

Neutral Territory: Cultural Space in Hawthorne's Travel Writing*

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The emphasis on the combination of physical space and metaphorical space is a major feature of Hawthorne's narrative. This paper analyzes cultural space in Hawthorne's travel writing, centering on his works *The Old Manse* and *The Marble Faun* from the perspective of neutral territory. The old manse and Rome carry different cultural metaphors, each reflecting a complex and subtle narrative space. Individually, Hawthorne transforms the old manse into Thoreau's cabin, where American is affected by "sleepiness" and gains spiritual healing. At the national level, Hawthorne creates an allegorical Italy as borderland to explore the existence of American civilization.

Keywords: Nathaniel Hawthorne, neutral philosophy, cultural space, travel writing

Introduction

As Tylor (1889) stated in his essay *Primitive Culture*, "scale of civilization" promised a powerful genealogy of modernity, a narrative of origins that could account for the social difference or "unevenness" perceived at home and abroad. *The Old Manse* that published in 1846 firstly described Hawthorne's investment in intermediary cultural space and his advocacy for spiritual healing in retreat. Italy in *The Marble Faun* was also seen as new cultural configuration to explore the interpretive consequences for America. The meanings that reside in both distinctive cultural spaces could be further analyzed.

Hawthorne's "Neutral Territory"

The mid-19th century in literary history is the era of prose narrative. Cooper, Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, and Stowe are writers of prose narrative. For many readers, *The Scarlet Letter* still counts as literature. "Yet other valuable prose narratives of the time often trouble today's readers because there is no clear conceptual category into which the works fit" (Bercovitch, 1995, p. 607). In Hawthorne's romance narratives, he "turns away to develop a freely imaginative space" (p. 609). More importantly, this literary narrative "not only differed from but seemed also to transcend and, implicitly, to criticize the world of common life" (p. 609). In *The Custom-House*, Hawthorne suggests that the romance-writer must conjure up "a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other" (Hawthorne, 2007, p. 30). In his Juvenile literature *The Whole History of Grandfather's Chair*, Laffrado

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(1992) found Hawthorne uses imagination “symbolized by magic and alchemy, allows his characters and even the writer to travel through space and time, to be somewhere else” (p. 7) and interprets the “Neutral Territory” as an “unconventional reality” to represent the founding process of the United States. In the prologue to *The House of the Seven Gables*, Hawthorne sees romance as a genre in opposition to the novel. The novel focuses on the social reality, while romance centers on the deep consciousness or psychological reality of the subject. Meanwhile, in his preface of *The Marble Faun*, Hawthorne locates the distinction between “the Actual and the Imaginary” in terms of the difference between America and Italy. The tradition of cultural understanding within which Hawthorne worked best was a tradition not merely of substance, ...but also of metaphor and its correspondent discursive or narrative forms (Pearce, 1964, p. 302). There, Hawthorne creates a poetic space with ambiguous geographical background. As Fussel said, American people drew “an imaginary metonymous line—‘that admixture of civilization, and of the forest’” (p. 302). The conflict between the two is the eternal problem of Hawthorne: “The prosaic world contends with the poetic imagination, not yet entirely at ease in the new environment” (p. 311). Fussel concludes that “The neutral territory is the meeting point between the facts of American history and the painfully growing American mind” (p. 312). Shannon Burns (1978) summarizes that Hawthorne’s neutral territory is a “specific state of mind, a way of looking at reality, a fictional world in which neither the ‘real’ world nor the world of the fairy tale holds sway” (p. 106). In this mysterious territory, viewpoints could change radically and revelation could take place. The aim Hawthorne creates such a space is to make readers look at world with a sense of doubt and criticism. Hawthorne “envision[s] his ‘romance’ as a ‘neutral territory’ in which literature and history, artistic representation and political action, can meet and interpenetrate” (Bellis, 2003, p. 12). After Hawthorne’s repeated attempts, “Neutral Territory” became a creative concept and narrative strategy in romance.

Retreat: Thoreauesque Cabin

The Old Manse is full of anecdotes with obvious style of travel writing. In this old manse, Hawthorne views himself as both host and guide. Kristie Hamilton (1998) formulates that “His sketches, where detached, domestic leisure characterized the space, activity, and subject position of the post-Irving sketch writer” (p. 90). He shows us around the house and surroundings, presenting a solemn “sight-showing” (Hawthorne, 1904, p. 11) of the nearby battleground. He often pauses to draw morals from what he sees, presenting the symbolic potential of the natural world, praising in his descriptions the benevolent and idealized nature. In the mid-19th century, modernity continues to bring dramatic changes to American and has implanted mental anxiety in every aspect of human life. He writes this particular travel notes with the moral and symbolic themes and highlights that nature must have some meaning. It cannot simply exist. Hawthorne begins his travel notes by deliberately emphasizing the connection between the place and its history. But, at the end of the passage, he claims that the old manse and its surrounding area were part of a realm very different from the everyday world. Landscape such as the Concord River, at the edge of the house’s backyard, is described: “While all things else are compelled to subserve some useful purpose, it idles its sluggish life away, in lazy liberty, without turning a solitary spindle, or affording even water-power enough to grind the corn that grows upon its banks” (p. 13). His guests include men “whose career of perpetual action was impeded and harassed by the rarest of his powers and the richest of his acquirements”, men “who had thrown his ardent heart from earliest youth into the strife of politics, and now, perchance, began to suspect that one lifetime is too brief for the accomplishment of any lofty aim”, and the woman “on whose

feminine nature had been imposed the heavy gift of intellectual power, such as a strong man might have staggered under, and with it the necessity to act upon the world" (p. 76). As Hawthorne stated,

