

# PICTORIAL CROSS-CURRENTS BETWEEN HAWTHORNE AND ATWOOD: NEGOTIATING WITH THE DEAD

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## CRUCES PICTÓRICOS ENTRE HAWTHORNE Y ATWOOD: TRATOS CON LOS MUERTOS

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### RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza cómo una novelista canadiense contemporánea, Margaret Atwood, utiliza la obra de un novelista norteamericano del siglo diecinueve, Nathaniel Hawthorne, para definir su propia posición como escritora, y también para criticar y transformar la reflexión de su predecesor. Este proceso se da en una novela de 1996, *Alias Grace*, en forma de una reescritura de la novela más famosa de Hawthorne, *La letra escarlata*. Una conexión importante entre los dos escritores es su uso del arte visual para plantear, y posiblemente resolver, los problemas que encuentran como artistas en un entorno hostil.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Intermedialidad, literatura comparada, narrativa norteamericana, novela histórica, relaciones entre texto e imagen.

### ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the way in which a contemporary Canadian novelist, Margaret Atwood, uses the work of a canonical nineteenth-century American novelist, Nathaniel Hawthorne, to define her own position as a writer, while at the same time criticizing and transforming her precursor's reflection on the writer's task. I identify this process in Atwood's 1996 novel, *Alias Grace*: it takes the form of a rewriting of Hawthorne's most famous novel, *The Scarlet Letter*. An important connection between the two writers is their common use of visual art to pose, and potentially to resolve, the problems they encounter as artists in a hostile environment.

**KEYWORDS:** comparative literature, historical novel, intermediality, North-American narrative, text-image relations.

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This paper is in many ways the product of what Edmund Wilson would call a “shock of recognition”: both my own recognition of an active, transformative link between two important figures in the development of fiction in North America—the American Nathaniel Hawthorne and the Canadian Margaret Atwood—and the perception that this link reveals, in the work of the Canadian writer, just such a moment of recognition, “when genius becomes aware of its kin” (Wilson). Atwood, considered as a new link in the chain of North-American “geniuses” quoted by Wilson, provides a much-needed update to the American critic’s book, by extending “The Development of Literature in the United States recorded by the *Men* who made it” (my emphasis) to the rich field of contemporary Canadian literature, represented by one of its most prominent women writers.

That Atwood did indeed recognize in Hawthorne a novelist whose work had a role to play in her own self-definition as a writer clearly appears in her conference on historical fiction, “In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction”. Describing a graduate course which she took on “The Literature of the American Revolution”, Atwood quotes a group of imaginary nineteenth-century Americans: “Now that we’ve had the Revolution, they fretted, where is the great American genius that ought to burst forth? What should the wondrous novel or poem or painting be like, to be truly American?” (Atwood, “In search” 222). She then goes on to mention *The Scarlet Letter*, as the quintessential product of this context:

... it was out of this questioning and assessing climate —where did we come from, how did we get from there to here, where are we going, who are we now— that Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote *The Scarlet Letter*, an historic novel ... that uses a seventeenth-century English Colonial setting for the purposes of a newly-forged nineteenth-century American Republic. And I think that’s part of the interest for writers and readers of Canadian historical fiction, now: by taking a long hard look backwards, we place ourselves. (222-223)

In the light of these remarks, it is significant that Atwood’s own historical novel, *Alias Grace* (the only one of her novels to fit into the category), can be read in part as a rewriting of *The Scarlet Letter*. In other words, to place herself, the author must look back not only at the Canadian past, but at the American literary tradition. In *Negotiating with the Dead*, a series of essays on writers and writing, Atwood specifically identifies Hester Prynne’s embroidered A as a symbol of the female artist’s marginal position in society (Atwood, *Negotiating* 83). Over and over again, the author describes her own artistic beginnings in terms which powerfully recall Hawthorne’s circumstances: a postcolonial context in which a new generation of writers are in charge of founding a national literature, while at the same time being looked upon with suspicion just for being writers. Reflecting on how

she became a writer, she describes the early stage of the process as a rather lonely and discouraging experience: “It was as if the public role of the writer—a role taken for granted, it seemed, in other countries and at other times, had either never become established in Canada, or had existed once but had become extinct” (16-17).

