1. The Pluralistic Ethics of Reading in Hawthorne’s Early Tales

Historians have amply documented the importance of destinarian convictions and the ubiquitous references to providence in nineteenth-century American discourses of political and cultural nationalism, Romantic notions of progress and history, and American imperialism and westward expansion.¹ Destinarian thought and providential ideas can be understood as a “structure of feeling” that characterizes the culture of America between 1820 and 1861.² Despite the omnipresence of destinarian and providentialist discourses in the decades prior to the Civil War, however, an overall assessment of the importance of these ideas for American theories of fiction, authorship, and the reading process is largely wanting.

In their discussions of the antebellum period and the “American Renaissance,” literary historians have generally treated providentialist notions in narrative fiction as remnants of an outmoded form of literary symbolization. In his classic study on the symbol in American literature, Charles Feidelson characterizes the providentialist writings of the American Puritans as an allegorical structure that preceded the flowering of Romantic symbolism in the American Renaissance. For Feidelson, the Puritan chronicles of “providences” present “a record of symbolic experience that never attained formal literary structure” and is symptomatic of “a powerful imaginative capacity [that] was haltingly exercised” (1953, 81, 82). As a form of early modern allegory, providentialist writings presuppose an invisible, transcendent totality – theologically understood as God’s omniscience, foreknowledge, and continual presence in his creation – to which

---


² I agree with Anders Stephanson’s passing remark that nineteenth-century providentialism is probably best understood, in Raymond Williams’s sense, neither as a pervasive worldview, nor as a hegemonic political ideology, but as a set of “meanings and values” characterizing the shared experience of a particular generation (Stephanson 1995, 28; Williams 1977, 132). In her study of American sensational culture, Shelley Streeby follows a similar line of reasoning when she analyzes the “connections among working-class culture, popular culture, and imperialism” in literary texts from the post-Jacksonian period (2002, 37).
any specific observation in the visible world can be related either in the form of “special providences” or miracles. Feidelson’s verdict that providentialism constitutes an inconsequential precursor to more refined literary tropes, such as the Romantic symbol or the modernist metaphor, has largely acted as the standard account of the emergence of these new forms of literary signification in the American novel.¹

The “supersessionary” paradigm underlying Feidelson’s account depicts the emergence of fictional literature and literary criticism as a process in which “religion ceded authority to knowledge and to forms of truth and suasion that no longer require its grounding” (Fessenden 2007, 632).⁴ Citing the diatribe of the American minister Samuel F. Jarvis against novel reading, Terence Martin relates the standard account of how fictional literature was seen as a falsification and distortion of reality, the moral universe, and the supernatural order of the cosmos, all of which are governed by “the eternal, timeless plan of God” (1961, 62). In a similar vein, literary historians have often uncritically accepted the perspective of religious conservatives who, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, considered literary fiction incommensurable with religious certainties by erroneously substituting “the finite for the infinite, the temporal for the eternal, the fallible for the infallible – man as creator for God as Creator” (ibid.). In contrast to such critical assessments, the same American critics who embarked on a crusade for greater cultural and literary independence from Europe after 1815 defended the respectability of literature by demanding a rigorous pursuit of the literary “quest for nationality” (cf. Spencer 1957), as well as by reassuring a national reading audience of the moral value inherent in the new mode of “novel reading.”

Advocating an ethics of reading grounded in the tenets of a liberal Protestantism, literary critics attempted to write into existence an interpretive community by popularizing readerly strategies for evaluating is-

³ Hawthorne’s veiled confession to “an inveterate love of allegory” in the preface to “Rappaccini’s Daughter” is less deprecatory than critics like Henry James, J. Hillis Miller, and Millicent Bell are willing to concede (cf. CE 10, 91-92; James 1967, 3; J. H. Miller 1991, 55; Bell 2005, 1-21). The admission that allegory is inimical to “human warmth” nevertheless acknowledges that narrative fiction always draws on an extra-textual reality (cf. Heitmann 2004, 118). More concretely, however, Hawthorne’s texts can be taken as foregrounding the reality of moral categories and ethical claims in the narrative construction of selfhood.

⁴ For an account of fiction’s emancipation from the moral constraints of religious institutions and ministerial elites in the history of the early American novel, see Davidson (2004). As Martin (1961) has demonstrated, the initial opposition of clergymen and the political establishment to the increase in fictional story-telling derived from a traditional view about the importance of religion for the maintenance of the social and moral order during the Early Republic.