

Roger Chillingworth: An Example of the Creative Process in 'The Scarlet Letter'

Roger Chillingworth, the fascinating 'devil' of *The Scarlet Letter*, belongs to a type of men in which Hawthorne seems to have taken a particular interest, i.e. the heartless inquisitors who have no respect for man and are prepared to destroy him deliberately by violating his most intimate being and by imposing their own will upon him through spiritual torture and persecution.

In his study of the historical elements which he considers as the main source of *The Scarlet Letter*,¹ Alfred S. Reid states that 'Roger Chillingworth has much in common with William Chillingworth',² the author of *The Religion of Protestants a Safe Way to Salvation* (1637). Indeed, there seems to be little doubt that Hawthorne's use of the name 'Chillingworth' was prompted by his knowledge of the life of the seventeenth-century Anglican divine; but, as we shall see, we can hardly accept Reid's suggestion that the philosophical and religious outlook of Roger Chillingworth was inspired by William Chillingworth's approach to religious matters. In fact, the relation between the imaginary and the historical character is to be sought elsewhere.

According to Reid, the main source of *The Scarlet Letter* was the famous Overbury case, i.e. the trial of the Count and Countess of Somerset for the murder of Overbury. The actual poisoning of Overbury by Robert Carr, Earl of Somerset,³ would have suggested to Hawthorne the spiritual poisoning of Dimmesdale by Roger Chillingworth. Hawthorne would thus have transmuted the physical tortures inflicted on Overbury into the spiritual tortures inflicted on Dimmesdale. Reid bases his argument on Hawthorne's explicit references in the novel to characters and events related to the case, and on Hawthorne's knowledge of them from seventeenth-century relations of the trial, which he is known to have read in the years preceding the composition of *The Scarlet Letter*. So far, Reid's thesis is fully substantiated, though he at times attempts to prove too much. But he further argues that the names of some characters in the novel were suggested to Hawthorne by those of seventeenth-century figures, and that Hawthorne gave these characters features which belonged to their historical counterparts. Thus, he contends that Hester's surname derives from that of William Prynne, who suffered under Laud as Hester suffers under the New England Puritans, and he draws a parallel between Hester's husband and the seventeenth-century divine William Chillingworth.

It is clear that Hawthorne knew something of William Chillingworth.

¹ Alfred S. Reid, *The Yellow Ruff and The Scarlet Letter, A Source of Hawthorne's Novel*, Gainesville, University of Florida Press, 1955.

² *Ibid.*, p. 98.

³ Carr's wife, the former Countess of Essex, was accused of poisoning Overbury, and Carr was accused of complicity in the murder.

In the first place, we have ample evidence that Hawthorne was deeply interested in seventeenth-century English and American history. Then, given the books he is known to have read, he must have come upon descriptions of William Chillingworth's life and work, which are often discussed by historians and theologians.⁴ Hawthorne borrowed several times from the Salem Athenaeum Clarendon's *History of the Rebellion*, in which the author describes William Chillingworth's character and gives an account of his life and death. It is also evident that Hawthorne did not confine his reading on theology to Puritan authors: what he read was sufficiently diversified to give him a fairly objective picture of the Anglican divine, and he may also have known Chillingworth's works.

Reid bases his comparison between the historical and the imaginary Chillingworth on the 'rationalism' of the two characters. He explains it as follows:

Hester's husband assumes in the novel a surname identical with that of another seventeenth-century figure, William Chillingworth (1602-1644). A liberal and an exponent of man's natural reason, Chillingworth typifies the new spirit of rationalistic inquiry that was coming over the age (...). In his masterpiece, *The Religion of Protestants a Safe Way to Salvation* (1637), Chillingworth disavows partiality to system or conviction. He searches for truth, he says, in accordance with the principles of mathematical certainty. He resolves the question of faith to reason and to the understanding's assent (...) Roger Chillingworth is a learned man, a rationalist, and a liberal. He shrewdly reduces the problem of his calamity from one of human passions to a question involving 'no more than the air-drawn lines and figures of a geometrical problem' (...) Chillingworth's cold liberalism is contrasted with Dimmesdale's iron framework of theological reasoning and warm religious faith.⁵