My interest here is not simply to identify an influence between the two novelists; nor am I claiming that Atwood’s writing is somehow derivative in relation to the earlier, more canonical work. What I would like to demonstrate is that *Alias Grace* is part of an ongoing exchange, a kind of cross-cultural discussion about issues which concerned both writers closely. In that sense, I would argue that Atwood’s novel is in some sense pursuing a task which Hawthorne could not fulfill because of the obstacles he faced as a nineteenth-century novelist writing in Puritan New England. We might say that one of Atwood’s concerns in her 1997 novel is to criticize and improve on Hawthorne’s earlier proposal<sup>1</sup>. Thus, to speak of *Alias Grace* as a “rewriting” of *The Scarlet Letter* is not entirely a metaphor: as I will argue below, the parallels between the two novels are significant (primarily in the construction of the female protagonist as a figure of the artist ostracized, practically for life, by her community). The fact that Atwood’s novel refers explicitly to Hawthorne can be read as a signal to the reader to explore the connections between the two books further, and I believe that these connections point to a deliberate transposition, in the later novel, of the central issue of Hawthorne’s book to the Canadian context and a twentieth-century woman’s perspective.

An essential link between the two works is the use both writers make of visual art: in both novels, the verbal narrative is interwoven with vivid evocations of various forms of visual art which seem to propose a hybrid verbal-visual language as a challenge to purely verbal discourse. W.J.T. Mitchell, in *Picture Theory*, proposes several concepts which might account for this kind of hybridation or interweaving. Among them, the concept of the image/text (Mitchell 88-89), which implies a problematic relationship between the verbal and the visual—one which raises the question of “the heterogeneity of representational structures within the field of the visible and readable” (88)—seems to me the most relevant to the novels discussed, in which the relationship between verbal and visual language is problematized. Both writers are intensely aware of the expressive and communicative power of visual images, and of the power of verbal language to imprison the individual; both novels engage in creating images which evoke certain forms of visual art, forms which actively intervene

1. This idea recalls Richard Brodhead’s reflection on the “school of Hawthorne”, that is to say the way in which he perceives Hawthorne to engage later North-American writers and stimulate their own reflection on the writer’s task. (See Brodhead 8-12)

in a narrative process which in both works involves interpretation and a search for “truth”. We will see that part of the attraction of the visual dimension for both writers is that it provides a privileged vehicle for dealing with the problematic relation between *signifying* and *representing*<sup>2</sup> in art: visual art, for the two authors, thus becomes a vehicle for reflecting on the problems of their own, verbal art, and a means (hopefully) to resolve some of their difficulties as verbal artists.

In Hawthorne’s case, the most obvious manifestation of visual art in *The Scarlet Letter* is embroidery, which not only invades the story at the level of plot but also functions as a metaphor of the whole book<sup>3</sup>. As for Atwood’s novel, it centers on a protagonist who, among other things, is clearly an avatar of Hester Prynne. Like Hester, Grace is a talented seamstress and embroiderer; like Hester, she is also an ostracized criminal, whose crime is closely connected in the novel to her activity as a seamstress (as we will see, her narrating of her story is associated with embroidery): thus, the activity also becomes an organizing metaphor of the creation of the story itself<sup>4</sup>. And of course, Grace, like Hester, is a stand-in for the author (surely that is one of the meanings of the novel’s title). However, we will also find differences in the treatment of the visual material (and in the kind of visual material evoked) which hold the key to Atwood’s creative transformation of Hawthorne’s work.

## VISUAL ART IN *THE SCARLET LETTER*: EMBROIDERY AS PAGEANTRY

Any understanding of Hawthorne’s fiction has to start out by recognizing what a problematic undertaking being a fiction writer was in his particular place and time. Discussions

