Pia Masiero Marcolin

THE THREEFOLD DESTINY,
HAWTHORNE'S 'MISTY ROMANCE':
AN ANALYSIS IN (GENERIC) PERSPECTIVE

Il romanzo, non appena affermatosi come genere autonomo, rivela chiare tendenze egemoniche e aspira a inglobare in qualche modo gli altri generi, diventando più che genere guida, genere totale.

CESARE SEGRE

And just as the relationship between promise and unfulfillment eventually develops towards some form of identity, such as the one single point of original fall or rise, or simply of misplaced hopes, so the achievement of allegory lies in the capacity to sustain complexity by making successful changes. American allegory, therefore, is a mode of thought in which transformation takes place.

OLAF HANSEN

The whole point of allegory is that it does not need to be read exegetically; it often has a literal level that makes good enough sense all by itself. But somehow this literal surface suggests a peculiar doubleness of intention. and while it can, as it were get along without interpretation, it becomes much richer and more interesting if given interpretation.

ANGUS FLETCHER

[Allegory] cannot be other than spoken consciously.

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

Dealing with the question of genres in literature is a hard task for a critic. Punning on the meaning of the term, we might say that generic considerations run the risk to be a generic mapping out of literary productions somewhat abstracted and isolated from their essential co-ordinates of time and space.

In his contribution to Interpretation: Medieval and Modern, Ansgar Kelly makes an interesting distinction concerning generic interpretation. He writes:
In this paper I wish to extend my approach [...] to genres in general. I am restricting myself to two kinds of situations: to cases of authorial awareness of genres in composing their own works. I call this the interpretation of genres; and to cases where writers apply generic categories to already existing works – this is interpretation by genres.

Some lines on Kelly reinforces the distinction:

For a work to qualify as an interpretation of a genre in the sense that I am using it here, it is not enough for its author to call it by a generic name; he must be consciously using it in a generic sense.¹

Kelly’s clear distinction provides us with a useful starting point to approach Nathaniel Hawthorne’s work from a generic perspective. In fact Hawthorne belongs to the category of those writers who have an “awareness of genres in composing their own works”. Hawthorne’s awareness of genres goes beyond an easy and superficial generic labelling well into the perception and recognition of generic dilemmas. Hawthorne’s interest in the distinction between novel and romance is well known and much written upon. Many of his most famous prefaces hinge upon this generic distinction which may be considered a sort of underlying and founding element in his whole production. In all of these theoretic frames the romance seems to prevail as Hawthorne’s most cherished genre, that is a genre which allows the writer a special “latitude”. The generic power of representation is at stake here.

Tentatively I would suggest that Chaucer and Hawthorne in their literary experimentation lived a parallel and yet reversed difficulty concerning the boundaries of the romance mode. In spite of their macroscopic differences, their interest in the dynamics of the romance mode stems back from the question of the relationship between reality and its fictional representation-representability.

In The Canterbury Tales Chaucer challenged the genre romance directly in two tales: “Sir Thopas” and “The Squire’s Tale”. As the former is told by Chaucer’s own fictional self and the latter by a character, the squire, who is recognisable as the most explicit embodiment of the writer’s alter ego, I think we can consider these two tales as a clear voicing of Chaucer’s view on the romance mode.

“Sir Thopas” sounds as a veritable parody of the romance

¹ Kelly 111.
mode. Whereas on the one hand Chaucer seems to adhere to the dictates of the mode employing typically romantic elements, namely, the quest and a chivalric scenario, on the other hand, he inserts realistic and ironic details which do not fit into the romantic construction. These details create a sort of transversal undercurrent which undermines the mode from within.

In “The Squire’s Tale” Chaucer introduces a much more subtle commentary on the romance and addresses the problem of the genre romance as a usable literary form directly. As “Sir Thopas”, “The Squire’s Tale” is, structurally speaking, a typical interlaced romance based on the constitutive elements of this mode. Yet, the undermining of the genre is not due to an ironic and parodic tone, as in “Sir Thopas”, but to an experimental (and disruptive) handling of the element of the “marvellous”. Chaucer does not treat it as an untouchable and unexplainable given but as an empirically verifiable scientific product.

Chaucer’s need to introduce the possibility of a rational approach to the “marvellous”, which has to be considered a crucial element of romantic constructions, short-circuits the romance mode. In Chaucer’s view thus this mode frustrated the writer’s need of representation of reality insofar as it did not allow him to represent all the subjects he considered worthy of representation. The traditional boundaries of the romance mode dwarfed the writer’s power of representation of a changing reality which could not be read through the interpretational grid of the typical romance categories any longer.

