September 1978

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Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 14, no.3, September 1978, p.172-176
The Spirit World of The Blithedale Romance

by EDWARD STONE

This ingenuity . . . ended by living in a world of things symbolic and allegoric, a presentation of objects casting . . . far behind them a shadow more curious and more amusing than the apparent figure.¹

At the end of The Blithedale Romance, the greying former associate of the socialist society of twelve years before comments, from his Boston retreat, on the sad fate of those Hesperidean fields: "Where once we toiled with our whole hopeful hearts, the town-paupers, aged, nerveless, and disconsolate, creep sluggishly afield. Alas, what faith is requisite to bear up against such results of generous effort!"² On the reader's part, much faith is of course needed if he is to believe that the same Coverdale is speaking who once embraced that life with abundant faith, fleeing to it in search of "better air to breathe" than in Boston,— "Air that had not been breathed once and again! air that had not been spoken into words of falsehood, formality, and error, like all the air of the dusky city!" (p. 11). This dreary outcome of the original youth, energy, and faith of Blithedale is, of course, not only incongruous, it is inevitable: for the theme of The Blithedale Romance is the infection of the present by the past; the supremacy of man's limitations over his aspirations. But it had been an exciting chapter in his life, each page of it imprinted on the narrator's mind indelibly by some image of the past associated with it. His "eyes of sense half shut, and those of the imagination widely opened" (p. 119), Coverdale is the poet to whom the "fantasy" occurred, to whom things close at hand have existence in terms distant in time. In the first part of the story it is spring, and this faculty in him hopes and trusts; in the middle part, summer, it doubts; in the last, the autumn part, it dreads. This progression of the spirit is strikingly evident in the visions of the past which it creates. In The Marble Faun, a change in her impressions of the idols of the Virgin Mary will come over the chastened Hilda;³ in The Blithedale Romance each of the pic-

features of the past that Coverdale’s imagination brings forth is a mirror, a barometer of the narrator’s faith in the ability of the present to prevail against the weight of the past, both of its institutions and of his own close companions. By no means, of course, is the transition a simple one from faith and fervor to defeat and despair. At the very start there is uncertainty, even foreboding; and even the catastrophic end partakes of the glow of hopes lately shared. Early enough in his farm labors the poet Coverdale anticipates the failure of his venture, if not its violent end, when he discovers that not so much does his mind spiritualize, etherealize the labors he is performing on the farm as these render his thoughts “cloddish”—and this, long months before Westervelt completely materializes spirit in his Boston performance. Yet more than all else is The Blithedale Romance a history of the “exultation,” the “genial sunshine,” the “enthusiasm of rebirth”—for a sprinkling of spirit from the eighth chapter—that is chastened, subdued, and finally smothered. Reversing the process of spiralling growth and expansion of Holmes’s chambered nautilus, Hawthorne gives the reader of The Blithedale Romance a sense of proceeding through a steadily contracting passageway of the spirit by means of an exhibition hall of historical metaphors of that contraction.

In the spring time of that fateful year in Coverdale’s life, the sea of faith was at the full, and the pictures moving across the screen of his historic sense do not so much appear as bubble up and frolic, as befits the “blithe tones of brotherhood” that buoy Coverdale up the day he arrives at Blithedale. It was a new life for a young America. What wonder if the young man sitting by the farm’s “brisk fireside,” face “abased” with the “present warmth” should find his mind summoning up the vision of a family of the old Pilgrims who two centuries before, when faith in a better life thought it could move mountains, “might have swung their kettle over precisely such a fire as this, only, no doubt, a bigger one”! (p. 13). Would not such a comparison naturally spring from the sanguine mind of the young man of the 1840’s who feels that in the course of a few hours he has transported himself from the London or Leyden shackles of a corrupt old society to the purity and vigor of this new one? In fact, it is precisely his sense of mission that has inspired the vision above: it is the Pilgrims’ “high enterprise,” he confides later, that he and his Blithedale companions “sometimes flattered ourselves [that] we had taken up, and were carrying . . . onward and aloft, to a point which they never dreamed of attaining” (p. 117).

More, even, than a new way of life: no less than a new creation of life by the gods such as our mythologies themselves long ago envisioned it. First, the Judaeo-Christian myth. To properly present his heroine, the gorgeous, queenly, physically ample Zenobia, to wipe out the familiar image of present-day woman with that “certain warm and rich characteristic . . . refined . . . out” of her system, Coverdale finds it neces-
sary to picture the creation of the first woman, that divine creature: “One felt an influence breathing out of her such as we might suppose to come from Eve, when she was just made, and her Creator brought her to Adam, saying, ‘Behold, here is a woman!’” (p. 17). He invokes pagan myth as well. The blazing fire in the Roxbury farmhouse hearth renders Zenobia “convertible by its magic”: he sees “a glow in her cheeks that made me think of Pandora, fresh from Vulcan’s workshop, and full of the celestial warmth by dint of which he had tempered and moulded her” (p. 24). By autumn and the end, Coverdale will so thoroughly strip Zenobia’s divine trappings from her as to deny her not only virginity or even chastity but to refuse her the simple desire to destroy her heartbroken self; so great a descent will this be from his original spring-time impulse to envision her as a goddess from the two great Western cultures.