2. As we will see, “representing” implies both the productive and the receptive aspects of artistic creation, conceived as a source of aesthetic pleasure (and not necessarily as an object of abstruse interpretation). “Signifying”, on the other hand, can be understood in the sense of Erwin Panofsky’s iconology, which aims at deciphering the secondary, conventional (or symbolic) meanings of artworks (Panofsky, especially 55-58). It is worth noting that Panofsky’s reflections on iconology deal largely with the art of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, when visual art almost always had an allegorical dimension. Claudio Guillén also mentions the (productive) tension in the visual arts between “representing” (the process of merely presenting or reproducing a model) and “meaning”: the process of giving meaning to the model, which exists as a sign within a framework of other signs or symbols (Guillén 105-111)
3. Though, in fact, the novel creates a more complex network of references to visual and performing art. We will concentrate here on the related topics of heraldry and embroidery, in order to focus on the link between Hawthorne and Atwood. For an important study of the role of embroidery and the scarlet letter in Hawthorne’s novel, see Bercovitch, *The Office of the Scarlet Letter*.
4. For other studies of Grace’s activity as a seamstress and quilt-maker in relation to her story-telling, see Michael; Siddall; Tolan; Wilson. Surprisingly, I have found no literature exploring the connection between *Alias Grace* and *The Scarlet Letter*.

of nineteenth-century American literature cannot ignore the hostility of Puritan New England to fiction-writing, or the pressures put upon writers of the early nineteenth century to be the founders of a great national literature in the aftermath of Independence (Simonson, *Lambivalence* 11-17)<sup>5</sup>. If the writer wants to live up to these expectations (and keep his audience), he has to be a serious, patriotic, and useful character. And Hawthorne, when he writes *The Scarlet Letter*, is trying hard, if not to *be* one, at least to make a convincing show of it. One way of satisfying the audience is to imitate Scott (almost the only novelist considered respectable in New England at the time) by writing a historical novel.

At the same time, Hawthorne has his reservations about the public he is writing for: the American readers demanded an American Shakespeare, but they themselves were not Shakespeare's audience (Simonson, "Cuando el escritor..." 214-217). Hawthorne expresses this very clearly in chapter XXI of *The Scarlet Letter* ("The New England holiday"): the narrator, talking about the Election Day crowd which has gathered to hear Dimmesdale's final sermon, draws some rather grim conclusions, not about the colonial Puritans, but about his own contemporaries:

... we perhaps exaggerate the gray or sable tinge, which undoubtedly characterized the mood and manners of the age. The persons now in the market-place of Boston had not been born to an inheritance of Puritanic gloom. They were native Englishmen, whose fathers had lived in the sunny richness of the Elizabethan epoch; a time when the life of England, viewed as one great mass, would appear to have been as stately, magnificent, and joyous, as the world has ever witnessed. Had they followed their hereditary taste, the New England settlers would have illustrated all events of public importance by bonfires, banquets, pageantries, and processions. Nor would it have been impracticable, in the observance of majestic ceremonies, to combine mirthful recreation with solemnity, and give, as it were, a grotesque and brilliant embroidery to the great robe of state, which a nation, at such festivals, puts on. ... (Hawthorne 155-156)

The narrator goes on to describe some of the New Englanders' rather feeble attempts at festivity on this particular occasion, and then administers his *coup de grace* to his own contemporaries: "It may not be too much to affirm, on the whole ... that they would compare favorably, in point of holiday keeping, with their descendants, even at so long

5. For other studies of Hawthorne's dilemmas as a writer, and of the relation between his writing and its historical context, see Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, *The Office of the Scarlet Letter*, and *The Rites of Assent*; Berlant; Millington; Reynolds (which includes an essay on Hawthorne's relationship to visual art).

an interval as ourselves. Their immediate posterity, the generation next to the early emigrants, wore the blackest shade of Puritanism, and so darkened the national visage with it, that all the subsequent years have not sufficed to clear it up. We have yet to learn again the forgotten art of gayety” (157).

We notice the importance that this withering diagnosis gives to the contrast between light and dark, drab and colorful (the *gray or sable tinge* opposed to the *sunny richness*), and the metaphorical function given to embroidery as the festiveness that should adorn even solemn public occasions. *The Scarlet Letter* is constantly informed by this tension between festivity, on the one hand, and, on the other, what we might call the tyranny of meaning: the moral lesson which is such an essential part of the Puritan world view. As we will see, Hawthorne calls on visual art as a means of counteracting this “joyless department”, as he calls it (157), and tipping the balance back towards “mirthful recreation”.

More specifically, the author calls on a number of art forms which belong, precisely, to Elizabethan England: heraldry, emblems, book illumination, religious painting, stained glass, and certain theatrical forms like the Elizabethan and Jacobean masque. What most of these forms have in common is the close relation which they establish between verbal language and images. My hypothesis here is that Hawthorne is working to transform his novel, at least metaphorically, from a piece of purely verbal discourse into an art object belonging to one of these composite forms.