Almost five centuries later, Hawthorne’s literary world offered to the prose writer aware of generic distinctions an interesting perspective – two genres, the novel and the romance, different as to their representational powers and constitutive elements. Hawthorne’s dilemma as it is stated in his prefaces echoes Chaucer’s reflections on the appropriate representation of reality. Hawthorne in fact asks himself which of the two is the best form to represent the subjects worthy to be written upon. The discussion concerning the subjects ‘worthy’ of literary treatment would lead us too far into the question of the materials at the American writers’s disposal. It should be enough for the moment to highlight the fact that Hawthorne

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2 For a clear treatment of the problem concerning either the density or spareness of “American” materials, see Perosa 14-17.
considered of the utmost importance to be able to represent not only the reality dependent upon verifiable data but even that “supernatural” reality which defies the categories of verifiability.

Both Chaucer’s and Hawthorne’s formal and generic choices, though crucially divergent, stem from the same need of representing the largest (and deepest) range of life possible.

In this paper I would like to reflect on Hawthorne’s debts to the tradition of romance starting from one of his earlier tales, “The Threefold Destiny” published in 1838. I would argue that this sketch which has not received much critical attention is not a mere divertissement as the narrator himself seems to suggest at the very beginning of the tale. I think this sketch contains an interesting early version of Hawthorne’s reflections on the romance mode and on the role of the writer of romances. In fact I would argue that this “legendary” sketch which seems apparently to be reducible to an allegory of straightforward equivalences of the kind x = y hides under this allegorical surface important clues to the understanding of Hawthorne’s “romanticism” and of his reinterpretation in American terms of this tradition. By means of a close reading of the sketch I will thus try “to dig” in search of the romantic treasure of the text.

The tale proper begins “in the twilight of a summer eve” when Ralph Cranfield, the hero of the tale, treads the streets of his native village, unrecognized, after a ten years’ absence. We are told that Ralph Cranfield had left his village in romantic quest of his high destiny, which he “from his youth upward had felt himself marked out for”. The Ralph Cranfield we see returning home is a disillusioned and weary man whose roaming in the world has been fruitless in the expected gifts, who trusts to “regain somewhat of the elasticity of youth in the spot where his threefold fate had been foreshown him” (600). The three marvellous events of his life – the discovery of “the maid, the treasure and the venerable sage, with his gift of extended empire”(600) 3 – have apparently not been disclosed to him through the three respective and unmistakable signs – a jewel in the shape of a heart on the maid’s bosom, “a hand

3 All quotations from “The Threefold Destiny” are from the complete edition of Hawthorne’s tales edited by Literary Classics, New York, 1982. Further page references are given in parentheses in the text.
with the fore-finger pointing downward and beneath it the
Latin word EFFODE and three venerable men claiming audi-
ence of him”(599).

At first sight “The Threefold Destiny” hinges upon a typi-
cally romantic theme – the quest. The hero leaves his family
and land behind and sets forth for a voyage around the world
which is expected to advance him in social status, in the knowl-
edge of the world and of himself. This voyage has two dimen-
sions – the horizontal/geographical and the vertical/spiritual
which proceed hand in hand, the one the figure of the other.
The voyage-quest thus marks a sort of rite of passage which
ushers the hero into knighthood or (in more modern periods)
into manhood. The adventures this voyage-quest entails mark
the widening and deepening of the hero’s consciousness and
constitute a proof of his destiny⁴. Yet if we consider in more
details the constitutive elements of the theme of the quest we
realize that Ralph Cransfield’s one cannot be explained away
easily.

In his seminal book Anatomy of Criticism Northrop Frye
writes in the section on romance:

As soon as romance achieves a literary form, it tends to limit itself
to a sequence of minor adventures leading up to a major or climatic
adventure, usually announced from the beginning, the completion of
which rounds off the story. We may call this major adventure, the ele-
ment that gives literary form to the romance, the quest.

Then he sums up: “Agon or conflict is the basis of archetypal theme of romance, the radical of romance being a se-
quence of marvellous adventures”⁵.

I think there are some major differences worth investigating.
“The Threefold Destiny” is certainly built as to lead to a
climax. The climatic moment is expected from the beginning
to be the unraveling of the mystery concerning the three signs
which are presented as the access keys to the treasures Ralph
Cransfield sees inscribed in his fate. Both the protagonist’s and
the reader’s expectations (and consequent quests) are directed
toward this disclosure. Yet the reader realizes immediately that
the climatic moment is not, using Frye’s term, “a major ad-
venture”, as the moment of the voyage-quest proper is strictly

⁴ Honig 82.
⁵ Frye 187, 192.
speaking closed with Ralph’s return and pertains the unnarrated space preceding the tale. To be more precise we would say that the end of the voyage does not coincide with the end of the quest.

