naked floor […] They called her ghost-child (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 794-5).

Only by reading their story in the second half of the novel, we are able to identify Zenobia's flaws. Until then the picture Coverdale paints of her is all-too idealized to allow any perspective that she is also a limited, petty human being. Moodie suggests that Zenobia has been mistreating her sister their whole life and that what engenders her superior demeanor is nothing but her comfortable upbringing. To maintain her sense of worth, Zenobia continually resorts to treating her half-sister as a maid. When their vagrant father arrives at the farm to see how both of them are behaving, he returns home disappointed (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 704-9).

This builds the image of an undoubtfully strong woman, though shattered inside. Unlike Hester, again, Zenobia is not a revolutionary – her role within the Blithedale phalanstery does not change her power play relation to her dependents. Nevertheless, Zenobia thinks to be evolving. She believes in the love of a man like Hollingsworth, and turns out deeply hurt as she finds out about his manipulative personality. In the end,

Priscilla denies the authority of the older sister and abandons her. This is the moment all self-conceit of the so-called revolutionaries – who are deep down only vain, self-absorbed bourgeois – is revealed. The catastrophe seems to prelude to Zenobia's death.

Priscilla, conversely, does change. After confronting her oppressors, she becomes the lover of the most manipulative figure in the novel, Hollingsworth (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 739-43; 823-4). Many years after the failure of the Blithedale experiment, Coverdale leaves the reader a report of a journey he undertook "for the sole purpose of catching a last glimpse of Hollingsworth" (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 843), his old friend and nemesis, in order to confirm whether he had achieved the entrepreneurial success he had once envisioned. Instead, Coverdale confirms that Hollingsworth had become another anonymous who "inhabited a small cottage, that his way of life was exceedingly retired", and he continues,

> […] my only chance of encountering him or Priscilla was to meet them in a secluded lane, where, in the latter part of the afternoon, they were accustomed to walk. I did meet them, accordingly. As they approached me, I observed in Hollingsworth's face a depressed and melancholy look that seemed habitual; the powerfully built man showed a self-distrustful weakness, and a childlike or childish tendency to press close, and closer still, to the side of the slender woman whose arm was within his. In Priscilla's manner there was a protective and watchful quality, as if she felt herself the guardian of her companion; but, likewise, a deep, submissive, unquestioning reverence, and also a veiled happiness in her fair and quiet countenance (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 843-4).

Only when Hollingsworth resigns completely, can Priscilla enjoy the long-awaited expansion of her selfhood. Once proud and pragmatic, he grows somber and becomes a shattered man, living outside a society he cannot and does not care to influence. Besides, he does so alongside a woman who will never question anything he has to say. Much of this odd relationship is left unexplained, and Hawthorne relies on paradoxical formulations such as the one that claims Priscilla behaved as if she felt herself a guardian; not a proper guardian, but a submissive one. With Zenobia dead and Hollingsworth defeated, one could extend the dynamics set forth in the novel and say that the weakness of the parasitical, self-absorbed type of people that both stand for allows the introverts to find a place in the world. With a veiled happiness Priscilla, being the ultimate representative of the latter sort, is able to assume the leading position.

4. The calling as intermediary between self and community

So far we have been dealing with self-absorption; let us turn to the role of the calling of each figure in Hawthorne's fiction. Zenobia is the only one with no calling: she is a mere figurehead of that community, who just once helps to nurse Coverdale during his illness, and does it poorly. "I recognized no severe culture in Zenobia; her mind was full of weeds" (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 669), Coverdale dismissively points out, ignoring his own failure to deliver in Blithedale. He had once expected that the experience there would grant him material for his best poetry (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 644), a belief later proven wrong. Coverdale then becomes the poet who lost his genius.

Hollingsworth by his turn plays the role of the philanthropist, and that in a community of self-helpers; he is a paternalistic figure amid an equalitarian group. His

philanthropy is absurd and it becomes offensive to Blithedalers as soon as they discover that the real motive behind the man's presence there was to purchase the very ground on which the farm stood (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 747). Thereupon he loses influence over his colleagues.

Priscilla's calling is certainly the most suggestive – she is a circus attraction, the so-called Veiled Lady, presented by a charlatan in small gatherings destined to entertain curious young fellows and superstitious farmers (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 635; 803). Like Hester, there is a spectral lure around her; her presence is constantly faded by some stronger and more imposing figure. Besides, again in parallel to Hester, she is always the one who sews. Through their needlework, both "came to have a part to perform in the world" (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 190). More specifically, Priscilla sews purses for her impoverished father, which are then peddled in the Boston bohemian quarters (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 704-706). Priscilla is self-giving enough to serve as a companion to the frustrated philanthropist Hollingsworth – as if doing him a favor – and in the end, in an unexpected declaration, she is said to be the only true love of Coverdale's life.

