



What Way out of Dilemma for Reuben Bourne in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Roger Malvin's Burial"?

Michel PODA[✉]
Université Ouaga I Pr JKZ

Abstract – "Roger Malvin's Burial" is a tragic narrative portraying a wounded war hero, Reuben Bourne, who is confronted by a complicated dilemma. The plight, which derives from how to deal with his fellowman, chiefly Roger Malvin, brings about Reuben's downfall, manifested through an acute feeling of guilt for failing Malvin. Under the spell of an evil fate, he proves unable to do something to reverse the situation, and only gets more and more entangled in his plight. In examining the matter, it turns out that the dilemma afflicting him is rooted in human vulnerability, symbolized by the wounded status of the key characters. As part of the dynamics inherent in this vulnerability which is set on transcending its own limit, the story does not end in a complete annihilation of the hero, as one might think, but goes further to climax in an apparent tragedy, which is for the hero the price to pay to get out of the spell of evil fate.

Key-words: dilemma, vow, curse, burial, liberation.

Résumé – "Roger Malvin's Burial" est un récit tragique présentant un héros de guerre confronté à un dilemme. Cette situation qui émane de comment traiter le problème que constitue son semblable, principalement Malvin, occasionne la déchéance du héros Reuben, laquelle se manifeste comme un sentiment aigu de culpabilité d'avoir failli à Malvin. Sous le coup d'une malédiction, il se montre incapable de renverser la situation et ne fait que s'enfoncer de plus en plus dans la tourmente. Tout compte fait, la racine de son problème se trouve dans la vulnérabilité humaine que symbolise le statut de blessé des deux principaux personnages. Conformément à la dynamique inhérente à cette vulnérabilité qui s'engage dans un mouvement de transcendance, l'histoire ne se termine pas par une annihilation du héros comme sa tournure le laisse penser, mais évolue jusqu'à un climax qui est en apparence une tragédie. Cela n'est autre que le prix à payer pour sortir de cette malédiction.

Mots-cléf : dilemma, serment, malédiction, sépulture, libération

1. Introduction

Hawthorne's fiction undoubtedly constitutes a big challenge to his readers or critics. "Roger Malvin's Burial" is one of those works which strike the reader with a baffling nature. The narrative features an Indian war hero, Reuben Bourne, who aims high in his concern to do something about the pathetic situation of his fellow-fighter survivor and wayfarer companion, Roger Malvin. Doing something about the case – like carrying his dying companion on the homeward journey or staying by his side to await his death and perform his burial before setting off – cannot be without any risk to his own life, given that he too is wounded and therefore unlikely to have the necessary strength to act as he intends to. He eventually resolves to leave his companion there and continue the journey alone, with the conviction that he is doing the right thing, namely keeping himself from a useless sacrifice for a hopeless case. He believes

[✉] fmpoda@yahoo.fr



that he will best serve the cause of his companion inasmuch as he counts on the possibility of finding rescuers for him, and if he has a chance of surviving; but if the latter's life cannot be saved, he will ensure his burial afterward, and will take care of Dorcas, his companion's daughter.

In deciding to act in the way that he considers to be the most justifiable, he unexpectedly swerves from this path by lying on his return home so as to meet Malvin's daughter's expectation about her father's fate. In doing so, he entangles himself in a deep and multiform dilemma, which thwarts the fulfilment of his blood-marked vow made to his dying companion and entails endless and destructive repercussions on his life as well as on his relationship with his family or his community.

With Reuben being caught in the grip of this relentless fate, the case seems hopeless. Yet the narrative goes on to present an unfolding for the dilemma, which appears to be the most controversial aspect in "Roger Malvin's Burial". What is at stake in the narrative? Does the story get to a positive ending or is it a complete disaster? How logical is the narrative's point of view, especially with regard to the ending? These are some of the questions which arise from the reading of the narrative, and this paper aims at providing answers.

2. A brief view of the dilemma

The dilemma in which Reuben found himself can be said to emanate from the need to match his actions with what is right and praiseworthy, or to make sure that his action is in agreement with his conscience, in his attempt to resolve the issue posed by his fellowman. This proves to be highly problematic. Why is it so? The reason is to be looked for nowhere but in his condition, however amazing this may sound. His condition, as portrayed, is a *wounded* one, which is but the mark of his vulnerability, both literal and metaphorical. In fact, in this portrayal is shown human condition which, as Hawthorne views it, is characteristically limited, physically as well as in other aspects. Man's condition operates in such a way as to turn the loftiest intention or the most justifiable action into a complete blunder. Hence Reuben Bourne's pretension to best serve Malvin's interests through his desertion ends up in an utter failure, even a disaster. Back home, he proves unable to keep to Malvin's last will regarding what to tell his daughter about his fate, still worse, regarding his burial. Malvin wanted him to tell Dorcas, if ever he got to see her again, what really happened in the wilderness: how after supporting him for three days on their homeward journey, he (Reuben) was finally obliged to part with him, as his life was reaching its end; and it was only upon his (Malvin's) insistence to leave him by himself and continue the homeward walk alone, in the hope that this might be of greatest help to him if Reuben's life was saved: he might find rescuers for



him, or return to perform his burial, as well as take care of Dorcas (Hawthorne 20, 22).¹ Instead of telling her this, Reuben, when in front of Dorcas, distorted the facts as they happened in the forest. He let her understand that he stood by her father till his death and performed as he could his burial rite before continuing his walk (24). In lying to Dorcas about the fate of her father, both to meet her expectation and also out of fear of appearing as one who failed to take care of Malvin, which might result in the loss of Dorcas's love for him as well as the scorn of his community, Reuben compromises any possibility of carrying out his abiding blood-marked vow to Malvin.