'Rationalist' and 'cold' describe Roger Chillingworth appropriately. On his own confession, he was never a man of warm affections, though he was at least kind, true and just before he became an instrument of the devil and decided to take revenge on Dimmesdale. Yet if he was an upright man according to 'the letter of the law', he must have shown little disposition to understand its spirit, for the ruthless determination with which he torments the minister clearly indicates that he is incapable of compassion or of charity. We are told that on the old continent Roger Chillingworth's intellectual gifts and method of free inquiry were at the service of humanity; but in the face of adversity, his 'cold rationalism' becomes more than a method of investigation, and it is soon impossible to dissociate it from the refined cruelty and the sinister fascination which he shows in torturing his victim. Roger Chillingworth's rationalism is positively evil, because it makes him blind to the spiritual view of existence. He fulfils his religious duties scrupulously in order to avoid arousing suspicion and to be accepted

⁴ A list of Hawthorne's borrowings from the Salem Athenaeum between 1828 and 1850 was established by Marion Kesselring: *Hawthorne's Reading, 1828-1850: A Transcription and Identification of Titles Recorded in the Chargebooks of the Salem Athenaeum*, Bulletin of the New York Public Library, Vol. 53, Feb. 1949, pp. 52-71, March 1949, pp. 121-138, April 1949, pp. 173-194.

⁵ Alfred S. Reid, *op. cit.*, pp. 98-99.

by the community, but he admits to Hester that he has 'long forgotten' his religion. It is this blindness to spiritual values which makes it so easy for him to come between God and a sinner and 'to violate in cold blood the sanctity of the human heart'. His rationalism is also evil because it makes him sin out of intellectual pride. Not only does he rely entirely on his intelligence to discover his wife's seducer, but when he has discovered him, he arrogates to himself the right to punish and to take vengeance. Thus, his intellectual self-reliance and pride, together with his determination to be Dimmesdale's self-appointed judge and tormentor, transform him into a devil, and his 'cold rationalism' is an instrument of destruction.

It is doubtful whether the rationalism and liberalism of Roger Chillingworth can be associated with any particular period; he does not represent the spirit of an age but a type of man, namely the cold experimentalist who, as we have already suggested, is prepared to destroy a human being in order to achieve his purpose. When he tells Hester: 'I shall seek this man (i.e. her seducer), as I have sought truth in books (...) Few things are hidden from the man who devotes himself earnestly and unreservedly to the solution of a mystery',⁶ he does assume that human beings and human problems can be subjected to the same cold rational inquiry as a mathematical problem. Perhaps he is closest to the eighteenth-century rationalists who denied the direct intervention of God in men's lives and made discursive reason the sole arbiter of all truth.

William Chillingworth, on the contrary, may be called a rationalist only in so far as he seeks for a reasonable basis of belief and advocates a rational interpretation of Scripture. However, he is careful to point out that man is liable to errors and that there are non-fundamental points in the Scriptures which he may not be able to understand, though neither these nor man's errors on these points are obstacles to salvation. Reason is a complement or a support to faith, not a substitute for it, as it is for Roger Chillingworth. Actually, he writes to his opponent, the Jesuit Knott, in the following terms:

Nor was I so unreasonable, as to expect Mathematical demonstrations from you in matters plainly incapable of them, such as are to be believed, and, if we speak properly, cannot be known; such therefore I expected not. For, as he is an unreasonable master, who requires a stronger assent to his conclusions than his argument deserves; so I conceive a froward and undisciplined scholar, who desires stronger arguments for a conclusion than the matter will bear.⁷

It is clear from this passage that William Chillingworth does not expect all religious problems to be solved by mathematical demonstration. He distinguishes between mathematical demonstration and assent to truth

⁶ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, in *The Complete Novels and Selected Tales of Nathaniel Hawthorne*. The Modern Library, New York 1937, p. 128.