The adventurous element is just hinted at, at the beginning of the tale when Ralph appears on the streets of his village and on the stage of the tale:

The staff, on which this traveller leaned, had been his companion from the spot where it grew, in the jungles of Hindostan; the hat, that overshadowed his sombre brow, had shielded him from the suns of Spain; but his cheek had been blackened by the red-hot wind of an Arabian desert, and had felt the frozen breath of an Arctic region. Long sojourning amid wild and dangerous men, he still wore beneath his vest the ataghan which he had struck into the throat of a Turkish robber. (598)

With this description of Ralph Cransfield’s apparel the narrator takes heed to create for the reader what we may aptly call a hero’s necessary curriculum adventurœ. It seems as if the narrator wants to pay homage to the legendary voyages of romantic heroes: this geographical catalogue is to be considered a veritable romantic catalogue insofar as it contains an almost mythical geography undetermined and indeterminable because of the persistent usage on the narrator’s part of generic plurals (the jungles of Hindostan, the suns of Spain) and indeterminate articles (an Arabian desert, an Arctic region). It generically touches the extremes of the earth and in thus doing it suggests elliptically a myriad of minor adventures. I think it is furthermore worth noting that the only carelessly inserted crude detail, Ralph’s killing a Turkish robber striking an ataghan into his throat, is the only episode which can be considered as belonging to the category of the agon. This legendary catalogue does not dispel the mist on Ralph’s adventures but subtly thickens is: the ellipsis is definitely the figure which dominates the protagonist’s ten years’ world-wandering. All we know about these so called minor adventures is that they have changed Ralph’s New England characteristics giving him an outlandish aspect.

The adventurous side of the quest is thus done away with quickly by the narrator and never referred to again. It strikes the romance reader for its absence from the text. We, as readers, are treated by the narrator as Ralph treats his mother; we share the same fate: both Ralph and the narrator scarcely hear
and vaguely answer our thousand questions about travels and adventures.

There had been few changes in the village; for it was not one of those thriving places where a year's prosperity makes more than the havoc of a century's decay. [...] Few seemed to be the changes here

As contrasted to the variety of the legendary places and to Ralph's own changed aspect, the insistence on the unchanged aspect of the village stresses the passage from unknown to recognized geography. Ralph lives this passage as figure of his unsuccessful quest. "He had come back," the narrator explains, "but only for a time, to lay aside the pilgrim's staff" (600, my emphasis). At this point in Ralph's expectations his quest cannot exist disjoined from the voyage, the disclosure of the mystery cannot find a fertile soil in the realm of the known; in Ralph's romantic mind the "three marvellous events" ask for a marvellous setting to be shown to him. The return marks thus for Ralph a moment's rest in view of diving again in search of his three fated pearls. The protagonist considers his quest suspended in the moment he enters his native village. He is thus completely unequipped for what is going to happen to him. The equipment for the quest, symbolically represented by the pilgrim's staff, is laid aside for the moment.

The initiation Ralph has to go through requires an apparently different space and time: the precincts within the narrow boundaries of the New England village and three days' time. Both on the spatial and temporal levels there is a sort of condensation which shifts the focus of Ralph's quest from a horizontal/geographical dimension agonistically oriented to a vertical/spiritual dimension cognitively oriented. From this moment on Ralph's quest will not be directed toward the discovery of the three signs but toward the interpretation of the different signs he will be confronted with.

Ralph's unpreparedness for this symbolic voyage based on an interpretative quest is immediately evident when he is confronted with a familiar but curiously changed object:

6 The exact quote is: "Ralph Cranfield sat all day in the cottage, scarcely hearing and vaguely answering his mother's thousand questions about his travels and adventures" (604). This is, by the way, the only time the word adventure is used in the text.
He made friends again with his childhood’s friend, the old tree against which he leaned; and glancing his eye adown its trunk, beheld something that excited a melancholy smile. It was a half-obliterated inscription – the Latin word effode – which he remembered to have carved himself in the bark of the tree. [...] It might be accounted a rather singular coincidence, that the bark, just above the inscription, had put forth an excrescence, shaped not unlike a hand, with the forefinger pointing obliquely at the word of fate. Such at least was its appearance in the dusky light. ‘Now a credulous man’ said Ralph Cranfield carelessly to himself, ‘might suppose that the treasure which I have sought round the world, lies buried, after all, at the very door of my mother’s dwelling. That would be a jest indeed!’ More he thought not about the matter [...].

Ralph’s comment paired with the melancholy smile which accompanies his remembering an adolescent gesture of his are evidence of Ralph’s ironizing on the possibility of a romantic local quest, of an unravelling independent from a search around the world. And yet, the third voice narrator’s description of the excrescence on the bark, on the one hand insinuates the possibility of the coexistence of the marvellous within the precincts belonging to familiar objects and, on the other, introduces another important aspect concerning the interpretation of reality, namely, the problem of the possibility of an objective and verifiable vision. The narrator seems in fact to consider the possibility that the dusky light be the cause of the singular appearance “not unlike a hand” of the excrescence. The double negative here used suggests furthermore that the observing eye can shape its own forms and interpret them according to an inward (and thus subjective) and not and outward (and objective) modeling.