In the ensuing episode Reuben is tormented at will in both his mind and his heart, hearing calls to act toward redeeming himself vis-à-vis Malvin in particular, but is unable to answer such calls as he dreads the prospect of facing disgrace openly, after being credited with undeserved popular praise following his lie. In this way, he descends to the bottom of an infernal pit, so to speak. Reuben ends up becoming a "ruined man" (26), says the narrator. Although this remark, in the first place, refers to his economic situation, it is not less applicable to his psychological and moral conditions. He has literally become a lunatic, or a neurotic subject, losing control of his actions, thoughts and perceptions. This situation is depicted as a curse. If, at first, the curse appears as an unjustifiable or self-inflicted torment resulting from mere fancies, a connection with the spirit or ghost of deceased Malvin is insinuated. Whether a hallucination or not, Malvin's figure appears to Reuben, just as he saw it in the parting scene, still waiting for him to come back to fulfil his vow. It can be inferred from this vision that with his body lying unburied, Malvin cannot find any rest following his death and consequently takes to haunting the one whom he holds responsible for his evil fate, as was commonly believed in Ancient Rome², or in the Shakespearian tragedies. This fact reveals the importance of the burial rite and justifies how crucial it is in this narrative. It is so crucial that profanation of corpses is viewed in the narrative as one of the most dreadful warfare practices, and is therefore the fate that Malvin seems to fear the most, judging at how Malvin insisted by his companion for his burial to be performed. The same feeling is shared by Dorcas, who was so anxious about her father's fate, and eventually, with Reuben's lie, was relieved of the sorrow of losing her father unburied in wilderness. Reuben's doings or feelings also confirm this utmost concern for the burial rite, with reference to the blood-stained vow he made to his dying companion to return and perform his burial,

¹From now on the references to the story will be reduced to the page number, omitting the author's name.

²Harold W. Johnston, in his web publication entitled *The Private Life of The Romans*, provides us with some insight into the matter: "The soul, they [Romans] thought, could find rest only when the body had been duly laid in the grave; until this was done it haunted the home, unhappy itself and bringing unhappiness to others" (XIV, § 464).



or the deep uneasiness he went through at the thought that Malvin's remains were lying unburied.

On the other hand, in consideration of the Christian background of the key characters and the way Reuben's torment ends, the curse can also be said to be inflicted by God; for Reuben has broken the relationship with Him, in failing Malvin or his daughter, thus incurring His wrath. This is in keeping with the tenet of covenant³ so dear to the Puritans of Reuben and Malvin's time.

To make a long story short, Reuben has been tormented by this evil fate for eighteen years, a sufficiently long period of time of suffering. It shows how desperate the case appears. Needless to say that he has come to lose the smallest heroic feature, contrary to what he initially looked. Rather than a noble war hero to be praised, he now appears as a miserable victim to pity.⁴

The dilemma being briefly presented, my study can now go further to the main concern of this paper, which is the question of a way out of this trouble.

3. The decision to do something about the prevailing situation

Entangled in a deadlock, is Reuben irremediably doomed to self-annihilation? The narrative tends to reject this ending as it insinuates that a remedy can still be found, however desperate Reuben's situation is. It is even imperative for him to find a remedy, for the case is not less than an emergency: "[He] was finally a ruined man, with but one remaining expedient against the evil fate that had pursued him. He was to throw sunlight into some deep recess of the forest, and seek subsistence from the virgin bosom of the wilderness" (26). Reuben must react urgently to reverse the evil fate ("he was to throw sunlight into some deep recess of the forest"), for obviously this evil fate will lead to no other outcome but death, and death in this case is not a viable solution: it is tantamount to uttering ignominy, absolute annihilation for Reuben - total defeat for a war hero - as well as everlasting lack of rest for Malvin's spirit, whose chance of restoration through a burial rite would vanish *ipso facto*.

It can be noticed that the rejection of an annihilating ending is quite in accordance with the central parameter of the human essence, which is symbolized not only by Reuben's wounded state but also by Malvin's. Further to showing vulnerability or finitude, this human nature is set on transcending

³The concept of the covenant derives from the Bible and refers to the deal God proposes to His People, the Jews, and beyond the Jews all the believers who recognize Him and His son, Jesus Christ, as their Lords. Based on that deal God blesses obedience to His commandments and punishes disobedience. The concept was a pet word to the Puritans who called themselves God's People and claimed to enter a covenant with God.

⁴This is the focus of a first study that I did on this short story, published in Cahiers du CERLESH, N° 36, University of Ouagadougou, 2012.



its limit to reach infinitude, that is, to make up for vulnerability. It is undoubtedly this dynamics that the burial rite materializes here. In this respect, Malvin counts on receiving burial in order to have a peaceful rest in the afterlife (which means a continued life after his death), while, Reuben, by performing it, would reach out to high standard values and assure for himself a blessed destiny (which means a fulfilled life on earth and a continued life after his death).

To come back to the narrator's insinuation, one may wonder about the appropriateness of the remedy ("to throw sunlight into some deep recess of the forest, and seek subsistence from the virgin bosom of the wilderness"), if it is not viewed as merely either superficial or limited. The best way to tackle a serious problem like Reuben's is certainly to go to the root, one might argue. For Reuben's trouble did not start with his economic ruin, which is only a symptom of a deeper cause: the curse he incurred. On the other hand, the economic ruin may seem a smaller sign in comparison to the psychological signs such as the mental turmoil or the corrosion in the heart.