The case of heraldry is particularly striking. If we think back to the passage previously quoted, we will see that this art form is very much present between the lines, since any public pageant in Elizabethan England would have been saturated with heraldic representations: the mention of the “grotesque and brilliant embroidery” on the robe of state can be read as a hidden reference to this art, which was omnipresent throughout Europe in the late Middle Ages and the early Renaissance (St John Hope; Pastoureaux). Any ceremonial robe was bound to carry heraldic devices indicating the family or profession of the wearer. As we might have expected, heraldry is much more explicitly evoked in relation to the scarlet letter itself, particularly at the very end of the book, in the famous passage in which Hester and Dimmesdale’s grave is described:

... one tombstone served for both. All around, there were monuments carved with armorial bearings; and on this simple slab of slate ... there appeared the semblance of an engraved escutcheon. It bore a device, a herald’s wording of which might serve for a motto and brief description of our now concluded legend; so somber is it, and relieved only by one ever-glowing point of light gloomier than the shadow:—

“ON A FIELD, SABLE, THE LETTER A, GULES.” (Hawthorne 178)<sup>6</sup>

This passage connects directly with the one in “The Custom-House” in which Hawthorne talks of his name being “blazoned abroad on title-pages” (Hawthorne 21-22). The term “blazoned” explicitly refers to the herald’s verbal description of the coat-of-arms: these verbal descriptions of visual icons made up a large part of the medieval “rolls” in which the information about heraldic shields was recorded (St John Hope 54-56). By framing the whole book between the title-page as verbal correlate of a heraldic shield, on the one hand, and the characters’ tombstone, on the other, as the visual manifestation of the same, with his own added herald’s gloss, Hawthorne is suggesting that the whole novel could be read as a work of heraldic art, combining both the devices (embroidered or engraved) and the verbal commentary, with Hawthorne in the double role of the shield-bearer and the herald (the creator of the coat-of-arms).

There are a number of other references to heraldry and related arts in the novel: the letter is Hester’s “badge”, the “symbol of her calling” (Hawthorne 110-111), as in the heraldic banners of the London guilds<sup>7</sup>. Even the letter mysteriously branded on Dimmesdale’s breast is curiously reminiscent of certain theories about the origins of heraldry, which supposedly started out as a series of devices tattooed on people’s chests as a mark of status (St John Hope 1). Pearl, who is the living embodiment of the letter (she goes around dressed up as it, like a character in a Christmas masque, as one of Hawthorne’s characters explicitly points out [Hawthorne 75]), is also described in a way that associates her with a figure in a stained-glass window: in chapter VIII, when Reverend Wilson sees Pearl in the Governor’s house, he exclaims, “Methinks I have seen just such figures, when the sun has been shining through a richly painted window, and tracing out the golden and crimson images across the floor.” (75-76). This is another indirect reference to heraldry, as the medieval stained-glass windows often bore heraldic devices (Pastoureau 23).

The choice of this particular art form as a recurring motif in the novel has several implications for the story. Obviously, the devices of heraldry do have a semantic dimension, as referring to aristocratic families or professional associations. But their semantic dimension is usually an indirect one, as in the “punning” (or “canting”) devices which provided, not the name itself, but a clue to the name, a kind of visual conceit or riddle (St John Hope 50, 59-60). Their other characteristic is that they subordinate the denotative

6. As the Norton edition points out in a footnote on the same page, in heraldic terms this means “On a black shield, the letter A in red” (Hawthorne 178).

7. Badges, which were worn by members of professional guilds or by the servants of aristocratic houses, usually carried on them some identifying element of the guild’s or the family’s coat-of-arms (St John Hope 48-49).

function to the pleasure of the eye. For St John Hope, the age of heraldry was an age when people “reveled in it and played with it” (6). Pastoureau also mentions the playful nature of the art, its presence not only at tourneys but at carnivals (Pastoureau 14)<sup>8</sup>.