⁷ William Chillingworth, *The Religion of Protestants, A Safe Way to Salvation*, in *The Works of —*, ed. by Thomas Birch, London 1742, Preface, p. 10.

on rational grounds. The latter is what he requires for assent to the truths revealed in Scripture, as well as for assent that Scripture is the Revealed Word of God. For William Chillingworth, Reason is a gift of God; it is 'grounded on divine Revelation and common notions written in the hearts of all men'.⁸ As we have seen, Roger Chillingworth's rationalism makes him self-relying and proud, whereas, as Tulloch writes, 'the rational inquisitiveness of people like Chillingworth makes them acutely sensitive to the limits of human knowledge in all directions.'⁹ According to Clarendon, this rational inquisitiveness had a disastrous effect on Chillingworth himself: 'he had with this notable perfection in disputation contracted such an irresolution and habit of doubting that by degrees he grew confident of nothing.'¹⁰

Reid describes Roger Chillingworth's attitude towards religious problems as 'cold liberalism'. Liberalism in the first part of the seventeenth century was something different from the religious liberalism of the eighteenth century which Reid seems to have in mind. If William Chillingworth may be called a liberal, it is only in so far as his tolerance was prompted by his desire for concord among protestants at a time when disputes about things indifferent were threatening to disrupt the unity of the Church. He was not tolerant in the sense of the liberal theology of the eighteenth century, which is hardly distinguishable from deism, and his plea for rational inquiry is still a long way off from eighteenth-century free-thinking.

Finally, we may wonder whether the *man* William Chillingworth was in any way like Roger Chillingworth. Tulloch, whose account of William Chillingworth's life is based on Des Maizeaux,¹¹ describes him as a 'true and generous-minded man, (...) inaccessible to the motives of grosser self-interest of any kind (...) a man of generous impulses and true warm-heartedness (...) incapable of a mean thought.'¹² The circumstances of his life also show that he had little in common with Roger Chillingworth. William Chillingworth was the godson of Laud and a fellow of Trinity College, Oxford. While disputing with a Jesuit, he became converted to Catholicism and was sent to Douai. But after a short time he began to doubt the infallibility of the Catholic Church, and, prompted by letters from Laud, he returned to Oxford. His enemies accused him of insincerity and opportunism, yet it appears from several testimonies, among which that of Clarendon, that he was on the contrary quite sincere, and he obviously gained nothing by his conversion and reconversion except the wrath of both Romanists and Puritans. In fact, he seems to have been

⁸ *Ibid.*, Preface, p. 15.

⁹ John Tulloch, *Rational Theology and Christian Philosophy in England in the Seventeenth Century*, 2 vols., Edinburgh & London, Blackwood and Sons, 1872, p. 288.

¹⁰ Clarendon, *The Life of Edward, Earl of Clarendon*, Vol. 4 of *The History of the Rebellion*, Oxford 1759, p. 29.

¹¹ Pierre Des Maizeaux, *An Historical and Critical Account of the Life and Writings of William Chillingworth*, London, J. Peele, 1725.

¹² John Tulloch, *op. cit.*, p. 262, p. 279, p. 304.

the very opposite of a calculating man: back in Oxford, he at first refused to subscribe to the XXXIX articles, because he felt he could not do so in all honesty. The fact that he was given to doubt and that he supported free inquiry in order to make personal conviction the basis of faith, argues for a reasonable but scrupulous nature, quite unlike the arrogant self-assurance of Roger Chillingworth. Clarendon, whom, as we have seen, Hawthorne read several times, writes about William Chillingworth:

The sincerity of his heart was so conspicuous, and without the least temptation of any corrupt end; and the innocence and candour of his nature so evident, and without perverseness, that all who knew him clearly discerned that all those restless motions and fluctuations proceeded from the warmth, and jealousy of his own thoughts, in a too nice inquisition for truth.¹³

It is obvious, then, that William Chillingworth was very different from Roger Chillingworth both as a man and as a thinker. His religious tolerance is an indication of his respect for other human beings, a quality which Roger Chillingworth clearly lacks. We can thus conclude that the image of William Chillingworth Hawthorne could have derived from the accounts of him he read, and from his possible acquaintance with Chillingworth's works, can in no way have suggested such a devilish character as Roger Chillingworth.