Yet the narrator is not mistaken in suggesting this remedy. The argument is justifiable, first, because the appropriate treatment of well identified symptoms can logically remedy the disease at its root. Second, the import of this insinuation goes beyond its apparent meaning: Reuben's economic ruin is a metonymy, and as such, stands for his psychological condition or his moral or spiritual fall. Furthermore, the preservation of human life is known to be grounded primarily on material conditions. Marx as well as Freud, after Hawthorne, gave priority to such conditions in the way they saw the life process of the individuals, respectively in the theory of dialectical materialism and the self-preservation drive. So, the case of Reuben being obviously a question of self-preservation (as well as preservation of his family's life), it is mandatory that he should seek the necessary means. This means cutting off the ties with his ruined material situation in view of a new start. He must seek a new cultivation farm in the wilderness and relocate his homestead there. That is what he undertakes to do, precisely eighteen years after leaving Malvin in the forest. Thus, he hopes to reverse fortune and have a better chance in life, undoubtedly strengthened by the experiences of other settlers who achieved prosperity in that way, as was current in those days. In fact, some settlers achieved prosperity in that way - which gave rise to the concept of the American frontier⁵. And given that economic prosperity was regarded as a visible sign of God's blessing in the then Puritan context under the influence of

⁵The concept, as defined by the then historian, Frederick Jackson Turner, does not refer to any notion of a static borderline as it might sound, but to the American Westward expansion through which the immense wilderness of the newly found land has been peopled and transformed by ambitious settlers seeking to benefit from the available opportunities for their self-development.



the Gospel of prosperity, his curse, in this way, could logically be removed. By responding to the call for a new start, which, in fact, has been persistent but has remained unanswered, Reuben does achieve peace of mind, synonymous to the removal of the curse, though the project of relocation has stopped half way dramatically. After all, is not the relocation project just a step, say a pretext, toward achieving the ultimate goal, which is the redemption of Reuben and the subsequent removal of the curse? It is as if making the necessary step is enough to bring about the expected final result, thus showing the efficiency of the remedy, from this perspective.

From this outcome a slide to the psychological perspective can be made, in accordance with the metonymical import of the approach indicated. On that ground, surely Reuben's case is identifiable with a neurotic case or a psychological malfunction. Therefore, the cure requires a psychoanalytical approach. In this respect, he must access the unconscious area of his mind (which is represented by the forest)⁶ and bring out into light the dreadful thing hidden there: the cause of his anxiety. In keeping with the mental turmoil going on in him, which is outlined in the previous part, it can be noticed that, on the journey into the forest for the purpose of relocation, Reuben does not only seem paranoiac, giving the impression of being pursued by some enemy, but also he walks with an utterly confused mind, with no sense of direction, which entails correction from his teenage son. On the fifth day of his descent into the tenebrous region of the unconscious (symbolized by the journey into the forest) a crucial point is reached, at the mention by Dorcas of Malvin's death anniversary and the comfort she feels in knowing that her late father was well attended to by Reuben. In making this allusion, she unwillingly hits the most sensitive point in Reuben and sets him off into hysteria, so to speak. He begins to speak enigmatically and act briskly with no self-control, hurrying away with his musket to look for game. Shortly after, his gun goes off: it was the ending of the crisis. The gunfire announces the inadvertent killing of Reuben's son, Cyrus. The latter was his only child, born out of his marriage with Dorcas. Cyrus was, in fact, the object of his father's narcissistic love:

Even Dorcas, though loving and beloved, was far less dear to him; for Reuben's secret thoughts and insulated emotions had gradually made him a selfish man, and he could no longer love deeply except where he saw or imagined some reflection or likeness of his own mind. In Cyrus he recognized what he had himself been in other days; and at intervals he seemed to partake of the boy's spirit and to be revived with a fresh and happy life. (26)

⁶The Freudian notion of the unconscious, as Terry Eagleton shows, reveals a tenebrous and tumultuous region in the subject, which is seat to impulses and whose contents can only be figured out through the interpretations of dreams. As such it is otherwise called the subconscious, which is telling of its being hidden to the conscious mind. Although the concept has been improved by the Lacanian perception, with the unconscious appearing as the relationship of the self with the other, the unconscious remains characteristically as a very problematic or ungraspable ground (151-161).



The killing of Cyrus is apparently tantamount to touching the core of Reuben's crisis. The anxiety-generating matter which has been lying deep in Reuben's unconscious has now been hit and brought out into light, thus opening the way to cure. It is undoubtedly that *ego* which has been kept hidden, because it is not compatible with the ethic codes of heroism and Puritanism of his community. It is the bashful *ego* which let selfishness overcome selflessness in the wilderness, thus bringing about the desertion of Malvin. Reuben's decision to abandon his companion, says the narrative, was "aided, unconsciously to himself, by the hidden strength of many a motive" (21), otherwise termed "a selfish feeling" (20), which is precisely "the desire of existence and the hope of happiness" (22). That *ego* unveiled by the narrator is absolutely loathsome from both the Puritan and heroic grounds of that time, which were rather uncompromising. As a result, Reuben might be faced with rejection by his community and this prospect has brought him to lie. The lie, in turn, has the effect of making things worse for him, and entangling him in a vicious circle of falsehood (his genuine *ego* being kept hidden to other people) and self-torment (due to his inability to liberate himself from falsehood and to fulfil his promise to his unfortunate companion Roger Malvin). During the eighteen years that the situation has been going on, Reuben was thwarted by this wounded *ego* from lifting the veil on him, that is, telling the truth to Dorcas and the whole community, and thus, opening to himself the way to performing the burial of Malvin's remains.

In fact, over that period of time, Reuben has been vainly developing defence mechanisms against the possibility of falling into disgrace, refraining from telling the truth, turning away from his community members, refusing to hear calls to perform the burial and rationalizing on his desertion, taking to an *alter-ego*, that is, Cyrus, etc. But it is of no good to him as his torment endures. With these escapist solutions coming to failure, a more appropriate way out must naturally be envisioned, based on a right perception of the source of the problem Reuben is faced with.

In this respect, it is worth noting that the internal conflict prevailing in him has been kindled by the burden of the Puritan and heroic codes which he embodies and which are too demanding for the vulnerable being that he is. Our reading of the narrative has now come to take another turn in accordance with the deconstructive style characteristic of Hawthorne. If, at once Reuben's outstanding personality was measured by these codes of values, the same codes are to be blamed for his "ruin". In other words, the heroism of his time expects him to act like a superman and the then Puritanism demands him to be stainless and to refrain from enjoyment of life. This being the case, to paraphrase the words of Manfred Mackenzie as well as Michael Colacurcio, he must free his



ego from reactionary violence contained in the heroic and Puritan codes⁷. This reactionary background weighs on him overwhelmingly up to the point of crushing him and leaving him with the possibility of no viable way out: either he tells the truth and is likely to fall into disgrace or he does not and has to keep to deceptive strategies (the defence mechanisms) which leave the dilemma unresolved. This situation, as suggests the narrative, cannot go on any longer. Reuben must find a way to bring the situation to an end. By getting rid of the burden of Puritanism and heroism, he will free himself of self-deception and falsehood which foster in him the pretension to be what he can never be: a living saint on earth and an outstanding hero. Only by so acting can he be true to himself and others.

