

ANALYSIS

“Roger Malvin’s Burial” (1832)

Nathaniel Hawthorne

(1804-1864)

“Roger Malvin’s Burial” is important as the first instance in American literature of the *individuation* concept, by which one must first save one’s own soul rather than simply depending on Christ or some other savior. Later, Hester and Dimmesdale also exemplify the concept in *The Scarlet Letter*. The most extreme articulation of the concept is by Emerson in his famous essay “Self-Reliance” (1841).

The inward history of young Reuben Bourne opens in the wilderness on the western frontier of New England in 1725. After an introductory paragraph that establishes an atmosphere of romantic heroism and chivalry, Reuben and old Roger Malvin are making their way home through the forest from a defensive engagement with Indians in which both were wounded. The old hunter grows too weak to go on. Lying in the shadow of a great rock shaped like a gigantic gravestone, Malvin tries to persuade Reuben to leave him there and save himself from certain death. The arguments of Malvin, who is the father of his fiancée, remind Reuben that there were other and “less questionable” duties than that of sharing the fate of a man whom his death could not benefit. “His generous nature would fain have delayed him, at whatever risk, till the dying scene were past, but the desire of existence and the hope of happiness had strengthened in his heart and he was unable to resist them.”

Reuben gathers Malvin a stock of herbs and roots to eat and some leaves to sleep on, then he binds the handkerchief bandaging his own wound to a sapling on the summit of a great rock and vows that he will return either to save Malvin or to bury him. He leaves with a guilty feeling that sometimes torments men in their “most justifiable” acts. His departure is endorsed by Hawthorne: “Who shall impute blame to him if he shrink from so useless a sacrifice?” The answer is, Reuben himself.

Critics have found this moral problem more complicated than Hawthorne probably did. The choice is between a useless chivalric sacrifice and a rational perception of “less questionable duties.” However, Reuben’s own interests coincide with the right moral choice and he distrusts himself. As a Calvinist he believes in his own depravity. Additionally, he is convinced that Malvin is going to be dead before he returns and so he stops rationalizing about bringing back aid. The moral issue of the tale according to Hawthorne is not Reuben’s leaving Malvin, but breaking his vow.

After he makes it back to his settlement and emerges from a coma, he feels ashamed. When his fiancée Dorcas asks him anxiously about the fate of her father, he defends himself against an imaginary accusation, then tells her his story truthfully until she interrupts with the inference that Malvin is dead. Dorcas assumes that he buried her father. Out of shame Reuben implies that he did bury him, telling the lie upon which his tragedy turns. He feels impelled to lie by his groundless sense of guilt, by the self-distrust that follows from the doctrine of total depravity, and by his fear of losing the love of Dorcas.

He permits himself to be made a hero in the settlement and he marries Dorcas, restrained from confessing his lie to a severe and rigid Puritan community by an understandable “moral cowardice” similar to Dimmesdale’s: “...pride, the fear of losing her affection, the dread of universal scorn, forbade him to rectify this falsehood.” His evaluation of his situation accords with Hawthorne’s: “He felt that for leaving Roger Malvin he deserved no censure. His presence, the gratuitous sacrifice of his own life, would have added only another and a needless agony to the last moments of the dying man; but concealment had imparted to a justifiable act much of the secret effect of guilt; and Reuben, while reason told him that he had done right, experienced in no small degree the mental horrors which punish the perpetrator of undiscovered crime.”

Reuben's irrational guilt is compounded by his concealment, leading to his primary sin, the breaking of his vow to Malvin. He becomes a secret sinner like Dimmesdale, Parson Hooper and Goodman Brown. Although their situations are different, each of these Puritans is led into sin by the impact upon his psyche of the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity, which "could not fail to cause miserable distortions of the moral nature." After his lie, Reuben is unable to keep his vow to bury Malvin because of his "superstitious fears" of the wilderness, which to the Puritans was the domain of Satan. Year after year he is harried by his conscience to go back and "redeem his vow."

Reuben the secret sinner becomes isolated, selfish and misanthropic. His prosperity declines into ruination and he is ultimately forced to seek a new life by going west into the wilderness with Dorcas and their son Cyrus, a boy of fifteen. The boy is loved by his father "as if whatever was good and happy in his own nature had been transferred to his child, carrying his affections with it." They set out by some design or coincidence in early May, almost on the anniversary of his unfulfilled vow to go back and bury Malvin before the body was eaten by wild animals or abused by Indians.

The unfulfilled vow is "like a serpent gnawing into his heart." For five days they travel into the "dark heart" of the forest. Reuben is drawn back toward the place where he left Malvin, on this very date years ago. "Where am I? Whither am I wandering? Where did I leave him?" When he and Cyrus go out hunting for game in different directions, Reuben strays "rather like a sleep walker." At that time, the word *unconscious* had not been used in the English language. The word *subconscious* had been used nine years before, in 1823, by the British essayist Thomas DeQuincey to render his experiences under the influence of opium. Reuben is under the influence of guilt. "Unable to penetrate to the secret place of his soul where his motives lay hidden, he believed that a supernatural voice had called him onward, and that a supernatural power had obstructed his retreat. He trusted that it was Heaven's intent to afford him an opportunity of expiating his sin."