Something very similar occurs with another Renaissance form of visual art, the emblem, which also involves a problematic, “punning” relationship between an image charged with allegorical meaning and a brief text whose relation to the image was not merely illustrative. On the contrary, the aim was to create a complex verbal and visual conceit, requiring an exercise of wit on the part of the observer in order to interpret it (Praz 15-24); and for an age in which wit was a primary requirement for the educated individual, interpretation was also a form of enjoyment. It is worth noting that *The Scarlet Letter* gives as much importance to emblematics as to heraldry (the two art forms are in fact closely connected, as heraldic devices often included or took the form of emblems). The letter itself, of course, is constantly referred to as a token, a symbol, or a badge indirectly manifesting the moral lesson of Hester’s situation<sup>9</sup>; on one occasion, Hester’s daughter Pearl, the human embodiment of the Letter, is explicitly described as an “emblem and product of sin” (Hawthorne 65).

This constant presence of the visual, I argue, is Hawthorne’s attempt to evade the rationalistic, didactic strait-jacket of Puritan moralism and replace it with a discourse rooted in the world of the senses, as manifested, for example, in the visual and performing arts<sup>10</sup>. The final paragraph of the novel, which leaves us on a rather gloomy parting image of the heraldic A, suggests that the author did not fully succeed in this undertaking. The performing arts do, after all, require a good deal of participation on the part of the audience, and there are indications that the author failed to create the sophisticated readership he yearned for (Simonson “Cuando el escritor” 215-217; *L’ambivalence* 395-401).

Atwood faces a different situation. Her readership is much better prepared to deal with what she has to offer them than Hawthorne’s was, nearly a century-and-a-half earlier.

8. He also remarks, interestingly, that heraldic stained-glass windows often survived Protestant image-breaking practices because the heraldic images had no religious dimension (Pastoureau 23). Here we may have another clue to Hawthorne’s criticism of his contemporaries: it is not in fact the original Puritans who objected to the art of heraldry, but the nineteenth-century Americans, hidden behind the seventeenth-century Puritan colonists, who can no longer tell the difference and regard all art as suspect.

9. And leading to a transformation of the character herself into a human emblem: she and her letter, doomed to become the “general symbol... of woman’s frailty”, “the type of shame” (Hawthorne 55-56), not infrequently become “the text of the discourse” during the minister’s Sunday sermon (60).

10. This is also apparent in the way in which the novel destabilizes the moral message supposedly contained in the Letter, which gradually acquires a variety of meanings, escaping the Puritans’ didactic intentions and activating the hieroglyphic character of emblematic art.



Moreover, she is herself both a verbal and a visual artist, and, thus, is better equipped to deal with the artistic problems which both writers faced<sup>11</sup>.

## VISUAL ART IN *ALIAS GRACE*: EMBROIDERY, PATCHWORK AND COLLAGE

The connection between *The Scarlet Letter* and *Alias Grace* goes well beyond mere similarity of context. Atwood provides clues, within the novel itself, to a much more organic relationship, one which is directly connected both to the protagonists' particular kind of artistic activity and to their respective criminal records. For Grace, too, is a marginal, ostracized figure for most of the novel: first, as an Irish servant girl in a British colony, and later, as a condemned criminal, convicted of abetting the murders of her employer, Thomas Kinnear, and his house-keeper and mistress, Nancy Montgomery<sup>12</sup>.

The association between Atwood's protagonist and Hawthorne's is discreet but explicit. Dr. Simon Jordan, the psychoanalyst character in the book, is discussing Grace with Reverend Verringer, the Methodist preacher who heads the committee for rehabilitating the protagonist (hopefully by using psychoanalysis to prove that Grace was mentally ill at the moment of the murders). Simon is wondering whether he should interview Mrs. Moodie, a local literary figure who has written about the murder case, but Reverend Verringer advises against it. As he says: "Mrs. Moodie is a literary lady, and like all such, and indeed like the sex in general, she is inclined to—" 'Embroider', says Simon. 'Precisely,' says Reverend Verringer. (Atwood, *AG*<sup>13</sup> 223). The two then go on to talk about Spiritualism, which provides the occasion for mentioning Hawthorne. Reverend Verringer quotes the narrator's comments on mediums in *The Blithedale Romance*, which intrigues Simon: "He is surprised to find a clergyman reading Hawthorne: the man has been accused of sensualism, and —especially after *The Scarlet Letter*— of a laxity in morals" (223).

