



“A Triumph of the Gaze over the Eye”: Gaze in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* and Nino Ricci’s *Lives of the Saints*

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Abstract: Situated in a relatively claustrophobic environment, both Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* and Nino Ricci’s *Lives of the Saints* traces the dynamics between particular individuals and the community as a whole. Using the concept of “gaze” as a key, and employing Foucault and Lacan’s theorization concerning that concept, this essay seeks to unravel the struggle characters in both novels go through, and argue that while *Lives of the Saints* hangs in an irresolvable liminal space on its way breaking out of the Semiotic into the Symbolic, the history, *The Scarlet Letter* is a journey from the Symbolic into the Real, where ego could rest unharmed beyond any sense of lack.

Keywords: gaze, psychoanalysis, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Lives of the Saints*

1. Introduction

First published in 1850, *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne tells the story of the entangled relationship among Hester Prynne, who breaks the Puritanical code by committing adultery and giving birth to a girl Pearl, priest Arthur Dimmesdale, the father of the child, and Roger Chillingworth, a scholar, physician and husband of Prynne. Comparatively, *Lives of the Saints*, first of the trilogy by the same name by Nino Ricci, was first published in 1990 and centers on the experience of Vittorio Innocente’s family in a southern Italian village Valle del Soles before its emigration to Canada for his mother’s adultery with a “blue-eyed” man. Placed in a relatively claustrophobic environment, both traces the dynamics between particular individuals and the community as a whole. Moreover, both ultimately concerns the felicity of the ego, how it could stand intact in the individual’s relationship with others and endure the wounds it is forced to face, “battered by the external world, scourged by the cruel upbraidings of the superego, plagued by the greedy, insatiable demand of the id” (140) [1], in the case of *Lives of the Saints* the precarious state of a migrant, and for *The Scarlet Letter* the admonition of God. Using “gaze” as a key, in Foucault and Lacan’s terminology respectively, this essay seeks to unravel the struggle characters in both novels go through, and argue that while *Lives of the Saints* hangs in an irresolvable liminal space on its way breaking out of the Semiotic into the Symbolic, the history, *The Scarlet Letter* is a journey from the Symbolic into the Real, where ego could rest unharmed beyond any sense of lack.

2. The normalizing gaze in *The Scarlet Letter* and *Lives of the Saints*

The normalizing power of the strict Puritan moral code is embodied in the ubiquitous gaze strewn generously along the text, and jumps constantly, unexpectedly out to harass, creating an all-embracing system of surveillance and control. This gaze is introduced at the beginning with the novel’s description of the prison door, one of the two earliest foundations of the “virgin soil”, the inside of which made more aghast for its lack of detailed description. This depletion would, however, be compensated later by the scene in the market place since it could be taken as the structure of a prison laid out. The place for Hester to stand for her trail, “the platform of the pillory”, “a penal machine”, is comprised with numerous components, part of which is the scaffold, a “instrument of discipline”, “contrivance of wood and iron”, fashioned to hold the penitent’s head for “public gaze” (45) [2]. The weight of this occasion and this gaze is cemented by representatives of institutions, who sat on balcony of the meeting-house, “looking down upon the platform” (46) [2], thus completing the vision of Foucault’s “optimal prison”, the panopticon. This gaze is further internalized as self-discipline, as the omnipresent God shows Himself in all objects, and diffused into each individual in New England. Society is thus transformed into “a field of perception”, where “thousands of eyes posted everywhere, mobile attentions ever on the alert”, a delicate network of surveillance (214) [3], and Hester is made to sustain “the gaze of the multitude through several miserable years as a necessity, a penance, and something which it was a stern religion to endure” (176) [2].

Another gaze comes from Chillingworth onto Dimmesdale. Triggered by vengeance it gradually aggravates and transmutes into a morbid passion equal in strength with the source of life, blazing in his “mysterious and puzzled smile” as the

moment he turns away from the minister: “‘A rare case,’ he muttered. ‘I must needs look deeper into it. A strange sympathy betwixt soul and body! Were it only for the art’s sake, I must search this matter to the bottom’” (109) [2]. The minister, then, is no longer seen as an animate individual but a specimen for medical examination, its traits erased as a corpse lying on the table for autopsy, and that gaze bypasses the patient, penetrates the patient’s body, peels away their idiosyncrasies and turns institutional, ready to sacrifice that target for its own purpose (7) [4]. This combination of a scholar and a physician, a scientific intellect, is seen also in Dr. Rappaccini in Hawthorne’s short story “Rappaccini’s Daughter”, who would fain sacrifice his daughter’s happiness for proof of a scientific hypothesis, and appears to be an archetype demonstrating Hawthorne’s suspicion over an overweening intellect (72) [5].