Coverdale is no reliable narrator. His opinions alter rapidly, making him untrustworthy both to us readers and to his fellow Blithedalers. What does then justify his late declaration of platonic love to Priscilla, and why does he let such an important confession to the end of the narrative, after all? Through the whole novel, Zenobia is the real object of Coverdale's fascination. She mesmerizes him by showing his ridicule, like all strong women in Hawthorne's novels do to their chauvinistic companions (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 672; 714). Does then Coverdale's final declaration suggest he sensed Priscilla's superiority over her egotistical peers? Is he somehow aware that she had been the one who understood the communitarian spirit and was able – in parts due to her upbringing – to repeal the bourgeois self-obsession, which turned everyone else into bitter, lonely or self-destructive people?

These are mere speculations, though valid ones since they allow us to go from Coverdale's own romanticized mind frame and touch a deeper level of meaning in the novel. In some sense, such questions are direct outcomes from the narrative mode crafted by Hawthorne. In interpreting the last scene of the novel, one can also consider the protagonist's tendency to become fascinated by everything he cannot control, claiming that his final portrayal of Priscilla indicates that, at last, she was the one who had the quality that most lacks in a solitary man: she is self-giving.

Let us neither idealize Priscilla's fate nor follow the overtly idealistic 'gospel of the heart' professed by the old Hawthorne (WAGGONER, 1991, p. 75). From the beginning to the end, Priscilla is a victim. She accepts she is better off being anonymous, presenting herself to the world as a *veiled* lady – suggestively, the Veiled Lady is not only a person who will hide her face from her spectators, she is also considered to be eerie, supernatural – one expects her to disappear all of a sudden; and that is part of the spectacle Priscilla learned to provide. There are no circus numbers in her adult life, but also no social participation – it was a life beside a failed man, living in ignorance and sharing his solitude. The Blithedale experience, as well as the life project of the subjects involved therein, results in a failed utopia.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, in spite of the valuable experience Hester and Dimmesdale had together, adults cannot be fully transformed. Both characters, although against the Puritan prejudices, were born within that environment. In Hawthorne's fictional universe, it is too late for adults to change their sensibilities. That explains the end of

the novel, disappointing as it is for many critics: after freeing herself and Pearl from the world of superstition and hypocritical moralism, Hester cannot help going back to Boston and living the rest of her life there, without giving up the scarlet letter, the symbol of her ostracism. "Hester's resumption of her role as branded woman seems disappointing – a betrayal of her character's potential", comments Person (2007, p. 81). It is Pearl, her progeny, who will enjoy a life outside that sterile environment.

In the *Blithedale Romance*, on the other hand, we find no next generation. Priscilla and Hollingsworth form a childless couple. Zenobia dies before giving birth; Coverdale remains a bachelor for life. Polemical as it may be, Hawthorne leaves the impression that there is no positive outcome for the socialist experiments of his time, and points out the possible reason for that: 19th century people had neither learned to tame egotism, nor left adequate successors who would learn from their parents' mistakes (WAGGONER, 1991, p. 25, 38)[5].

Therefore, be it Hester or Priscilla, Hawthorne's virtuous figures seem to share a bleak fate as they become more and more invisible, until completely retreat from a society which will not recognize their worth. Self for Hawthorne – as it was for his German predecessor Goethe – cannot be lived as an autonomous entity. This is part of the illusions of the liberal ideology, which the author criticizes in Anglo-Saxon culture[6]. "Hawthorne tests the proposition that human identity is contingent and circumstantial, rather than an inherent essence," points Leland S. Person (2007, p. 49). "We like to think that there is something in us – a soul, or some other core of identity, the continuity that memory gives us – that does not change" (PERSON, 2007, p. 71). Nevertheless, Hawthorne's characters only gain their selfhood and find a substantial value in themselves inasmuch as they coexist and collide with other selves (WAGGONER, 1991, p. 23). "Many of the romantic poets in the early part of the century", claims Randall Stewart (1948, p. 252-253), "emphasized the idiosyncratic, glorified the lonely, exceptional individual. They enjoyed and celebrated […] their differentness from the mass of humanity." Against such an assumption, Hawthorne's tales of personal failure divert us from the uniqueness of their characters, attestesting rather that the "surest basis of happiness is found […] in those [traits] which one possesses in common with others" (STEWART, 1948, p. 253). There lies the author's main objection against the era of individualism.