Along this line, his *alter-ego* Cyrus, the embodiment of his self-deception regarding the subjugating social codes or success in life, must be dealt with. He must be sacrificed for Reuben to be liberated. Symbolically, his killing occurred at the very place where his internal conflict of self-deception and falsehood began, that is, the place where he left Roger Malvin to die. Following the killing of Cyrus, Reuben is half cured of his "dementia". For the completion of the cure he still has another step into the forest to make: that to get rid of falsehood and straighten the relationship with the other, that is, with God as well as with his human fellows that he deceived, namely his wife Dorcas, his community and his late companion, Malvin, who all mistook him for a most reliable and virtuous person.

In other words, the definitive resolution of his predicament implies for Reuben the necessity to confront directly the other, chiefly Dorcas to whom he lied about Malvin's fate and who is now standing in front of him. In that respect, God or the fellowman partakes of the symbolism of the forest in a twofold way: cognitively and psychologically. God, according to the then Calvinistic doctrine, is the unknown, the dreadful; so is the other from a philosophical point of view, on the basis of which, Raymond Carpentier writes that "[t]he notion of the other always exceeds our knowledge of it, for it is always more than what it is supposed to be"⁸ (85). Yet, the fate and shaping of the *ego* is linked to this category defined as the other. Hence a fall like Reuben's requires a step towards and through this category with a view to mending the relationship that has been badly affected since the desertion of Malvin. This step must be taken to bring things back to normal and restore inner peace.

⁷According to Michael Colacurcio cited by Mackenzie, « Roger Malvin's Burial » responds to Hawthorne's concern not only to exorcize the present from past violence epitomized in the value codes but also to liberate the past historical facts from "the making and maintenance of a lie" out of "false nationalist consciousness"; in this respect the Lovell Fight has been distorted into an epic (466-67).

⁸The original statement that we have translated reads as follows: "Autrui est toujours plus que nous ne le savons, autrui est toujours plus qu'il n'est" (87).



To put it more clearly, Reuben cannot continue to conceal his lie to Dorcas, nor can he continue to leave his vow to Malvin unfulfilled and, by doing so, compromise Malvin's rest and ruin his own life as well as his family's. He must find a way to get out of the plight in which he is entrapped, no matter what may happen, namely his disgrace or the loss of Dorcas's love that he dreads. So, the decision to relocate the family comes to provide him with the opportunity to "settle his accounts" with his spouse, and, in the same order of things, with Malvin's spirit. Following the gunshot which has killed Cyrus, Reuben suddenly found himself just in front of Malvin's bones and face to face with Dorcas who, after hearing the gunshot, has gone in search of Cyrus only to find him lying lifeless, without understanding what has happened to him. Reuben is left with no choice but to tell her at last the truth about her late father's fate:

'For the love of Heaven, Reuben, speak to me', cried Dorcas; and the strange sound of her own voice affrighted her even more than the dead silence. Her husband started, stared into her face, drew her to the front of the rock, and pointed with his finger. [...]
'This broad rock is the gravestone of your near kindred, Dorcas', said her husband. 'Your tears will fall at once over your father and your son' (31 - 32).

Following this awful revelation, Dorcas simply utters a shriek of horror and falls "insensible" near her dead son. At this point, the vengeance of the unhappy spirit of Malvin who has not received the promised burial, or the divine punishment incurred by Reuben's fall, has now reached its ultimate point. In other words, the story is brought to a disastrous climax: the deaths of Reuben's beloved ones caused by himself. Is it what he has been called to this place for? Is he lured into the wilderness to merely be crushed down? What a dreadful irony if that is all he has been called for! But what follows this climax tends to be a denial of an annihilating catastrophe.

In the midst of that disaster a fact, which might go un-noticed but which is highly meaningful from the standpoint of psychoanalytical therapy, must be highlighted: Reuben bursts into tears. By doing so, he opens up the door to emerge from a pathological situation into a normal or healthy one. As a matter of fact, Freud considers mourning to be a relieving act in opposition to melancholia which is pathological. While the mourner answers "a call of reality", and in this respect, is able to overcome a denial of a loss that he is faced with and consequently frees himself from self-destruction, the melancholic subject fails to overcome his unwillingness to recognize the loss, which is harmful to him. Letting the tears flow at the loss of a beloved person is a normal and healing attitude, argues Gerald W. Peterman. So, by bursting into tears over the losses of his dear ones for which he is liable, Reuben has gone further enough in facing the reality of things. He has touched the root of the matter, freeing himself of self-deception. This brings his plight to an end *ipso facto*: "The vow that the wounded youth has made the blighted man had come to redeem.



His sin was expiated - the curse was gone from him [...]”, reads the narrative (32).

In this unfolding the seeming disaster is in fact the remedy that Reuben needed to get out of his internal conflict. Not only does it liberate him from his long torment but it also brings back to normal his broken relationship with the other (either God or the fellowman).

Yet, this unfolding is still puzzling. Can the killing of Cyrus and the apparent death of Dorcas be considered other than an extreme punishment? How can it be rehabilitating or salutary to Reuben from the perspective of the divine justice that the narrative makes an allusion to? This urges us to go further in our investigation.

4. The price to pay for the removal of the curse

This double tragedy has not occurred to bring about the annihilation of Reuben. Far from producing this result, it has apparently brought about a positive change of situation. It has resulted in the settlement of Reuben’s “debt” and the removal of the curse. This simply means that the seemingly disastrous ending is the price to pay by Reuben to get things back to normal. This point turns out to be controversial and therefore requires elucidation.