As Sacvan Bercovitch explains: “to have choice (in Hawthorne’s fiction) is to keep open the prospects for interpretation on the grounds that reality never means either one thing or another, but rather is meaning fragmented by plural points of view.” The uncertainty on the actual appearance of the excrescence ushers us in the realm of ambiguity: the presentation of possible interpretations of an object or event in which the discriminating factor is not the unchanged object but the observing (which thus becomes shaping) eye. As it is Ralph’s

7 Bercovitch 210.
8 The most famous example is probably the interpretation of the two letters “a” – the first on Hester’s dress, the second in the sky – in The
voice which comments out loud the appearance of the bark and not the narrator’s, we must infer that Ralph’s eye is at stake here. I think it better leaving aside for the moment any further consideration on Ralph’s vision and defer it after the analysis of Ralph’s first night.

The first night the protagonist spends beneath his mother’s roof, “in the well-remembered chamber – on the pillow where his infancy had slumbered” (602), that is, in the very heart of the precincts of known and familiar objects, turns out to be, in stark contrast with the familiarity of the environment, “wilder than ever in an Arab tent, or when he had reposed his head in the ghastly shades of a haunted forest” (602). This night which begins the last three days of Ralph Cranfield’s fated wandering and wondering swarms with “the crowd of [Ralph’s] early visions” strengthening in his mind the images of the three premonitory signs. The incredulous Ralph who had just a few hours before commented ironically on the possibility of interpreting the bark excrescence as one of the three signs begins to give way to a more uncertain man who doubts of his firm belief in the clear distinctions between the romantic realm of the quest indissolubly linked to the voyage and the familiar realm of known objects associated to the quietness of a rest.

It is interesting to note how many times from this visionary night on the term “familiar” is used in association with terms pertaining to the semantic field of the marvellous. Just two telling examples: the first comment after the restless night is: “the same phantoms […] still flitted about the cottage, and mingled among the crowd of familiar faces” (602, my emphasis). After the visit of the three village dignitaries who seem to fit perfectly into the messengers of the second of the expected signs – three venerable men and the brandishing of a staff in the air on the chief’s part – the narrator comments:

*Scarlet Letter* in which Hawthorne masters the possible interpretations of these two signs brilliantly.

9 This is not the only comparison of this kind. There is another one which goes in the same apparently paradoxical direction. It is worth noting that it is once more introduced by a remark on the unchangedness of familiar objects: “Every crook in the pathway was remembered. Even the more transitory characteristics of the scene were the same as in bygone days. A company of cows were grazing on the grassy road-side, and refreshed him with their fragrant breath. ‘It is sweeter than the perfume which was wafted to our ship from the Spice Islands’”. (605, my emphasis).  

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To Cranfield’s fancy their images were still present, and became more and more invested with the dim awfulness of figures which had first appeared to him in a dream, and afterwards had shown themselves in his waking moments, assuming homely aspects among familiar things. (604 [my emphasis]).

Ralph’s sleep and wakefulness become progressively alike. Fancy images and familiar things possess the same homely aspect for Ralph’s perceiving eye. The concept of homeliness acquires thus a new significance in Ralph’s life; its scope is in fact widened as to incorporate the things of the imagination, that is, the things of dream-land and generically speaking of fairyland. The key to this process of progressive redefinition of the two categories which we may call, using Freud’s terminology, of the heimlich (homely) and of the unheimlich (unhome-ly) 10 is clearly the protagonist’s fancy.

Il nascosto è l’altra faccia di una presenza. Il potere dell’assenza ci riconduce al potere che detengono certi oggetti reali, i quali designano dietro di loro, uno spazio magico, sono l’indizio di qualcosa che non sono. [...] Questo strano potere dipende in un certo senso, da una insufficienza da parte dell’oggetto: in luogo di trattenerci, esso si lascia superare in una prospettiva immaginaria e in una dimensione oscura. Ma gli oggetti non possono apparire insufficienti se non in risposta a un’esigenza del nostro sguardo, il quale, risvegliato al desiderio di una presenza allusiva, e non trovando nella cosa visibile l’impiogo di tutte le sue energie, va oltre e si perde in uno spazio nullo, verso un aldilà senza ritorno 11.