Two of his late short stories ("Egotism", 1843, and "Ethan Brand", 1850) are very explicit about this, proposing that egotism, together with a sense of intellectual pride found in some individuals who take the world as a laboratory to their theories, work as the quintessential "unpardonable sin"[7]. The paradoxical formula Hawthorne novels propose could be expressed so: self-absorption leads to self-estrangement; the

[5] In the preface the narrator attests his neutrality by mentioning that his treatment of the subject does not "put forward the slightest pretensions to [...] elicit a conclusion, favorable or otherwise, in respect to Socialism" as a future possibility to society (WAGGONER, 1991, p. 633).

[6] Hawthorne's Anglo-Saxon criticism tends not to put subjectivity as an absolute value into question – as if it were something given *a priori* to human beings, and not a modern social construct. J. Hillis Miller, in *Hawthorne and History* (1991, p. 92) says that in the short story "The Minister's Black Veil", Hawthorne "suspends two of the assumptions that make society possible: the assumption that a person's face [in a sociological sense of the word here; as *persona*] is the sign of his selfhood and the accompanying presumption that this sign can in one way or another be read". I suggest that, for Hawthorne, part of the problem in American culture is the very assumption that the exaltation of the persona makes society possible.

[7] The same phrase appears in *the Blithedale Romance* (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 677-678).

more one craves after one's innermost core, the less substance one finds. Egotism, thus, is rather a symptom of a social compulsion than a profitable device that allows one to prove one's individual value.

This does not imply that differentiation is necessarily a negative factor. Let us not forget Hester's courage to differentiate from the Puritan crowd: by accepting the scarlet letter and transforming it into the symbol of her holiness, she attests her distance from a society she knows to be hypocritical. The proposed solution for self-estrangement resides in the radical denial of self-compulsion.

5. About the closing paragraphs of *The Scarlet Letter*

What renders *The Scarlet Letter* tragic is the fact that Hester cannot overcome the stigma of being guilty. This strikes the reader as odd since she does not find any urge to repent her 'sin'; she was supposed to be guilty only through the eyes of the puritans. After all, Hester has no problems in accepting her past deeds; the love affair with Dimmesdale feels legitimate since their mutual sentiment is authentic. The guilt she carries is more like a performed act through which she expresses the force of her love, even though it may require some sacrifices. In trying to blend in, Hester learns to be selfless; ultimately the only selfless member of that community. On the other hand, the physician Chillingworth is obsessed with his vengeance against those who stained his image of an honorable husband, to the point of using his calling to administer a slow and cruel punishment upon Hester's lover, who is also obsessed – not properly with a personal goal but with his own purity, since he covertly enjoys the status of a holy incorruptible churchman (LORING, 1969 [1850], p. 43).

Hester seeks for a calling that allows her to find her value both as a Christian and as a useful member of the community. If she turns out a winner in any sense, it is because, against all odds, she becomes useful to her fellow Puritans once the pest sets in – some people even suggest that the 'A' embroidered on her dress stands for Able. Thus, she uses her social handicap to attain her calling.

As the question of one's calling (and the uses of it within the community one inhabits) comes into account, certain parallels between Hester and Priscilla become prominent. Firstly, like Priscilla, Hester is a seamstress. As substitutes for the Providence, they clothe those who are most in need for care and human warmth (see Matthew 6:28-30). At one point Coverdale suggestively claims that Priscilla's purses are the "symbol[s] of [her] own mystery" (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 662)[8], e.g. of her prominence even though she is faded by the presence of more charismatic revolutionaries. Secondly, Hester becomes a guardian-like figure as well. During the pest she serves as a Sister of Mercy (a selfless calling by itself) and, even before that, in chapters VII and VIII, she suggestively fights for the guardianship of her progeny. In the eyes of Puritan authorities, a woman, above all a sinful one, is unable to wisely rear a child under the precepts of religion. Hester has to fulfill the role of a guardian twice, becoming father and mother to Pearl. The price she paid ended up being the emptying of

[8] Later on, just before leaving Blithedale, Coverdale deciphers the meaning of such a mystery: "you, Priscilla, are a little prophetess; or, at least, [...] you have spiritual intimations respecting matters which are dark to us grosser people" (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 756-757). Significantly, he does so after requesting a purse she was working on in order to keep as a keepsake, a symbol of the unselfish being only she could become.

her sense of self, now in the negative sense of the term. She cannot live anywhere but in the puritan settlements after Pearl is gone, more as a spectral figure than as a real one. There is something sinister about Hester's last days, which can be easily neglected when one overemphasizes the symbolic power with which she is indeed invested. What she leaves behind is worthwhile enough to justify the novel's composition (see HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 148) – unlike the life of any other character, Hester's renders a narrative with a liberating message, becoming a source for social change. Her self turns into a stronger symbol than the scarlet letter, and indissociable from it.