However, it seems unlikely that Hawthorne, steeped as he was in seventeenth-century literature, named his character without being at all reminded of the Anglican divine. Something in the life or thought of William Chillingworth may have had some relation with the story that was taking shape in his mind particularly with the story of the spiritual torture inflicted on Dimmesdale. Now, there was an incident in William Chillingworth's life which closely resembles the story told by Hawthorne, even though Chillingworth was the victim, not the tormentor. When the Civil War broke out, Chillingworth, who was then a royal chaplain, joined the King's army and was captured by the Puritans at Arundel. As he was too ill to be transported, he was given asylum at Chichester. On his death-bed he was tormented by the Puritan Francis Cheynell, who attempted to force him to confess his so-called errors and argued with him to make him recant his plea for tolerance. All the available accounts of Cheynell's treatment of Chillingworth agree that he was cruel and ruthless towards the dying man, and he was even said to have hastened his death. Clarendon asserts that the Puritans 'prosecuted him with all the inhumanity imaginable; so that by their barbarous usage, he died within a few days.'¹⁴ Cheynell himself wrote a pamphlet entitled *Chillingworthi Novissima. Or the Sicknesse, Heresy, Death, and Buriall of William Chillingworth* (1644). As Tulloch rightly remarks, 'If this

¹³ Clarendon, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-29.

¹⁴ Clarendon, *The History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England*, Vol. II, p. 365.

account of Chillingworth's death had not been written by Cheynell himself, we would find it incredible.'¹⁵

The question is whether the torment inflicted by Cheynell on Chillingworth in order to convert him is similar in kind to the torment inflicted by Roger Chillingworth on the minister Dimmesdale. Roger Chillingworth persecutes Dimmesdale in the same way as Hester is persecuted for some time by the Puritan community. He never allows Dimmesdale to forget his sin, and he is determined to pursue him as long as he lives. And all the time, he is supposed to be taking care of Dimmesdale's health and calls himself his friend. When Hester tells him that he is sufficiently avenged and asks him to leave Dimmesdale alone, Chillingworth answers that he is fulfilling a 'dark necessity' and acting in accordance with his fate, a calvinistic interpretation of his behaviour which is considered by several critics as a mere excuse for the evil he has done. Obviously, Cheynell also believed that it was God's will that William Chillingworth should have fallen into his hands, for he writes that he met him by an 'unexpected providence'. The preface to his pamphlet suggests that there was something of personal revenge in his attitude towards Chillingworth, for he alludes to the plundering of his house and the destruction of his library by the Cavaliers, and asserts that zealous Protestants (like himself) can expect little charity at Oxford. Like Hawthorne's character, he appoints himself the judge of his victim and never questions his right to torment him morally. At the same time, he says that his attitude is dictated by charity. He writes:

When Mr Chillingworth saw himself entangled in dispute, he desired me that I would deal charitably with him, for, saith he, I was ever a charitable man: my answer was somewhat tart, and therefore the more charitable, considering his condition, and the counsel of the Apostle (Titus 1. 13), 'Rebuke them sharply (...) that they may be sound in faith'.¹⁶

Obviously, the epithets 'pitiless' and 'unforgiving', which Hawthorne uses to describe Roger Chillingworth, can be applied to Cheynell, who, like Hawthorne's character, shows himself obdurate in his determination to extort a confession of guilt from William Chillingworth. What Cheynell actually wants from Chillingworth is that he should condemn heretics, i.e. 'Turks, Papists, Socinians'. When the latter refuses, saying that it is not for him to absolve or to condemn, Cheynell accuses him of being a Socinian himself, and says:

Now either Mr. Chillingworth was guilty of some such equivocation, or else he grew worse and worse, and would not anathemize a gross Socinian. And if in these latter days seducers grow worse and worse, I shall not wonder at it.¹⁷

¹⁵ John Tulloch, *op. cit.*, p. 297.

¹⁶ Francis Cheynell, *Chillingworthi Novissima. Or, the Sicknesse, Heresy, Death and Buriall of William Chillingworth*, London 1644, C3.

¹⁷ Francis Cheynell, *op. cit.*, C3.