“Roger Malvin’s Burial” draws on Christian theology, more particularly on Calvinism, which fostered New England’s Puritanism, and in keeping with this fact, the notion of the price to pay here recalls the punishment incurred in the case of breaking the covenant with God. Such punishment was meant to bring about the atonement of a violation, as exemplified in the *Old Testament*. As a matter of fact, the history of the relationship between God and his chosen ones is rooted in covenants. Theologically, two major covenants between God and mankind are affirmed, with some nuances between Calvinism and Catholicism. From the Calvinist angle, the former one was concluded with Adam and Eve and the latter one with Abraham, whereas from the Catholic perspective, the first one was made with Abraham and the second one began with the advent of Christ. God, in the former covenant, requested men to recognize Him as their Creator and the Master of their lives and to commit themselves to acting according to His commandments; in return, He would provide them with happiness on earth (either in the Garden of Eden or the Promised Land). In the latter covenant He expected men to recognize Him as their God and remain in the faith to Christ, His Messiah, in exchange for salvation and eternal life in His Kingdom. The breaking of the covenant would bring upon its doer God’s wrath or reprobation. Although the theology of God’s covenant did not begin with Calvinism or Puritanism, seventeenth century theologians, one of whom is John Preston, laid it down clearly for the Reformed Churches of that time, to the



extent that it appeared as their guiding principle. "The covenant [as presented by these theologians], therefore, is the only method by which God deals with man at all", says the critic Perry Miller (62). So, all Christian believers, who are regarded as Abraham's offspring, are bound by the new covenant which has definitely replaced the former one.

Now to come back to our narrative, the journey into the forest has ended with the killing of Cyrus at the very place where Malvin died and the apparent death of Dorcas due to too much shock. Following this double tragedy, the epilogue thus goes on to state that Reuben's offence is now atoned and his curse is removed:

At that moment the withered topmost bough of the oak loosened itself in the stilly air, and fell in soft, light fragments upon the rock, upon the leaves, upon Reuben, upon his wife and child, and upon Roger Malvin's bones. Then Reuben's heart was stricken, and the tears gushed out like water from a rock. The vow that the wounded youth had made [to] the blighted man had come to redeem. His sin was expiated – the curse was gone from him; and in the hour when he had shed blood dearer to him than his own, a prayer, the first for years, went up to Heaven from the lips of Reuben Bourne. (32)

This ending is simply unacceptable, protests the critic Frederick C. Crews, "for how could we take seriously the religious notion that a man can make his peace with the Christian God by shooting his innocent son? It is clear that Reuben has not performed a Christian expiation but simply rid himself of his burden of guilty feeling" (381).

Obviously, Crews fails to enter the author's imagination or artistry, which we dealt with in previous studies.⁹ First, Reuben's plight cannot be reduced to an unfounded feeling of guilt, for the evidence of his moral fall exists, and it is what brings about his guilty feeling, as will be shown in the following lines. By the way, is there such a thing as an unfounded guilty feeling? Conscience, which in some way is comparable to God's eye, cannot disagree with the individual for no reason. The evidence of Reuben's fall is rooted in the principle of human vulnerability together with the moonlight play of hues, characteristic of Hawthorne's fiction, in which a given fact implies a

⁹In "Ch. 2. Le diorama de Hawthorne" of our doctorate dissertation entitled "Vers une théorie de l'inclusion: une approche déconstructive de la fiction de Nathaniel Hawthorne", we have analyzed the nature of Hawthorne's artistry, based on a study of « Main Street ». It appears that this short story can aptly serve as the road to Hawthorne's fiction, which is conceived in the form of a fictional show, playing with reality and illusion (or fiction), and demanding of the audience to adopt the appropriate state of mind for understanding the proposed fiction. Our investigation highlights the content of the show, both in its artistic principle and semantic content and goes further to consider spatial and temporal representations in the show, and ends up with a study of the narration and the discourse.

In a second publication entitled "The Ironic Figure of Reuben Bourne in Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'Roger Malvin's Burial'", *Cahiers du CERLESHS*, we have shown that a sound understanding of the puzzling figure of Reuben Bourne requires of the reader a by-pass through the artistry in which it is written. Characteristically, Hawthorne's fiction overlaps different grounds of meaning, trying through a play of paradoxes and contrasts to convey a complex meaning.



hidden face of that fact. Crews's argument, as it appears, is grounded on the narrator stating that Reuben is preoccupied with defending himself against an "imaginary accusation". Was Reuben merely a victim of his own fantasy, imagining himself a murderer of his companion? It is clear that Malvin counted on Reuben's help for his rescue but this help never came. In fact, his rescue was not at all a preoccupation for Reuben after parting with him. The only thing which was in his mind was the prospect of life and happiness. Not only was it in his mind but also in his heart: "Reuben's young heart clung strongly to existence" (23). It was such an obsession in Reuben that it led him astray on his homeward journey, thus compromising any chance of rescuing his unfortunate companion. So, Reuben, in a sense, condemned Malvin to death. Worse than that, he condemned him to a double death for failing to return to perform his burial as promised. The burial honors the deceased, introduces them into the afterlife and perpetuates their memory here on earth. Frederick C. Crews and similar critics, for instance, fail to perceive this aspect. After rejecting the others' propositions, Crews states that the narrative of "Roger Malvin's Burial" is centred on an unfounded feeling of guilt, which "was never generated by a committed sin or crime in the first place" (381). In the light of what we have shown here, this view is quite amazing. Thus, Crews's perception is no different from that of Harry Levin, who declares Reuben "innocent" of Roger Malvin's death, or that of Martin Turner, who asserts that the narrative "relieves Reuben Bourne of any guilt for abandoning Malvin" (381). It is clear that we entirely disagree with such views, and the rest of our study will reveal further points of disagreement.