It is this antique-vision-making inclination that causes Coverdale to transform his own city-saturated self into a character from allegory. In a notebook entry for 1841 Hawthorne had referred to “old Autumn, clad in his cloak of russet brown”—possibly an echo of Spenser’s “Then came the Autumnne, all in yellow clad”; this vision returns in the “liberal and hospitable thoughts” that occur to Coverdale as he sits musing in his pine-tree hermitage. Looking at the grape-vine that encircles the tree, he anticipates an abundant harvest of grapes and follows the thought through to one of the most poetic of Hawthorne’s evocations: “It gladdened me to anticipate the surprise of the Community, when, like an allegorical figure of rich October, I should make my appearance, with shoulders bent beneath the burthen of ripe grapes, and some of the crushed ones crimsoning my brow as with a blood-stain” (p. 99). Here again the past, a remote mythological one from Renaissance times, figures in his imagination warmly and sportively: the fervor of his hopes expresses itself in this vision of fruition, of the successful yield of nature and the joy it brings to man.

Yet the course of Coverdale’s thinking has already been re-set, now for some catastrophe (to which Hawthorne refers periodically). Only a page or two after reaching back into the past for this trope of achievement, Coverdale suddenly finds his spirit burdened by “a mood of disbelief in moral beauty or heroism” such as had inspired his first fancy-spinning and convinced of the folly of the Blithedale experiment, of his laughable ridiculousness. Westervelt, the Devil, has just done his work, planting the seeds of suspicion and distrust.

It is still possible for Coverdale to function on the farm, and even hopefully on occasion. The knowledge that the Apostle Eliot had preached on the spot 200 years earlier inspires Coverdale to invoke his historic muse and summon up the shade of this “holy Apostle of the In-

dians, with the sunlight flickering down on him through the leaves, and glorifying his figure as with the half-perceptible glow of a transfiguration" (p. 119). His mind still can seek out the past for transfigurations such as these. In the next chapter, almost in the same breath with which he records his break with Hollingsworth, he can observe in their fence-mending that Hollingsworth "wrought like a Titan" and that he himself lifted stones as heavy as the weight that Samson lifted at Gaza (p. 136). But the sky has already begun to cloud over, and when Coverdale returns to Blithedale in the autumn, it is to no such enriching harvest as he had imagined from his pine-tree perch but to bitterness and death.

Sunburnt and arid, the August woods and pastures had reflected the blight of his spring hopes, but in Chapter 24 he returns to Blithedale on a delightfully breezy September morning, the joy of physical well-being holding in check his profound uneasiness, and sickness of spirit alternating with unfathomable buoyancy. Weighed down by a nameless foreboding of something evil already befallen or about to befall, he is now visited by a succession, almost a rapid-fire, of fancies from the past that make visual his anxiety. Now it is death that oppresses his spirit. Pausing beside a quiet black pool in the sluggish dark river, he wonders whether anyone had ever drowned himself in it, then summons forth some ghostly tenant of its depths: "perhaps the skeleton of the drowned wretch still lay beneath the inscrutable depth, clinging to some sunken log at the bottom with the gripe of its old despair" (p. 208). That midnight when Hollingsworth's probing pole brings up from those river depths a sunken log, its black ponderousness becomes a symbol of the weight of the past in Coverdale's imagination: the log rose partly out of water—all weedy and slimy, a devilish-looking object, which the moon had not shone upon for half a hundred years,—then plunged again, and sullenly returned to its old resting-place, for the remnant of the century" (p. 233), like a figure from the past surfacing and then sinking back into the pitch of Dante's inferno. Earlier in the day, he had stumbled over a heap of logs, decaying under moss and mould, and in "the fitful mood" that now sways his mind, he imagines "the long-dead woodman, and his long-dead wife and children, coming out of their chill graves, and essaying to make a fire with this heap of mossy fuel!" (p. 212).

His mood sends his mind yet further back into time, rummaging amid the ancient past of the region; but now only its grimmer aspects come forth to mirror his mood. Going off into the woods to find his former companions, it is with the resolution to spy out their posture craftily, like the Indians before him. And when he comes upon the three people he has been looking for, he gives concretion to his feelings of dread by seeing in the tableau in front of him a recreation of the most shameful results of the spirit that had carried the first brave European adventurers across the Atlantic: now Hollingsworth is a Puritan judge, Zenobia an accused sorceress, and Priscilla her victim (p. 214).
Instead of good, there had come from this last mission into the wilderness only deceit, tyranny, heartbreak, and violent death. And so ended the Blithedale venture. Lingering on after twelve long years is one last vision, companion to those last eerie ones, of a long dead fire, of burnt-out oak logs whose warm glow "must be represented, if at all, by the merest phosphoric glimmer, like that which exudes, rather than shines, from damp fragments of decayed trees, deluding the benighted wanderer through a forest. Around such chill mockery of a fire," Coverdale thought, "some few of us might sit on the withered leaves, spreading out each a palm towards the imaginary warmth, and talk over our exploded scheme for beginning the life of Paradise anew" (p. 9).

Yet in that last sentence Coverdale combines Alpha and Omega, "the pole" and "the tropic" of his youthful fervor. Even now, each stage of that group pursuit of the American Dream remains alive, illuminated by some bright historic happening or myth woven around it by his ever-active imagination. Those bones do live.

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