Here Cheynell brings against William Chillingworth the same accusation as Roger Chillingworth brings against Dimmesdale when he tells the latter that he is sick in body because of the sickness in his soul. William Chillingworth might have asked Cheynell the question that Dimmesdale asked of his tormentor: 'Who art thou that meddlest in this matter? -- that dares thrust himself between the sufferer and his God?'¹⁸

There is thus a striking parallel between the attitude of Cheynell and that of Roger Chillingworth towards their respective victims. As we have seen, Hawthorne undoubtedly knew that William Chillingworth had been tormented spiritually by Francis Cheynell. The latter's attitude must have impressed him, for, as we have already mentioned, he was particularly interested in those scrutinizers and inquisitors who do not hesitate 'to violate the sanctity of the human heart'. He had already created such a character in *Rapaccini's Daughter* and was soon to create another in *Ethan Brand*. Is it not likely, then, that the transmutation from physical to spiritual poisoning operated by Hawthorne's imagination when, as Reid suggests, he adapted the Overbury case, was prompted to him by his knowledge of Chillingworth's spiritual torture by Cheynell? That he called Chillingworth the tormentor in his novel instead of the victim is no objection to our assumption, for the ways of imagination are not so simple as Reid's explanation implies. On the contrary, imagination operates in a complex way, combining conscious recollections with elements unconsciously assimilated, fusing fragments of different materials and shaping them into a new whole. The complexity of this process has been described by Professor Lowes in *The Road to Xanadu*,¹⁹ in which he shows how images stored in the 'well' of the subconscious coalesce, amalgamate, and arise in new combinations in the poet's mind to participate in a new creation under the guidance of the integrating and controlling power of the poet's imagination.

Further evidence that the creative process which gave birth to *The Scarlet Letter* was more complex than some of Reid's arguments suggest is Hawthorne's choice of Prynne as a surname for Hester. As we have seen, Reid suggests that Hawthorne gave Hester that name because, like William Prynne, she is cruelly punished on the scaffold. Here again, Reid equates the two cases but fails to take into account the true character of the historical figure which may have inspired Hawthorne. True, Hester defies society: she is true to her inner being, and she thinks that her real sin is to have married Chillingworth, whom she didn't love. Hester condemns what hinders the true expression of the self: 'The world's law was no law for her mind (...) She assumed a freedom of speculation (...) which our forefathers, had they known it, would have held to be a deadlier

¹⁸ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

¹⁹ John Livingstone Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu, A Study in the Ways of Imagination* (first published in 1927), London, Constable, 1951.

crime than that stigmatized by the scarlet letter.'²⁰ Now, William Prynne was a rigid and intolerant Presbyterian, who would have been most anxious to inflict a harsh punishment on Hester if he had been among her judges. Although he repeatedly attacked prelacy, he was not condemned by Laud until he slandered Royalty and openly criticized the immorality of the court. Prynne was much more intolerant than the people who condemned him, and he later took revenge on Laud with much cruelty. As with Chillingworth, Hawthorne seems to have inverted the role played by the person who bears a historical name. Hester does not condemn immorality, she is condemned for it.

If my interpretation is correct, Hawthorne took over from history, and adapted to his own purposes, outward characteristics, such as names or the fact that William Chillingworth was a learned and eminent man. The important parallel between reality and fiction is to be found in the fanaticism, intolerance and uncharitableness which characterize both the attitude of Cheynell and of those who in *The Scarlet Letter* deem it their right to inflict punishment. It fits in with the main theme of the novel, namely the pressure exerted by a man or a group of men on an individual human soul. Hawthorne certainly admires the Puritans for their uprightness, their courage and for what they have achieved. At the beginning of the novel, he also acknowledges the qualities of Roger Chillingworth. But both the Puritans and Chillingworth assume the right to violate a human soul: the Puritans by their intolerance, by imposing a mode of thought, of feeling and of life, and by making Hester the object of their scrutiny; Chillingworth, by torturing Dimmesdale spiritually. That the Puritans and Chillingworth are the instruments of Hester's and Dimmesdale's regeneration is no excuse for their attitude: Hawthorne shows clearly that regeneration depends on Hester and Dimmesdale alone, and he presents it as a dilemma which their own Puritan conscience must solve. There is no doubt either that Chillingworth represents the devil, the principle of evil, not only for the people of Boston, but for Hawthorne himself. The people see him as a devil because he tries a human soul, Hawthorne because he violates a human soul. This was also the role played by Cheynell towards William Chillingworth. If we remember that Roger Chillingworth has nothing in common with William Chillingworth either as a scholar or as a man, and if we make allowance for the originality of the creative process, we can certainly conclude that it was *not* William Chillingworth's rationalism but the spiritual torment to which he was subjected by Francis Cheynell which most impressed Hawthorne.

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²⁰ Hawthorne, *op. cit.*, p. 181.