So, it is undeniable that Reuben is guilty of the death of Malvin. In view of his failing so gravely to assist Malvin or perform his burial, it is not surprising that Reuben has come to be haunted by Malvin's wandering ghost, like in a medieval story, say a Shakespearian play. Quite logically, the voice disturbing Reuben could be assimilated to the voice of Malvin's ghost or the voice of his own conscience.

Consequently, the killing of his son, together with the apparent death of Dorcas, is the price to pay for the removal of the curse afflicting Reuben, and there is no denying that it has brought about the atonement of the curse, as shown in the long quotation above.

With regard to the religious import of the killing, it is worth noticing that it must be related to the tenet of the covenant, and from this angle, it recalls the case of King David in the *Old Testament*. In choosing him to be the King of Israel, God signed a covenant with him under the terms of which He would protect him and make him great if he walked righteously. Unfortunately, King David broke the covenant at least twice. First, by having Uriah killed at war so that he could take his wife, whom he desired so much. By Prophet Nathan, he



was brought to recognize his sin, and following this, he was chastised with the death of his son, which brought about the expiation of his sin and re-established his relationship with God (II Samuel 11 and 12). Second, King David, urged by some megalomania, ordained the census of the people under his rule, thus breaking the covenant. He recognized his fault afterwards, and to atone his sin, God punished him with the death of some of his people by a plague epidemic (II Samuel 24).

In both examples, the expiatory punishment or sacrifice that God exacted did not fall directly on the breaker of the covenant but on a third party. So worked God's justice in the *Old Testament*. Christ himself is a blatant illustration of God's handling of the breaking of the covenant by men. He is chosen by God the Father to be the expiatory sacrifice to redeem all of sinful mankind. His sacrifice is supposed to redeem more efficiently than the blood of animals. As a matter of fact, up to the advent of Christ, expiation of sins was generally carried out through the sacrifice of animals and not that of the sinners.

The expiatory sacrifice in the Reuben case is perfectly in keeping with this divine logic or justice. (Note also that the sacrificial animal or victim was preferably innocent, stainless and young. So was Cyrus, in a sense). It may be shocking to a rational mind, but it responds to a logic which marked the history of Judeo-Christianity up to Christ. According to Apostle Saint Paul, God's wisdom looks like folly to men and inversely men's wisdom is pure folly to God (I Corinthians 1: 18-25).

It may appear that, in the working of this justice of God, the latter is not much demanding of the sinner, for somebody other than the covenant breaker is punished for the expiation of the fault. This is a rather superficial understanding. The son or his people both meant a lot to King David; so did Cyrus to Reuben. In Cyrus, he "had shed blood dearer to him than his own" (32), highlights the narrative. In other words, Reuben is turned into the murderer of his cherished son and in the same impetus, a murderer of his wife, who is not less dear to him, for it was for her love that Reuben deserted Malvin. Therefore, the death of King David's son or Reuben's son and wife is genuinely the token of the punishment - a harsh punishment indeed - inflicted on the covenant breaker, for God holds the perpetrator accountable for his own sin, and his punishment is meant to bring about the sinner's repentance. What God desires the most through this logic is not the sacrifice of an expiatory victim or any other sacrifice but the sinner's repentance, says the prophet Hosea (6: 6), or the evangelist Mathew (9: 13). In Hawthorne's narrative, Reuben, in view of what he has endured, is well-prepared for his repentance shown in a shedding of tears.

In the light of this development, Crews's analysis, as it runs in these following lines, simply crumbles down:



The story ending is heretical, to put it mildly: Reuben's alleged redemption has been achieved through murder, while the guilt from which he has thereby freed himself stemmed from an imaginary crime. The real murder is unrepented yet – indeed, Reuben shows little concern for his dead son – while the fantasy-murder brings forth tears and prayer. The Biblical allusions suggesting a possible redemption serve the purpose of placing in relief the merely pathological nature of the case at hand. For the idea of divine care is cruelly mocked by a plot in which all exhortations to Heaven spring from self-delusion, and in which the 'redeemer' performs his redemptive function by unintentionally stopping a musket ball. (388)

Crews must bear in mind that Hawthorne, in this narrative, draws on the beliefs of the eighteenth century New Englanders, in which the image of God is more like that of the *Old Testament* than that of the *New Testament*. In the *Old Testament*, God is just dreadful, distant and unfathomable, whereas in the *New Testament*, He is rather loving, merciful and close to men, at least in his Son, Jesus Christ. It so happened according to God's merciful plan that His Son Jesus, like Cyrus, stopped the punishment "bullet" intended for sinful mankind, thus putting an end to the shedding of innocent blood for expiation¹⁰. According to Perry Miller, it did not take too long for the New England Puritans to feel the need to alter their theology so as to make God more accessible and less dreadful.

From a detached standpoint, this *Old Testament* kind of reality, as is reflected in this narrative, appears ironical. This is precisely the viewpoint of critic Agnes McNeill Donohue, who is also critical regarding the ending of "Roger Malvin's Burial":

Ending this barbarous Old Testament-like tale of vengeance, exacted by a fiercer Jehovah than the God of Abraham, is the bland statement that Reuben is now able to pray. The conclusion is really impertinent unless we see it as Calvinist-ordained irony that dramatizes the conflict between the depraved nature of all men (Reuben is the archetype of Calvin's Everyman) and the merciless, appalling righteousness of God, demanding from sinners the full price of their envenomed nature – not less than everything. (22)

For Donohue too, the irony of the Calvinist tenets undermines the ending of the narrative, mostly the particular about Reuben's ability to pray after the sacrifice of his beloved. For her, this particular cannot be taken seriously. However, for us this point does not present any difficulty at all: it is a simple question of logic. Given that the atonement of the curse incurred has been effective, Reuben's relationship with God is *ipso facto* back to normal, and his ensuing prayer is quite logical. Besides, as Henry James points out, Hawthorne's artistry goes beyond a naïve adherence to Puritan theology: he uses it as a playground, swinging between discrediting and crediting it (352-353), undoubtedly driven by a constant desire to present the various aspects of

¹⁰It is clear that the sacrifice of Cyrus is analogical to the sacrifice of Christ and not to the near sacrifice of Isaac, as Crews puts it ("Even the Abraham Isaac parallel, which seems more prominent than any other..." [387-88]). The latter sacrifice is not an expiatory sacrifice as that of Christ, but rather a sacrifice to show God's love and recognition.



reality for the sake of objectivity. In this respect, if the God that Reuben turns to in a prayer looks merciless in view of the tragedy Reuben has gone through, He is not less merciful¹¹ in view of His help to Reuben, which has brought about the atonement of the offence and the removal of the curse. The event of the prayer is no doubt the token of God's hand at work on Reuben's behalf, for only God's grace can bring the sinner back to pray. We will show more of God's help in the next section.

