CHAPTER 4


Cock-crowing and the decline of the West

Herman Melville’s short story “Cock-A-Doodle-Doo! Or, The Crowing of the Noble Cock Beneventano” – first published in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* on 1 December 1853, with no attribution – can also be related to the fantastic tradition in American literature, even if it is usually read either as a satirical attack upon American Transcendentalism (Thoreau, Emerson) or, in a more straightforward or naïve reading, as an allegorical exemplum (where the significatio tends to overshadow the narrative kernel of the story). In spite of the fact that Beryl Rowland stresses the allegorical and exemplary dimensions of the story, she nevertheless also points out its links to the forementioned fantastic tradition (even if she [in the manner of Rosemary Jackson] terms it “fantasy”): “As in most of

1 Unless otherwise indicated, references to Melville’s works are to Herman Melville, *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces 1839-1860*, Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1987 (given in parentheses in the text).

2 See for instance William Bysshe Stein “Melville Roasts Thoreau’s Cock”, *Modern Language Notes*, LXXIV (1959), 218-19. Stein’s satirical reading of “Cock-A-Doodle-Doo!” is criticized by Sidney P. Moss who reads the tale as “a companion piece to ‘Bartleby’ .... Where Bartleby is defeated by life and withdraws even into death, the narrator of ‘Cock-A-Doodle-Doo!’ comes to defy and even deny death while exulting in life ....” Furthermore, according to Moss, the cock’s emblematic function is all-important: “Though the cock is dead [at the end of the story], its spirit, phoenix-like, has risen in the narrator’s own person ...” (“‘Cock-A-Doodle-Doo!’ and Some Legends in Melville Scholarship”, *American Literature*, XL [1968], 210). One could argue, however, that such an interpretation underplays Melville’s cultural pessimism in “Cock-A-Doodle-Doo”, his savage attack on the social and political evils of the industrial age and the project of modernity in general.
Melville’s other tales, the movement is from the mundane to fantasy, culminating in the personal epiphany of the narrator.” Beryl Rowland likewise characterizes “Cock-A-Doodle-Doo!” as “a kind of allegorical parody of the archetypal Grail quest, with the disintegration of the miraculous object [the cock] and the hero’s assumption of its powers forming an ironic coda”. According to Rowland, the portrayal of the cock furthermore reminds us of the position of this bird in “folklore: the crowing cock ‘that is the trumpet to the morn’ dispelled ghosts, and caused fairies, demons, and spirits to lose their power over mortals”. In this connection we recall Washington Irving’s “Rip Van Winkle” (1820), where there is a similar structural affinity between the narrative elements that relate the story to a fantastic tradition and its folkloristic roots (see my Chapter 2 on “Rip Van Winkle’s Fall into History”).

The first-person narrator of “Cock-A-Doodle-Doo” is a clear-cut example of the unreliable narrator, and we do not know for certain to what extent he is simply fantasizing and/or hallucinating, when it comes to putting his experiences to the test: he appears to suffer, on a regular basis, from severe bouts of melancholia.

This depressive cast of mind is foregrounded from the very outset, which means that it is explicitly mentioned in the very first paragraph of the narrative: ”.... my own private affairs were also full of despotsisms, casualties, and knockings on the head, when early one morning in Spring, being too full of hypoes [that is hypochondria] to sleep, I sallied out to walk on my hill-side pasture” (268). When the narrator hears the wonderful cock – in a certain sense the real protagonist of the story – this despondency is quite abruptly turned into its exact opposite, a state of euphoria, but the narrator nevertheless remembers his original mood very well:

Bless me – it makes my blood bound – I feel wild. What? jumping on this rotten old log here, to flap my elbows and crow too? And just now in the doleful dumps. And all this from the simple crow of a cock .... (271-72, my emphasis)

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4 Ibid., 594.
5 Ibid., 599.