These comments are part of the introductory remarks of Starobinski’s L’occhio vivente in which the author analyses the fantastic in literature. Starobinski’s analysis stems from a conception of the fantastic as standing at the crossroads between two distinct and yet interdependent elements that allow the passage from the real and verifiable object to the beyond: the eye and imagination. These concepts provide an illuminating interpretational grid for the analysis of the dynamics of Ralph Cranfield’s romantic character.

From the very beginning of the tale the reader is reiterately told that if Ralph was “marked out for a high destiny” he was marked out for possessing a fervid imagination as well. In the

10 For a discussion of these two Freudian concepts in literature see RELLA (a cura di), La critica freudiana, Milano 1977.
11 Starobinski 6.
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first of a series of five catalogues containing a list of typically romantic situations or objects, the narrator suggests that one of the possible explanations for Ralph’s imbibing this idea of a high destiny may be “his brooding fancy” – the other alternatives being a revelation by witchcraft and a dream of prophecy. Just a few lines later we read that “perhaps the one [of the three fatalities] on which his youthful imagination had dwelt most fondly, was the discovery of the maid” (599, my emphasis). Again it is “in the flush of his imaginative youth” (600, my emphasis) that Ralph sets forth for his fated quest. The catalogues that I just referred to have thus a double motivation. From a narratorial point of view, they represent a homage paid to the typical topoi of romantic narratives: by means of quick lists the narrator both acknowledges and takes possession of this romantic lore which thus becomes a legendary background to Ralph’s quest even when it will turn out to be a local quest. These lists, furthermore, strengthen the presentation of Ralph as a romantic hero: he may not know which of the possibilities these catalogues foreshadow will be the actual one, but he certainly knows the existence of these different alternatives. The young Ralph seems thus to be already well versed in romantic knowledge.

In following Starobinski’s suggestions we are confronted with the problem of the place occupied by real objects in Ralph Cranfield’s situation. The kind of objects the Russian critic refers to contain an intrinsic power to entice the viewer away from their superficial appearance and to instill in him the need to go beyond them in their “magic space”. The example Star-

12 The presentation of each single sign is amplified by a catalogue. The first sign – the woman wearing on her bosom a jewel in the shape of a heart – is thus commented: “whether of pearl, or ruby, or emerald, or carbuncle, or a changeful opal, or perhaps a priceless diamond, Ralph Cranfield little cared, so long as it was a Heart of one peculiar shape”. The second sign – the hand pointing downward – is thus expanded: “whether carved of marble, or hewn in gigantic dimensions on the side of a rocky precipice, or perhaps a hand of flame in empty air, he could not tell”. The treasure may consist of gold in coins or ingots, of precious stones or of something else. The third sign concerning his future glory may indicate a future as “a king, and founder of an hereditary throne, or the victorious leader of a people contending for their freedom, or the apostle of a purified and regenerated faith” (600). I suggest considering these catalogues as a sign of Hawthorne’s generic awareness. They in fact encompass the possible alternatives typical of the romantic lore.
obinski provides is Poppea’s veil (considering Hawthorne’s production we may think of the minister’s black veil) the obvious desire it kindles to lift it and the consequent work of the imagination. The work of Ralph’s imagination does not seem triggered by special real objects.

If we picture Starobinski’s model as a rectangle in which the basis is represented by the suggestiveness of these special objects and the height by the power of the eye, Ralph’s situation should be represented by a rectangle with a minimized basis – the objects – and a maximized height – the eye. This geometrical metaphor should suggest a sort of inversely proportional relationship: the more the object possesses the intrinsic power of suggestiveness Starobinski refers to, the less there is the need for a desirous eye and vice versa. The interplay between these two variant factors create the space of the imagined beyond metaphorically represented by the invariant area of the rectangle.

I thus suggest considering Ralph’s case the latter of the two possibilities. In contrast with the absence of these objects, the narrator’s insistence on details pertaining to the protagonist’s eyes and his way of looking is evident.

After the first night Ralph is bid welcome (“for his mother’s sake”!) by some neighbours. This is how they find him: “a tall, dark stately man, of foreign aspect, courteous in demeanor and mild speech, yet with an abstracted eye, which seemed often to snatch a glance at the invisible”. Later on during the interview of the three dignitaries “Cranfield gazed fixedly at the speaker, as if he beheld something mysterious and unearthly in his pompous little figure” (602 and 603, my emphasis).

The protagonist’s fixed gaze abstracts him from the surface of things and allows him to cross the threshold of the visible world and snatch “a glance to the invisible”. This gaze does not only allow this crossing but seems to be able to transform the visual input data into something confused: “his mind [read ‘his mind’s eye’] dwelt upon the features of the Squire, till they grew confused with those of the visionary sage, and one appeared but the shadow of the other” (604).