This is a rather devious passage. The mention of embroidery and *The Scarlet Letter* on the same page is obviously not chance. I would argue that Atwood herself is concerned here with precisely the issue I have been discussing in relation to Hawthorne's novel: the tension between the moralizing and rationalizing impulse, on the one hand (what I called earlier the "tyranny of meaning"), and the world of the senses, on the

11. For other studies of Atwood's involvement with visual art, and her activity as a visual artist, see Cooke; Nischik.

12. See an earlier, more limited exploration of this aspect of the novel in Simonson, « Des fleurs »

13. From here on, *AG*.

other. And certainly, *The Scarlet Letter's* celebration of the pleasures of the eye could be defined, in Puritan terms, as a "laxity in morals," even without the topic of adultery.

This brings us to a passage in *Alias Grace* which for me is as essential to a reading of Atwood's novel as the passage on Elizabethan festivity was for *The Scarlet Letter* because it epitomizes the tension between sensorial perception and interpretation, between meaning and pleasure. Again, it involves both the character of the psychoanalyst and, indirectly, the activity of embroidery. Early in the novel, Grace is having one of her sessions with Dr. Jordan. As he sits across from her in the sewing room, Grace gives us her assessment of the situation:

... He smells of shaving soap, the English kind, and of ears; and of the leather of his boots. It is a reassuring smell and I always look forward to it, men that wash being preferable in this respect to those that do not. What he has put on the table today is a potato, but he has not yet asked me about it, so it is just sitting there between us. I don't know what he expects me to say about it, except that I have peeled a good many of them in my time, and eaten them too, a fresh new potato is a joy with a little butter and salt, and parsley if available, and even the big old ones can bake up very beautiful; but they are nothing to have a long conversation about. Some potatoes look like babies' faces, or else like animals, and I once saw one that looked like a cat. But this one looks just like a potato, no more and no less. Sometimes I think that Dr. Jordan is a little off in the head. But I would rather talk with him about potatoes, if that is what he fancies, than not talk to him at all. (*AG*, 111-112)

The potato has to do with Dr. Jordan's course of action with his patient: he brings her objects, or pieces of fruit or vegetables—preferably roots, that are stored in cellars—in the hope that they will evoke some association that will bring her memory back (in particular, the memory of what happened in the cellar where Nancy Montgomery was murdered). In a way, the whole novel is about the tug of war between the psychoanalyst, who is trying to diagnose, interpret, and categorize Grace, and Grace herself, who never allows this to happen (in fact, instead of "curing" the patient, the doctor ends up losing his own memory).

Embroidery, of course, is not very far away; not only is the scene taking place in the sewing room, where Grace is sewing blocks for a quilt—a considerable portion of the subsequent conversation turns on the question of quilts—but the whole interaction between the two takes the form of the kind of embroidering which Dr. Jordan and Reverend Verringer mentioned in the passage quoted above. Whereas Dr. Jordan aims at getting past the mere frills, so to speak, and ascertaining the hard facts of the case, he is ultimately foiled by the realization that the frills *are* the facts, or at least all that the observer is going to get.

The passage I have just quoted strikes me as representative of what is, in my opinion, the main impulse of *Alias Grace*: away from interpretation and towards sensorial experience.<sup>14</sup> In her 1996 novel, Atwood uses the actual physical presence of the visual, however discreetly, to expand the narrative references to visual art, thus destabilizing and “opening up”, so to speak, the verbal dimension of the text. The section titles of the book are quilt names, and the title page of each section has a picture of the corresponding quilt block below the title. This sort of collage art is as much a metaphor for the story as patchwork itself, which is, in fact, a form of collage: originally, quilts were often made by sewing together pieces of previously existing cloth into new patterns, particularly when the previous material was old and no longer useable in its original shape (Chouard 71; Peck 16, 20). This mode of recycling, or *reinscription*, gives us an idea of what Atwood might really be doing with Hawthorne’s novel, as if *The Scarlet Letter* were an old and beautiful Indian shawl in danger of becoming moth-eaten, and needing to be cut up and reused in a different form.