It has gone distracted, through a morbid activity, and, while preternaturally wide-awake, is nevertheless tormented by visions, that seem real to it now, but would assume their true aspect and character, were all things once set right by an interval of sound repose. (p. 77)

They all suffered from anxiety and contradiction modernity brought in the city. So, Hawthorne distinguishes the old manse from both the "instruction" and mere "pleasure and amusement" to assuage conflicts, which indicated enormous cultural value and function of the old manse.

Hawthorne witnesses a new cultural space that isolated from mass civilization and corrupted principles in his brain. In this cultural territory, people could keep emotional depth and intellectual seriousness to reach earnest self-examination. He notices that friends who visited the old manse exhibited an urge to fall asleep. Elsewhere, people might find this a contemptible self-indulgence. But, this intermediate space between sleep and waking is favored as an amiable withdrawal from reality. Rather than seeing this sleepiness as a sign of his incompetence as a host, Hawthorne interpreted this sleepiness as an achievement. "Others could give them pleasure and amusement; or instruction—these could be picked up anywhere—but it was for me to give them rest—rest in a life of trouble" (p. 75). Hawthorne's claims about the efficacy of sleep in the old manse fully anticipate a crisis and realize a healing spirit. Hawthorne creates an isolated and private space through depicting the old manse as "glimmering shadows". In this space, people enjoy the privileged position in the world. He gives the old manse an important role as a retreat of avoiding "dusty glare and tumult of the world" (p. 74). A sojourn upon the Assabeth River with Ellery Channing shows the reason why they need this space. Hawthorne in *The Old Manse* confesses,

But the chief profit of those wild days to him and me lay, not in any definite idea, not in any angular or rounded truth, which we dug out of the shapeless mass of problematical stuff, but in the freedom which we thereby won from all custom and conventionalism and fettering influences of man on man. (p. 64)

It is clear that he is now convinced that society limits people and hinders creative thinking. So, he asserts "We were so free today, that it was impossible to be slaves again tomorrow" (p. 64). His aim is not to preserve the whole social system, but to "long protect the institutions that had grown out of the heart of mankind" (p. 67).

He raises a question of the ideal and the real: "Which, after all, was the most real—the picture, or the original?—the objects palpable to our grosser senses, or their apotheosis in the stream beneath?" (p. 57), as he mentions in *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Marble Faun*. He gives a straightforward answer: "Surely the disembodied images stand in closer relation to the soul" (p. 57). The old manse is the "disembodied image" and contains an ideal and unchanging order, which aims to achieve the unity of soul and body. He gives the implication of landscape in *Buds and Bird-Voices*, "We dwell in an old moss-covered mansion...yet all these outward circumstances are made less than visionary, by the renewing power of the spirit" (Hawthorne, 1982, p. 829). In *The Old Manse*, Hawthorne combined his writing with this new cultural space to reshape and renew the lives of those at leisure in the "neutral territory" so as to preserve a certain permanence. Instead of trying to describe the real life as the realistic writers do, he sits alone in front of the door of old manse and creatively fantasize various scenes. And the people and things in these scenes are neither in pure reality world nor in illusionary world, but the "Neutral Territory" between the two.

Borderland: Allegorical Italy

Bercovitch (1991) asserts that Hester's remarkable but heretical defiance and the Puritan's severe penalty are transformed into the operative tensions that foster the liberal order yet to be born. After introducing *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Marble Faun* transplants the same dramatic pattern onto the stage of world history. By enlarging a national history into a global one, Hawthorne was participating in the early formation of a symbolic culture. In Robert Levine's view, Hawthorne made a hypothesis "rather through a historicism that explores more generalized cultural tensions in a foreign setting that, during the antebellum period, would have invariably prompted Americans to think about America" (Levine, 1990, p. 20). The old world of Italy, and the even older one of ancient myth, "provide Hawthorne with the symbolic material for an internal ethnographic drama, a doubling of culture and race that was also one of the subtexts of early anthropology" (Bentley, 1995, pp. 27-28).