The joined work of the imagination and the eye has the power to discard the distinction between real and imagined worlds or at least to blur their boundaries. If the true figure and the imagined figure are one the shadow of the other, that is, they are one the reflection, the doubling, of the other, we
may go as far as to say that either the two worlds have the same status of reality or they have the same status of unreality. The consequence of Ralph’s mode of vision is the undermining of categories which were presented as distinguished at the beginning of the tale, namely, sleep and wakefulness, familiar and mythical objects, visible and invisible worlds. The quest is definitely disjoined from the voyage and the fertile soil for a romantic adventure becomes identified with Ralph’s mental and visionary world. As we have already suggested it has not always been so in the protagonist’s life.

The insufficiency in the objects Starobinski speaks of can certainly be considered Ralph’s initial problem and main propeller. Ralph seems in fact to start his quest out of a need that cannot apparently be met among the familiar objects of his native village: it is the eye of his imagination which has created his own special objects – the signs – and thus has awakened a desire for a fated presence.

Ralph’s youthful restlessness lied exactly in his inability to find in the objects at his disposal the absorption of all his imaginative energies. His eye was possibly too absorbed in the contemplation of the signs of his own creation to be able to recognize in what was around him the objects corresponding to the invisible signs of his mind. His desire was directed toward a beyond that had to be found in an “elsewhere”, that is, a romantic elsewhere. Ralph’s going beyond – his ten years’ wandering – has thus been a losing himself in an empty (or inexistent) romantic space. The realm of “the misty romance” is thus nothing more and nothing less than Ralph’s mental world. It is everywhere and not elsewhere. Here we are figuratively confronted with the core of the romance mode.

At this point I think it worth taking a step back to the introductory remarks that constitute the incipit of the sketch. As Hawthorne himself indicates, prefaces and introductions are the means by which “he [the author] as seen fit to pave the

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13 At this point I think it worth stressing a comment on the narrator’s part which points to a possible disruptive interpretation of Ralph’s ten years’ wandering: “Yet, summing up all the mischief that ten years had wrought, it seemed scarcely more than if Ralph Cranfield had gone forth that very morning, and dreamed a day-dream till the twilight, and then turned back again. (600-601).
reader's way into the interior edifice of the book.\textsuperscript{14}

I have sometimes produced a singular and not unpleasing effect, so far as my own mind was concerned, by imagining a train of incidents in which the spirit and mechanism of the faery legend should be combined with the characters and manners of familiar life. In the little tale that follows, a subdued tinge of the wild and the wonderful is thrown over a sketch of New-England personages and scenery, yet, it is hoped, without entirely obliterating the sober hues of nature. Rather than a story of events claiming to be real, it may be considered as an allegory, such as the writers of the last century would have expressed in the shape of an eastern tale, but to which I have endeavored to give a more life-like warmth than could be infused into those fanciful productions. (598)

These introductory remarks\textsuperscript{15} together with the final paragraph constitute the frame of the tale. "The Threefold Destiny" belongs to the category of the tales framed externally, that is, it possesses an explicit formal frame that contains the narrative proper. The frame of "The Threefold Destiny" has a conventional form: an opening commentary by a narrator about a story which will constitute the following narrative, and an 'afterword' usually containing the narrator's concluding remarks. The frame is not, however, a simple formal introductory device. It is literally a framing "context (more narrowly, a script or paradigm) for perceptions and expectations. [...] [In a frame] different cultural expectations and generic expectations coexist."\textsuperscript{16} What kind of cultural and especially generic horizon does the frame of "The Threefold Destiny" create? Let's try to analyze it in details.

The first person narrator, an unnamed 'I' who sounds more or less like what we conceive the author to be\textsuperscript{17}, tells us a tale


\textsuperscript{15} These remarks sound very Hawthorrian, I think it worth quoting part of the preface to Twice-Told Tales to stress how "The Threefold Destiny" addresses central issues of Hawthorne's poetics: "[The tales] have the pale tint of flowers that blossomed in too retired a shade - the coolness of a meditative habit, which diffuses itself through the feeling and observation of every sketch. Instead of passion, there is sentiment; and even in what purport to be pictures of actual life, we have allegory, not always so warmly dressed in its habiliments of flesh and blood, as to be taken into the reader's mind without shiver" (from the Norton Edition of Nathaniel Hawthorne's Tales, 290. [my emphasis]).

\textsuperscript{16} THOMPSON 38.

\textsuperscript{17} For brevity's sake I have been using (and I will use) in this paper the term narrator instead of the more precise author-narrator. This is obviously
which precedes the tale proper concerning the creative elements which have inspired the writing of the sketch. His main interest seems to pertain generic distinctions. A Hawthorne reader knows very well that he cannot underestimate the intimate relationship between his authorial voice that is hidden under the narratorial one and the structures of narrative. Besides being a paving of the reader’s way, a guiding his steps into the interior of the narrative providing him with interpretational coordinates, the contents of the frame work as a sort of resonance box for what follows.