For to see is, essentially, a desire to know, “it is sight, with its accompanying imagery of light, unveiling, and fixation by the gaze, that traditionally represents knowing, and even rationality itself” (9) [6]. As normally there is no easy access to truth, it is always represented as “veiled, latent, or covered” (96) [6], the attainment of truth therefore involves a process of strenuous unveiling and laying bare, this process and desire embodied in the Actaeon complex described by Sartre where Actaeon pushes aside the branches the better to see Diana at her bath. To see is to incorporate the object into reason and rationality, to snub and materialize it into knowledge that could be articulated and grasped, and when needs be, controlled.

However, reason, or speech, with all of its potential to discipline and normalize, means also order, both Ricci and Hawthorne, and especially the latter, has to admonish is that it is that dark, abyssal place beyond speech and reason that is a more perilous position to occupy. The gaze that resides over Valle del Sole is *lu malocchiu*, a southern Italian dialect form of *malocchio*, translated as the evil eye. It is said to be caused by *invidia*, envy. However, there is no clear definition or codes as to what constitutes *invidia*, which is manifested in the diversity of the methods taken to avoid *invidia* and *malocchio*. Snake is seen as an agent of the evil eye. ‘Do l’orgoglio sta, la serpe se neva,’—where pride is the snake goes—therefore people visited by a snake is deemed as bad omen (11) [7]; it is associated with nearly all bad luck, an old woman, when her child vomited onto the floor, cried, “L’invidia!” , “A curse!” (24) [7]; villagers have to try not to contribute unequal sums of money towards the expenses of *festa della Madonna*, Valle del Sole’s main festival, to avoid stirring up *invidia* in each other (67) [7];. This ambiguity drags it down from the altar of its claimed Catholicism and subjects it to the contingency of human judgement. It suggests simply a highly negative emotional state and therefore to avoid it implies deep conformity, where no conventions would be shaken and no surface of water stirred. Alternatives are to be suppressed and punished.

This distortion of religion is also manifested in their confession. The solemn God turns into a caricature which could easily be seen in any childhood tales warning children against naughtiness in La Maestra’s story of San Camillo, whom God sends thieves to entrap for his debauchery (37-38) [7]. In the case of Silvio the postman, after returning from his banishment because of his falling into bad company, drinking and gambling, he would recite some of his poems dedicated to God, as, however, a petition to the villagers to be again accepted as one of the members of the community, who would mock him invariably every year “to remind themselves of the dangers of high aspiration” (88) [7], that deviance from the norms could lead only to retribution [8].

3. The path to redemption in *The Scarlet Letter* and *Lives of the Saints*

To fight against this titanic oppression of the Symbolic, Cristina retreat into the Semiotic [9]. Ricci delineates Cristina’s transformation after the snake bite. Before the onset of the results of the venom she is rationally silent, telling her father repeatedly that what she was doing in the barn was feeding the pigs, and when she overcomes the venom and fully returns to her conscious state, she is “bright and alert” (17) [7], still silent, marking her withdrawal into a safe place. Then, after this incident, “a deep silence” descends on the house, “the very walls, the floor, the splintered table, seemed to have grown strangely distant and mute, as if guarding some secret themselves” (52) [7], and Cristina withdrew into “a shadowy silence” (69) [7], broken mainly by her “quiet sobbing at night mingling with the sigh of the wind, like something inhuman” (71) [7]. She chooses not to feel the need to explain or prove any part of her being to others, but to feel intact in her own Neverland. Her being becomes porous, fluid, hard to define and grasp. She would reject opening her doors when the procession carries the statue of the Virgin Mary throughout the town (80) [7], would refuse to send her son the fields to do agricultural work like others, and her relationship with Vittorio, at the same time a mother and a lover, is shown clearly when her body is eroticized in the narration of the son as she is about to dive into the pool, “letting her dress fall casually to the cave floor and standing above me for a moment utterly naked, smooth and sleek” (30) [7]. Foundations of meaning is destabilized by her very being.

However, this silence is torn apart when she leaves the town, in an outburst of anger and clear utterance,

Fools ... You tried to kill me but you see I’m still alive. And now you came to watch me hang, but I won’t be hanged, not by your stupid rules and superstitions. You are the ones who are dead, not me, because not one of you know what it means to be free and to make a choice, and I pray to God that he wipes this town and all its stupidities off the face of the earth! (161) [7]

Meaning that hangs previously in air is pinned down and put into place by her explication. Similarly on the ship she shed her silence behind and seeks to talk with other passengers to create new relationships. For she attempts to break away from the undefinable ground of the Semiotic and to go into history, the history and symbolic order of another land, to adapt to the keep living. That she perishes on the way to the new world need to be put into the context of the whole text, where her children are ushered into a new life (49) [10]. It thus reflects the deep anxiety of migrants towards the future, regarding the precarious position migrants would inhabit in the new world and whether their souls could endure those sufferings it is forced to go through or seek the serenity of demise, which would be the theme in subsequent sequels of the trilogy. It is a gaze homeward with a body turned towards the future, caught painfully in between.