In the first paragraph of *The Marble Faun*, "famous production of antique sculpture... still shining in the undiminished majesty and beauty of their ideal life" (Hawthorne, 1860, p. 15) in the sculpture gallery presented a place of high culture and monumental art. Yet the narrative in fact serves for constituting this idealized space of high culture. After showing the sculpture gallery, the narrator immediately transforms view into "a shapeless confusion of modern edifices" (p. 16) nestled between ancient buildings and the ruins of a Roman street. Narrator in delusion depicts that Roma produces "a vague sense of ponderous remembrances; a perception of such weight and density in a by-gone life, of which this past was the centre, that the present moment is pressed down or crowded out" (p. 16). Meanwhile, he also sees "Side by side with the massiveness of the Roman Past, all matters, that we handle or dream of, now-a-days, look evanescent and visionary alike" (p. 16). Roman itself mirrored doubled images. It appears by turns as the mythic eternal city and as a site of urban blight. In *The Marble Faun*, the antiquity of the mythic world is set alongside the "decayed" modern Italians with antebellum conflicts. It casts a shadow from across the Atlantic. Hawthorne's writing is characterized by the fact that he creates his neutral territory by consciously, almost rhythmically, alternating similar details with less authentic elements. He tries to maintain that balance throughout. *The Marble Faun* begins in the real world, slowly moves into a realm where apparently unusual events take place, and finally into a world of mystery. The novel conducts an imaginary journey where people witness a varied landscape of more primitive stages of civilization. So, Rome becomes a "visionary" space on which the narrator can write a story of the eternal meaning transmitted through culture. In the novel, it is Italy that seems to face the threat of political turmoil, whereas the America described in the preface of novel is a "stalwart" nation of "commonplace prosperity". Apparently, there is incongruity and transposition of Old and New Worlds.

Taylor points out primitive culture serves "not merely as a matter of curious research, but as an important practical guide to the understanding of the present" (Taylor, 1889, p. 24). Italy carries the primitive cultural space, and the Italians represent the remnants of the "earlier system". In *The Marble Faun*, Italy offers modern America "antiquities" and history that can provide cultural "prosperity" and progress of civilization for an unrepresented America. Donatello gives Mariam "the idea of being not precisely man, nor yet a child, but, in a high and beautiful sense, an animal" (p. 101). However, it is worth mentioning that like primitive man, Donatello's life is determined by his impulsiveness: His sudden anger against the model leads him to murder in a "breathless instant" (p. 215). The primitive faun, therefore, is a decidedly mythic creature and "Hawthorne's imagining" that never exists. It represents a social selection. It seems that life has evolved so sadly dramatic that such men must change their nature, otherwise perish, like the antediluvian creatures. Hawthorne's faun represents a wistful and imaginary

memory of a lower one. Roma as this cultural space provides an ideal perspective and introduces a form of social surveillance that allows the observer to see at a glance who is out of place in a changing society.

In a travel log named *Chiefly About War Matters* about his trip to wartime Washington, Hawthorne compares a group of escaped slaves with mythic fauns. The men and women walking north on a Virginia road, he wrote, "were unlike the specimens of their race whom we are accustomed to see at the North" (Hawthorne, 1862, p. 50). Hawthorne sees them as beings of "primeval simplicity". Slaves who have left the plantation no longer belong to any established place in American society, are temporally displaced, and have no true dwelling space outside of a slave society. Hawthorne hesitates and questions: "For the sake of the manhood which is latent in them, I would not have turned them back; but I should have felt almost as reluctant, on their own account, to hasten them forward to the stranger's land" (p. 50). In his view, true liberty for the slave is another matter. This logic of black immigration politics echoes that of Hilda and Kenyon's journey to home from Italy. Hilda's walk through the alleys of Rome shows spaces of modern savagery:

Hilda's present expedition led her into what was—physically, at least—the foulest and ugliest part of Rome. In that vicinity lies the Ghetto, where thousands of Jews are crowded within a narrow compass, and lead a close, unclean, and multitudinous life. (Hawthorne, 1860, p. 195)

Hilda passes through this space to ensure that her New England world has surpassed this stage of primitive development. At last, she finds that there are "no future moments" (p. 283) in Italy and returns to America. Since the Revolutionary War, the other side of the Atlantic has always been a lingering cultural shadow and an "otherness" at the core of American culture and national character. In *Our Old Home*, so Hawthorne blames it all on that "English character would have been too ponderous a dead-weight upon our progress" (Hawthorne, 1901, p. 23). Italy serves as America's space of primitive cultural space, just as America has served that role for Britain.

Conclusion

Space is not an abstract objective existence, but a fruit of social production or a complex social construction, which will eventually have an impact on social practice and social cognition. In Hawthorne's travel writing, the city image is materialistic, bleak, collapsing, and depressing. Affected by the grand narratives of modernity, the old manse and Italy in Hawthorne's works are located deep in neutral territory. He explores the interpretive consequences of examining landscape in the light of this new cultural configuration. He does not want to return to the primitive barbaric times, but hopes that people can break free from the fetters of material pursuit, put time and energy on the self-improvement of personality, and further realize individual and national existence.

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