The generic awareness the narrator demonstrates in these first remarks concerns the typically Hawthornian distinction between novel and romance. The enjoyment the narrator confesses to have felt in imagining “the train of incidents” “The Threefold Destiny” is structured upon seems to be amenable to the generic status of the text. “The Threefold Destiny” in fact, is generically speaking a combination of modes.

The terminology the narrator uses is a good indication of this combined strategy. Following the distinction Edgar Allan Poe makes in his reviews of Hawthorne’s Twice-Told Tales and Mosses from an Old Manse, on the one hand we are confronted with a sketch which clearly belongs to the larger category of the novelistic genre aiming “at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man’s experience” (see “New England personages and scenery”). On the other, there is a tale belonging to the romantic mode in which the truth can be presented “under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer’s own choosing or creation” and which there can be a “very moderate use of the privileges [...] to mingle the Marvellous rather as a slight, delicate, and evanescent flavor” 18 (see “a train of incidents” in the “spirit and mechanism of the faery legend”).

It is interesting to note the result of the interplay of these two terms: the combined usage of sketch and tale seems, in fact, to give birth to a tale. Schematizing we may tentatively

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not true for all narrators but it is a quite pertinent generalization in Hawthorne’s case. For a detailed and illuminating discussion of this and other concepts related to this issue, see Thompson, “Introduction”, in The Art of Authorial Presence. Thompson’s book constitutes the starting point of my analysis of the frame of “The Threefold Destiny”.

18 All the quotes in this paragraph are from the “Preface” to Hawthorne, The House of the Seven Gables.
say tale + sketch = tale. Following a somewhat tortuous route we have reached the core of the generic discourse as Hawthorne conceives it.

Since the beginning of Hawthorne’s reflecting on generic instances (“The Threefold Destiny” dates back to 1838), the romance turns out to be using Cesare Segre’s terminology “un genere totale”. According to Hawthorne’s view, in fact, the romance is the most resilient genre in a writer’s hands insofar as it enables him not only to incorporate the traditional strictly romantic instances pertaining to the supernatural world but it is anchored on to the reality of the visible and historically determined world. All this shows that Hawthorne apparently does not revolutionize the romantic genre but conforms to its secular dictates, which he demonstrates to know very well.

“Rather than a story of events claiming to be real”, says the narrator, “it may be considered as an allegory”. Allegory, which may be considered as a fundamental process of encoding our speech, is certainly one of the constitutive elements of the romance mode. Putting forward this further remark on what will follow, the narrator “causes the reader to anticipate a fairy tale mode, in which a moral is by convention in order” 19. And a moral is what the reader is offered as a close of the romantic sketch.

Would all, who cherish such wild wishes, but look around them, they would oftenest find their sphere of duty, of prosperity, and happiness, within those precincts, and in that station where Providence itself has cast their lot. Happy they who read the riddle without a weary world-search, or a lifetime spent in vain! (606)

This moral, which constitutes the “utile”, as contrasted to the “dulce” represented by the creation of a “not unpleasing effect”, seems to present the interpretative key to the allegory which pervades the whole tale. The correspondences are clarified and the narrator takes a step forward unveiling the didactical aim of the tale. Ralph Cranfield’s destiny and the three signs leading to its revelation become very tellingly the Providential plan on each man’s life concerning the three spheres of duty, prosperity and happiness. The generalization that closes the final paragraph stresses the didactical intent of the whole allegorical construction.

Yet if we should listen to Hawthorne’s own words on these

19 Thompson 66.
moral teachings we would be not as sure of the true essence of
the tale. He warns the readers in the preface to The House of
the Seven Gables: “when romances do really teach anything, or
produce any effective operation, it is usually through a far more
subtle process than the ostensible one” 20.

The form of the narrative on the superficial level does not
seem to defeat generic expectations structured as it is with an
explicit frame which in its first half – the incipit – suggests an
allegorical reading of the tale and in its second half – the
explicit – provides it and provides furthermore the reader with
the conventional expected moral. This is the literal superficial
level that using Angus Fletcher’s words “make good enough
sense all by itself” 21. Yet even if the story invites and accom-
panies the reader in an allegorically structured set of corre-
spondences, the narrative as a whole subtly resists this reading
undermining its straightforwardness.

Looking more closely at the interplay between the tale prop-
er and the closing narratorial remarks we notice that Ralph
Cranfield, we had left apparently newly equipped for the inter-
pretative quest, in spite of his new understanding of the dy-
namics of his romantic quest, seems to be shut out both from
the actual interpretation of the riddle and from the complete
unraveling of the signs.