If *Lives of the Saints* marks the painstaking struggle for a renewed life, *The Scarlet Letter* dives straight into that initial stage where ego could rest unharmed. Although seemingly centered around the unwavering defiance of Hester Prynne, the character of Dimmesdale witnesses the devotion of highest emotional tension by Hawthorne, which could be traced arguable to the author himself, who is said to be haunted by his forefathers' involvement in witch-hunt (70-71) [5]. In the agonizing confession in the wood, the pastor admits that unlike Hester who wears the A in the outside, the sin he has to chew on in private is more difficult to bear. To be seen, to be laid out for open acknowledgement and recognition is thus easier than private and silent confrontation, as made clear by the pastor, "the hearts holding such miserable secrets as you speak of, will yield them up, at that last day, not with reluctance, but with a joy unutterable" (104) [2].

That deployment of the notion of a mask is also seen in *The Minister's Black Veil*, and often hints at the ironic notion how sinning or emptiness actually brings more sacredness to a cleric personage, and how sinning brings a clergyman closer to its people for each has sinned, as what Hester realized with "a new sense" endowed by the scarlet letter, that "it gave her a sympathetic knowledge of the hidden sin in other hearts" (69) [2], or that everyone wears black veil, as cried the dying minister in anger. Just like the painting competition held by two ancient Greek painters, Zeuxis and Parrhasios, where Zeuxis successfully painted a bunch of grapes that attracted birds to peck at, but Parrhasios won with a curtain on the wall, which drew Zeuxis to open up as to see what was drawn inside. For this mask, as the curtain that Parrhasios draws, raises hidden desires and impulses at the same time it brings people face to face with their lack, that from the Real which is severed as they enter the Imaginary and the Symbolic (40-41) [11]. It brings horror for it reminds of lack, cuts open the life that has been stitched together and reviews the abyss lying under.

As that black veil which keeps the eponymous minister "in that saddest of all prisons, his own heart" (382) [2], in inhabiting torment and confinement in his own heart it suddenly dawns on the pastor that the relief brought by being seen is not any longer enough, he decides finally to merge with his desire, never to be parted. This is emblemized in the "sunrise" which "threw a golden beam into the study, and laid it right across the minister's bedazzled eyes" (175) [2], which offers epiphany and the clergyman is no longer "in a Maze", which is the title of the chapter. He would choose, between the prison and the graveyard that are the twin initial foundations of the virgin soil, the latter. That the clergyman has an affinity with the graveyard is indicated in the possession of one in the new abode shared by him and Chillingworth, "well adapted to call up serious reflections, suited to their respective employments, in both minister and man of physic" (99) [2], and Chillingworth digs into the poor clergyman's heart, "like a miner searching for gold; or, rather, like a sexton delving into a grave" (103) [2]. Or probably both, as he realises, to be seen, to be rational is no longer enough, he now longs for that blissful beginning.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, focusing on gaze in both texts, this essay examines the normalizing force in *The Scarlet Letter* in the form of Foucault's panopticon, represented in the arrangement of the market-place scene and the omnipresent gaze residents perform on each other, and medical gaze, manifested mainly in Chillingworth's probing into Dimmesdale's heart. For to see suggests essentially knowing, and rationality itself. However, what *Lives of the Saints* and especially *The Scarlet Letter* warns is that being incorporated into speech and rationality implies also some extent of order, and it is in the realm beyond that chaos sets in. This is shown in the capricious Malocchio that resides over Valle del Soles and in the perversion of rites of confession into a play of the contingent human judgement. To escape from this oppression Cristina steps out of her retreat into the Semiotic and her children are ushered into a new life and history, while her death makes the peril of their future palpable. Dimmesdale, on the other hand, in his confrontation with that abyssal lack under the surface of a stitched life, yields to the desire for totality. Therefore, *Lives of the Saints* is on the whole a gesture out of suffocating suppression into a new life and new history, with disconcertions about the future and hangs in a liminal space. *The Scarlet Letter*, in its obsession with the concept of sin, is brought face to face with both the irrevocable lack and further the initial blissful state of intactness, and decides to stay permanently.

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