All in all, the price that Reuben had to pay for the removal of his curse is far from being a small or inappropriate one. It is so high and so judicious that it appears hard to be accepted on the basis of pure human rationality. It is unacceptable because, in its essence, it *sacrifices* the highest interests of the *ego*. It is certainly a demand for a better humanity: sociable and spiritual¹². If this kind of sacrifice looks disturbing, this is normal, says Serge Moscovi, for "[i]f one must act against one's own interests, then the ideal selflessness appears to be associated not only with unpleasantness but also with some irrationality" (75).¹³

5. The burial

There remains another difficulty to deal with. It is the question of the burial, which is at the core of the story. Critics hardly make mention whether it is performed or not at the end of the story. Yet such a key point cannot be easily overlooked or superficially dealt with. Therefore, we intend here to address the question: has the burial taken place or not? A daunting question can even be grafted to this one: if the answer to the question is yes, then whose burial is performed?

At first, it is worth noticing that the title which announces the subject is rather ambiguous. With its genitive form, the title seems to allude to a burial whose performer is Roger Malvin, since the primary function of the genitive case is to express a case of possession or attribution. Yet, this understanding immediately contrasts with the apparent meaning of a burial to be done on behalf of Roger Malvin, which could be expressed with the periphrastic structure: the burial of Roger Malvin. It is this second meaning which is

¹¹According to the *Bible*, if God does punish the sinner for his sin, in fact, He is by nature more loving and merciful than severe or merciless. He indulges in granting mercy and grace, as can be read in Micah 7: 18-19.

¹²In our previous article on this short-story, we have pointed out Pierre Ouellet's notion of the relationship between the *ego* and *the other*, which goes from the *socius* (the getting together in society out of common interest) to the *munus* (the absolute giving of oneself to the other without expecting any compensation), which brings about the concept of society and community. (Poda 237-238 or Ouellet 26-30).

¹³This is our translation of the following French version : "L'altruisme idéal paraît alors non seulement associé au déplaisir, mais aussi à une certaine irrationalité, si l'on agit à l'encontre des ses propres intérêts".



dominant in the narrative. In English grammar, the genitive form and the periphrastic structure (with *of* serving as a link between the noun and its complement) are interchangeable when the possessor is a human being. Hence, from a grammatical point of view, the title of the narrative at hand tends to have a twofold meaning, as part of the logic of the story. This ambiguity calls for elucidation.

The closing paragraph of the narrative is heavily loaded with meaning indeed, and therefore requires careful examination once more. After the double sacrifice of Cyrus and Dorcas, the narrative goes on like this: "At that moment the withered topmost bough of the oak loosened itself in the stilly air, and fell in soft, light fragments upon the rock, upon the leaves, upon Reuben, upon his wife and child, and upon Roger Malvin's bones" (32). That bough which came off the tree is not just a dry bough like any other. It is a symbol of the failed commitment to bury Malvin and, by the same token, the corrupt and lifeless nature of Reuben. Now that Reuben has made a step towards reversing the tendency, it works for him as if Merciful God has approved of his initiative and has stretched out a helpful hand to him. This brings to mind the parable of the repenting prodigal son, in which the merciful father, who has been waiting for the return of his son, shows full willingness to help him get back his place in the family. In the same way, Providence's helpful hand can be seen on behalf of Reuben. Earlier the narrative did mention that "were he [Reuben in the midst of torment] to make the trial, he would be led straight [by Providence] to Malvin's bones" (25). And this turned out to be so, according to the insight of the omniscient narrator. In the same line of reasoning, later on, just before the double sacrifice, a spell of light was cast upon what was happening to him, so that "[he] trusted that it was Heaven's intent to afford him an opportunity of expiating his sin" (29). And this insight did come true. It is in this respect that the topmost withered bough came off the tree, aided by no wind, and broke up into dust-like fragments which scattered over the dead and Reuben. This dust covering the dead stands for burial. In ancient societies, like the Roman or the Greek ones, interment could be reduced to its symbolic form in the case it could not be properly performed. In such a case, some handfuls of dust scattered over the dead body could do: "[...] the scattering of three handfuls of dust over the body was sufficient for ceremonial burial and the happiness of the troubled spirit, if for any reason the body could not actually be interred", says Harold Whetstone Johnston (*The Private Life of the Romans*, §464). It is how Antigone performed the burial of her brother in Sophocles' play.

So, the pious duty of the burial of Malvin which constitutes Reuben's chief problem is now carried out with the help of Heaven. In this event, so bountiful is the benevolence of Heaven that not only Malvin has received the sepulture but also the freshly dead Cyrus and Dorcas (this event brings us to conclude on



her death). The dust for the burial has also spread on Reuben, epitomising the burial of his corrupt nature, to make him emerge as a new man, who then, joins in communion with the dead. We are therefore brought to this paradoxical truth, which is reflected in the ambiguity of the title: the burial of Malvin has brought about the burial of Reuben's most loved ones and, at the same time, the burial of Reuben's selfish and corrupt self. Isn't this a sign of the reciprocal essence – the communion – which is characteristic of the relationship with the *other*?