The images on the quilt blocks, moreover, would seem to quote another key element from *The Scarlet Letter*: heraldry. At one point, Grace compares the many-colored quilts to the banners of armies in battle array, a comparison which is closely connected to the beauty of the quilts, and the intense visual pleasure that the character derives from looking at them (and, later, from remembering them): “Over the years in prison, when I have been by myself, as I am a good deal of the time, I have closed my eyes and turned my head toward the sun, and I have seen a red and an orange that were like the brightness of those quilts: and when we’d hung a half-dozen of them up on the line, all in a row, I thought that they looked like flags, hung out by an army as it goes to war” (Atwood, *AG* 185). This suggests a parallel between the quilt blocks which decorate the chapter headings and the heraldic devices one finds on medieval shields or banners, as well as inviting a comparison between these apparently isolated, suggestive images, and the scarlet letter as the recurring (and enigmatic) heraldic device in Hawthorne’s novel<sup>15</sup>.

However, this point also constitutes an important difference between the two novels. By explicitly making the connection with heraldry, Atwood also highlights the difference between it and the art form she has actually chosen to foreground in her novel. Unlike

14. The objects which Dr. Jordan brings to Grace are a good illustration of this: he brings her apples, radishes, carrots, in the hope of producing meaning, and she simply eats them (see for example Atwood, *AG* 43-45).

15. Another striking parallel could be drawn with emblematics: the quilt blocks with their accompanying names (“Jagged Edge”, “Rocky Road”, “Puss in a Corner”) very much resemble emblems whose text enigmatically evokes the different episodes of the story.

heraldry (at least in medieval and Renaissance England, where commoners could not adopt armorial bearings, unless as members of professional guilds [St John Hope 8-12]), quilting is not an aristocratic activity, but a popular art form, and one which creates an object both for ornament and for concrete practical use. The novel thus blurs the boundaries not only between the visual and the verbal, but between art and everyday life: even common objects (like potatoes, clean laundry, chicken bones...) become sources of aesthetic and sensual pleasure. This is where *Alias Grace* diverges sharply from *The Scarlet Letter*: Hawthorne's metaphor of heraldry encloses the story and its characters inside the limits of a symbolic escutcheon centered on a single, dominant device; Atwood breaks the coat-of-arms into a multitude of pieces which are only loosely connected. The quilt blocks forming the chapter sections are not, in fact, self-contained images, since each is potentially a fragment of a quilt waiting to be pieced together. At the same time, they cannot be united into a harmonious whole, since each belongs to a different pattern, and conjures up a whole different quilt, and even a diversity of possible quilts. In the story, none of these possible quilts is actually completed; nor is the story itself, which remains open-ended. In this sense, Atwood's novel is very much a "rhizomatic" text, in the words of Deleuze and Guattari: a work which ramifies underground in many different directions, rather than something organized harmoniously around a single central device (Deleuze and Guattari 9-37; Chouard 71).

## CONCLUSION

Both Hawthorne and Atwood, when they embarked on their careers as artists, faced the task of defining themselves as such in a context openly hostile to the undertaking; both of them understood/understand their writing in close connection with other arts, in particular with various forms of visual or performing art, which function, in their work, partly as metaphors of the fiction-writer's task, and partly as concrete strategies for expanding the limits of verbal discourse. I hope to have shown here that Hawthorne's seminal meditation on the problems of writing fiction in North America provided key elements for Atwood's continuing reflection on the topic. Obviously, it is possible to read *Alias Grace* independently of *The Scarlet Letter*; yet it is clear that by engaging with the earlier novel in her own work, Atwood is doing something which she herself names as one of the writer's essential tasks: *negotiating with the dead*.

All writers learn from the dead. ... All writers must go from *now* to *once upon a time*; all must go from here to there; all must descend to where the stories are kept; all must take care not to be captured and held immobile by the past. And all must commit acts of larceny, or else of reclamation, depending on how

you look at it. The dead may guard the treasure, but it's useless treasure unless it can be brought back into the land of the living and allowed to enter time once more –which means to enter the realm of the audience, the realm of the readers, the realm of change. (Atwood, *Negotiating* 178-179)

Atwood's concern with the danger of being "captured and held immobile by the past" might explain a certain reluctance on her part to directly acknowledge her debt to Hawthorne in her essays and conferences on writing, as if such an acknowledgment risked exerting a petrifying power on her own writing, immobilizing her in the shadow of canonical North-American literature. Yet I would argue that this act of "larceny, or ... reclamation, depending on how you look at it", is precisely what Atwood is doing with Hawthorne's novel: allowing a treasure to "enter time once more", be rewritten and become a source of new meanings.

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