The threefold acts of interpretations corresponding to the
unveilment of the threefold correspondence of visionary signs
and existing objects take on progressively the features of a
veritable decoding of romantic and allegorical symbols. This
decoding, as the climatic moment of the whole sketch makes
clear, is an act of interpretation Ralph lives only vicariously.
“Faith! Faith! [...] you have interpreted my wild and weary
dream!” (606, my emphasis), cries Ralph Cranfield eventually
unburdened of the weight of the enigma.

Yet “the reading of the riddle”, in spite of this sense of
liberation is still incomplete. “The Threefold Destiny” seems in
fact to fall in the category G.R. Thompson calls “negative
apocalypse or negative epiphany”. Thompson writes:

In works like “Young Goodman Brown” and “Alice Doane’s Ap-

20 “Whenever art uses exaggerated effects of affirmation, such effects
serve a strategic purpose and do not constitute a theme in themselves. Their
function is, in fact, to negate what they are apparently affirming”. Iser 11.
21 Fletcher 7.
a prophetic revelation seems to constitute the narrative climax, if not also the denouement, but the vision is deliberately qualified, undercut, or incomplete. Sometimes Hawthorne creates a series of revelations, each one seemingly the ultimate unveiling of the truth, but each turning out to be only a kind of permanently penultimate apocalypse: the promised final meaning is always deferred.

Literally speaking the reading of the third part of the riddle, namely, the treasure, remains out of the tale proper. This disclosure is, in fact, offered to the reader through the narrator’s voice who, in the frame, nicely sums up the threefold destiny unveiling the allegorical correspondences. Out of Ralph Cranfield’s fictitious scope, the revelation is as in *The Scarlet Letter* 23, not ultimate but “penultimate”, or using a Hawthornian term, “twice-told”.

I suggest considering this interplay between the narrator’s and the protagonist’s respective scopes a subtle undermining of the possibility of finding easy-made allegorical correspondences. The allegory here implied seems to be of a subtler kind, suggestive of the generic problems the writer of romances has to face.

“The Threefold Destiny” seems thus to be a veritable analysis in generic perspective both thematically and structurally. From a thematical point of view the way to achieve a complete self-consciousness as a writer of romances seems to be crucially at stake. Ralph Cranfield’s quest triggered by the necessity to discover his high romantic destiny and marked by a progressive development from unknown to known geography, from outer to inner space conjugated in terms of an interplay between real objects, on the one hand, and the eye and imagination on the other, can be viewed as figure of Hawthorne’s own search for a fertile soil as a writer of romances.

“The Threefold Destiny” in telling the story of Ralph Cranfield’s romantic interpretative quest tells the story of the perils of a generic quest romantically oriented – Hawthorne’s.

[The Author’s] pleasant pathway among realities seems to proceed out of the Dream-Land of his youth, and to be bordered with just enough of its shadowy foliage to shelter him from the heat of the day.

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22 Thompson 14.
23 The chapter entitled “Revelation” is, in fact, not the ultimate but the penultimate one of the romance.
Ralph Cranfield’s parable mirrors Hawthorne’s: the boundaries of the romantic quest (and mode) have to be physically narrowed down to the precincts of familiar objects and generically enlarged as to embrace the writer’s mental and visionary world. I thus suggest reading two crucial (and already quoted) passages in the tale as referring to the romance writer:

To [the romance writer’s] fancy their images were still present, and became more and more invested with the dim awfulness of figures which had first appeared to him in a dream, and afterwards had shown themselves in his waking moments, assuming homely aspects among familiar things. (604).

He sat [...] enveloping their homely figures in the misty romance that pervaded his mental world. (603).

The process of the blurring of the boundaries between real and imaginary Ralph Cranfield has gone through is at the core of the creation of images “more real than shadow” which people Hawthorne’s mind.

I furthermore suggest considering the structural construction of the tale as well, as a subtle reflection on the role of the writer in the romance mode: Ralph Cranfield’s being shut out from the complete unvelment-interpretation of his threefold destiny can be seen as figure of the writer’s impossibility to possess the meaning of reality, both visible and invisible, and his consequent difficulty of representing it in straightforward terms.

The generic quest for a mode that allows the writer the widest latitude possible ends in the recognition of an impossible exhaustive and univocal representation. This ‘end’ opens up new questions concerning the possible interpretative quests: the romance in Hawthorne’s hands turns out to be the privileged mode “to be reminded of the limitations of the mind’s place in the world. And in the end it accepts the limitations as the only viable answer to the question of why one should go on asking questions”.

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on Nathaniel Hawthorne's debts to the romance tradition starting from a close reading of The Threelfold Destiny (1838). This legendary sketch hides under its allegorical surface important clues to an understanding of Hawthorne’s usage of the dynamics of the romance mode and of his reinterpretation of this tradition in American terms.

KEY WORDS