But the burial rite would be incomplete if it stopped here. It cannot be performed without tears being shed. The bursting of tears, beyond the acceptance of reality already outlined, signifies respect to the dead. Hence Reuben, whose heart has just been regenerated with the dust burial, cannot refrain from shedding tears over his dead kin and, to a certain extent, over his former character. With this mortuary respect being duly paid, Reuben, according to the vision of the omniscient narrator, is now utterly relieved of his failed vow. And from now on in communion with his kin, he is, by the same token, in communion again with God, and in full self-unity; therefore, he can now address a prayer to God.

Going further in this line of reasoning, it can be perceived that this symbolic and providential burial foreshadows the possibility of a proper burial by Reuben on behalf of his dead kin. He is unlikely to step back after these closing events which have so deeply transformed him. He has reached a cathartic or renescent stage, depending on which perspective one sees it, and is thus emotionally or spiritually ready to perform himself his sacred duty of burying his kin. It is only by completing the burial rite that he will experience a full liberation.

This brings us to conclude that the story is brought to an unexpected, if not a spectacular ending. Although there seemed to be no way out for the hero caught in the entanglement of a doom, he has eventually succeeded in achieving his liberation. Beyond the tragic note of despair, the story culminates in a note of relief and hope, characteristic of a great tragedy.

6. Conclusion

"Roger Malvin's Burial" is the dramatization of a dilemma involving an Indian war hero, Reuben Bourne. This dilemma derives from the *wounded* or vulnerable condition of the hero and highlights the relationship between him and his companion, Roger Malvin, who is also a *wounded* character. For failing in his duties vis-à-vis the latter, Reuben condemns not only Malvin to a wretched fate, namely death and lack of rest of his spirit, due to non-performance of his burial, but also ties up himself to a no better fate: his life is



turned into a nightmare, which he seems utterly unable to get himself out of. It appears that the dynamics of the narrative cannot be halted at this level. A way out must be found by all means, for the sake of getting back to a real life for Reuben himself and offering a peaceful rest to Malvin.

In this dramatization, what is at stake is the relationship linking the individual to his fellowman, say the other. Reuben's desertion of Malvin has led to a disastrous relationship between the two, with the two coming under a curse. And through this relationship it is the destiny of mankind which is at stake, in all aspects. In this respect, the *ego* must transcend its limits to reach out for the other, for they are bound in an inextricable relationship, in which each entity has a vital, if not sacred, role to play on behalf of the other. Both share a common vulnerability which must be transcended. Generally speaking, the narrative calls for taking into account the other side of a given category of meaning for the sake of true and deep meaning. So, the way out is no other than the way of transcendence, which implies sacrificing the *ego* to safeguard the endangered relationship between the *ego* and the other.

Failure to engage on this way entails disastrous consequences to both parties, and ultimately, to the destiny of mankind at large. The consequences range from psychological to social and even spiritual. In a world dominated by individualism and egoism, this narrative appeals its readers to give utmost importance to the relationship with the other as the solution to the predicament man faces.

However great the sacrifice demanded may be, the gain is not less great. It carries the possibility of peace here on earth and salvation in the afterlife, in accordance with the Christian beliefs which the narrator alludes to. As such, this possibility receives God's endorsement. In putting the necessity to perform burial rites at the center of the story, the narrative shows how far this relationship should go, beyond the here and now, beyond the natural and lower universe, to reach the supernatural and higher world. In sum, it exceeds all limits and barriers set by the *ego* to reach out to the other and from the other back to the *ego* in a mutual benefit.

References

- Carpentier, Raymond. *Connaissance d'autrui*. Paris: PUF, 1968. Print.
- Crews, Frederick C. "The Logic of Compulsion". *Nathaniel Hawthorne's Tales*. New York:
- Donohue, Agnes McNeill. *Hawthorne: Calvin's Ironic Stepchild*. Kent: The Kent U P, 1985. Print.



- Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and Melancholia". *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*. Trans. James Strachy. Vol. 1. London: Hogarth P, 1953. 243-258. Print
- _____. *Cinq leçons sur la psychanalyse*. 1921. Paris : Editions Payot et Rivages, 2010. Print.
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *Nathaniel Hawthorne's Tales*. Ed. James McIntosh. New York: Norton and Company, 1987. Print.
- Hirsch, Emil, G. et al. "The Mosaic Sacrifices." *Sacrifice*. 2002. Web. Nov 25, 2010.
- Importance of Burial in Greek Religion (The)". *eNotes* 2010 Web. Nov 20, 2010.
- James, Henry. "Early Writings". *Nathaniel Hawthorne's Tales*. New York: Norton, 1987, 350-56. Print.
- Johnston, Harold Whetstone. *The Private Life of the Romans*. (XIV, § 464). Scott, Foresman, 1932. Web. Nov 20, 2010.
- Mackenzie, Manfred. "Hawthorne's 'Roger Malvin's Burial': A Postcolonial Reading". *New Literary History*. 27. 3 (Summer 1996): 459-47. 19 Feb. 2014.
- Miller, Perry. *Errand into the Wilderness*. Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1956. Print.
- Moscovi, Serge. *Psychologie sociale des relations à autrui*. Paris : Nathan / HER, 2000. Print.
- New English Bible (The)*. New York: Oxford UP, 1972. Print
- Norton and Company, 1987, 380-389. Print.
- Peterman, Gerald W. "Toward a Healthy Emotional Life". *Joy and Tears: the Emotional Life of the Christian*. Moody Publishers, 2013. Web and Print. 27 April 2015.
- Poda, Michel. "Le diorama de Hawthorne". *Vers une théorie de l'inclusion: une approche déconstructive de la fiction de Nathaniel Hawthorne*. Diss. U Montpellier III, 1995, 79-127. Print
- _____. "The Ironic Figure of Reuben Bourne in Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'Roger Malvin's Burial'". *Les Cahiers du CERLESHS*. 26.40 (June 2011): 219-246. Print
- Terry, Eagleton. "Psychoanalysis". *Literary Theory*. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1983. 151- 161. Print.