Suddenly, "perceiving the motion of some object behind a thick veil of undergrowth, he fired, with the instinct of a hunter and the aim of a practiced marksman." Gradually he recognizes the symbolic landscape: the rock like a gigantic gravestone, the oak sapling grown up and blighted at the top. "Whose guilt had blasted it?" Then he and Dorcas discover the dead body of Cyrus. She shrieks and the withered topmost bough of the oak loosens and falls down in light fragments upon them and Cyrus and the unburied bones, prefiguring Roger Malvin's burial and Reuben's absolution. "The vow that the wounded youth had made the blighted man had come to redeem. His sin was expiated--the curse was gone from him; and in the hour when he shed blood dearer to him than his own, a prayer, the first for years, went up to Heaven from the lips of Reuben Bourne." The reference in the final paragraph to "the vow" makes clear that Reuben feels guilty, and that Hawthorne blames him, for his failure to return and bury Malvin.

The "supernatural power" that Reuben believes led him back to Malvin's bones against his will and afforded him an opportunity to expiate his sin refers to God's sovereign will and the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. Hawthorne attributes the power to "motives" in "the secret place of his soul." In Christian tradition, when a symbolic death of self is accompanied by confession and repentance, there may be a rebirth, as is implied by Reuben's prayer. Nothing but the death of his beloved son Cyrus could soften his heart and make the tears gush out "like water from a rock." Only a catastrophe of this magnitude could atone for his sin. Nothing but divine retribution could explain it. From his own religious viewpoint, his son Cyrus is analogous to Christ, dying for his sins.

Most critics agree that the killing of Cyrus is an accident. Some misread the story by disregarding the anti-Calvinist content and by failing to understand that this is an "inward history," a psychological portrait, not an affirmation of Calvinism. Reuben may subconsciously intend to circle around and "sacrifice" his son like a New England Isaac, as a few critics have suggested, but he has no control over the movements of Cyrus, who just happens to be directly under the symbolic oak, behind a "thick veil of undergrowth," precisely when his father wanders into range. Reuben does not know where Cyrus is and cannot see him. No conscious killer, let alone a subconsciously driven one, could have arranged this perfect conjunction of circumstances, which dramatizes Reuben's belief in predestination.

Hawthorne portrays events as determined primarily by Reuben's guilty conscience, which compels him subconsciously to return and bury Malvin. When he emerges from his trancelike musing to shoot at "some object" in the brush, it is "with the instinct of a hunter." He fires from *instinct*, not guilt: "it was attributable to *no care of his own* that his devious course kept him in the vicinity of the encampment." (italics added) And the moan of Cyrus was "unheeded" by Reuben. If he had been driven subconsciously to murderous retribution, Reuben would have killed himself, not his innocent and beloved son.

From his own religious viewpoint, Reuben has been subjected to a greater test of faith than Abraham, who was not required to sacrifice his son. Cyrus died for his sins like Christ, but with no choice. Reuben sees the accident as divine punishment, which cannot be unjust, inasmuch as God is sovereign and a man deserves whatever befalls him. As evident in their writings, it was common among Puritans to think of such events as punishments of themselves without considering the injustice of the consequences to others. Hawthorne did not agree with Reuben's concept of retribution nor with his Calvinist conception of God. Clearly the death of Cyrus is unjust and disproportionate to Reuben's sin. The conclusion of this "inward history" is consistent with Hawthorne's "picture" of Reuben's Calvinist mind.

"Roger Malvin's Burial" is one of Hawthorne's studies of the effects upon the mind and moral nature of "pernicious principles"--Calvinist, early Quaker, Unitarian, utopian Transcendentalist, aristocratic, materialistic. Like a literary minister, he sought to "delineate the history of a mind bewildered in certain errors." He began writing this story in about 1828, soon after graduating from Bowdoin College, during a period when he studied his Puritan ancestors and compared his own beliefs to theirs. He saw the Calvinism of Reuben as barbaric and primitive, perhaps socially useful in a harsh era but still pernicious. Fortunately, New England outgrew it. As he says of Calvinism in "Main Street": "Such a life was sinister to the intellect, and sinister to the heart, especially when one generation had bequeathed its religious gloom and the counterfeit of its religious ardor, to the next."

As all his works convey, Hawthorne believed in a just and benevolent God, like the dying Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter* when he tells Hester, "He is merciful! He hath proved his mercy, most of all, in my afflictions." God helps Reuben save himself in the only way such a Calvinist could be saved. Though Hawthorne did not believe in predestination, he did believe in Providence, which could account for the extreme coincidences in the plot. Though driven subconsciously and attributing his salvation entirely to his God, Reuben must save his soul through painful individuation. True salvation must be earned rather than simply bestowed. Calvin should be buried like Malvin. Because he did not bury Malvin and could not bury Calvin, Reuben ends up having to bury Cyrus.

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