If one deems Hester the same sensual, lively being from the beginning of the novel, it is hard to deny the bleakness of her final days. For a brief period described in chapters XVII and XVIII, she and Dimmesdale seem to believe in the possibility of fleeing and starting life anew somewhere else. However, in the end an early narrator's remark confirms itself as true: "it may seem marvelous, that, with the world before her [...] this woman should still call that place [New England] her home [...]" (HAWTHORNE, 1983, p. 186). It is marvelous indeed, and we will never know what exactly leads Hester to act so. Disappointment with Dimmesdale's reluctance to accept her publicly? Weariness after years of suffering? An exact answer cannot be found in the novel. What is certain is that the happy fulfilling life Hester once envisioned will be achieved only by the next generation, by her daughter, far off the borders of 17th century Boston.

Something similar happens in *The Blithedale Romance*. There, in his most realistic novel, Hawthorne deals with individuals who primarily suppose themselves to be the agents of change in society. One can say that everybody in Blithedale wants to be a version of Hester Prynne. Hawthorne thus avoids the resilient and die-hard belief that revolutionary characters can win over a corrupt society, which they, and only they, are enlightened enough to reform. We find no revolutionary romanticism in neither of these novels; Hester and Priscilla cannot build an identity outside their assigned roles, despite all resistance against social impositions. Hester will die in Boston, wearing her scarlet letter; Priscilla will follow her master until the end.

All in all, the Hawthornian portrayal of different modes of selfhood offers us case studies of failed integration in society. In the cases of Zenobia, Hollingsworth, and Coverdale, too much pretension to self-sufficiency renders individuals alienated, unable to find their place in the community. In the cases of Hester and Priscilla, society fails to recognize the worth of its most useful members, rendering them faded beings, destined to live dull, unfulfilling lives. Hence, Hawthorne's approach refutes the optimism of mid-19th-century perspectives on selfhood that has been explored here as a basic tenet of the liberal ideology. Since Benjamin Franklin, American literary treatments of the subjectivity derived from the ideal of self-reliance; its main character was the self-made person whose radical task was to achieve their own goals in life *despite* society. Such a view was also implied in Emerson's contemplative self, or Walt Whitman's singing self, fully integrated into the city landscape. Hawthorne is relevant to us in his questioning of a deeply embedded notion in western cultures that presume selfhood without otherness. In the two novels here analyzed, outweighing either individual or collective dimension invariably produces shattered human beings, excluded from social participation in important ways.

What is left for them is the deliberate employment of their callings, a strange category Hawthorne insists upon, which sound oddly akin to Cooper's notion of the *gift* in the Leather-stocking Tales and Goethe's concepts of *Sendung* and *Berufung* in the

Wilhelm Meister's trilogy.[9] Such a good use of the calling, I conclude, may anticipate a new model of subjective agency in a society that withstands the arid world of normativity and lack of communal sense. Serving others seems to be the last resort of the few heroes crafted by Hawthorne's pen. Moreover, only marginalized people seem to grasp the logic of communal life before those fortunate ones who have a safe place in society and cannot help conforming to it, thinking solely about their own interests.

There is no political agenda or organized resistance against alienation in those works nonetheless. Hawthorne leaves a deep and complex portrait of the dynamics of estrangement in early bourgeois society and does so without providing a final solution for it. Especially in *The Blithedale Romance*, the effort was to explain why that self-acclaimed revolutionary experiment (akin to the Brook Farm experiment in which the author himself took part) failed and had to fail.

We must also notice that Hawthorne does not identify the shattered selfhood as a phenomenon exclusive to modern societies. Both 17th century puritans portrayed in *The Scarlet Letter* and 19th century Blithedalers share similar issues. Hawthorne's crude suggestion is that American society has not substantially progressed since the times of Cotton Matter; the spiritual crisis of all inhabitants of his fictional universe is one and the same.

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[9] Cooper develops this concept in *The Pathfinder* (COOPER, 1985, p. 230), above all. Remarks related to the notions of *Sendung* and *Berufung* are scattered through, respectively, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters theatralische Sendung* and *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*'s final scene (GOETHE, 1948, p. 459-460).

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