

**Zeitschrift:** SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Association of University Teachers of English  
**Band:** 29 (2013)  
  
**Artikel:** The conflict of voice in Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Blithedale romance  
**Autor:** Straumann, Barbara  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-390812>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 01.09.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# The Conflict of Voice in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*

Barbara Straumann

Taking as my theoretical point of departure Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia and Friedrich Nietzsche's notion of culture as a battleground of conflicting opposites, I argue that there is a conflict of voice at the centre of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*. To be more precise, the text foregrounds a power struggle between the voice of the feminist performer Zenobia and the voice of the first-person narrator Miles Coverdale. Coverdale's narrative is motivated by his wish – and failure – to read Zenobia, who defines herself by virtue of her perpetual performance. Disturbed by the fact that Zenobia has a position of her own, Coverdale seeks to contain her powerful voice, which continues to haunt him twelve years after her death. In my paper I trace how the conflict of voice between the dead performer and the haunted narrator is inscribed textually as well as the ways in which this highlights a cultural conflict over the woman's voice.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) revolves around a conflict of voice that is closely linked to a cultural conflict having to do with the woman's voice. The most prominent voice in Hawthorne's narrative about a utopian New England community is that of Zenobia, a renowned feminist and brilliant performer. When the performer appears in the text for the first time, she presents herself in grand theatrical fashion. Already her pseudonym "Zenobia" forms part of her self-performance. Harking back to an ancient Syrian queen, it is the *nom du plume* she has assumed as the author of feminist tracts and magazine stories. As pointed out by Miles Coverdale, the first-person narrator of *The Blithedale Romance*, her pseudonym matches her queenly attitude and

pride, “it accorded well with something imperial which her friends attributed to this lady’s figure and deportment” (13). Coverdale, who has just arrived in the utopian community of Blithedale, meets the famous Zenobia for the first time as she enters the parlour at Blithedale Farm. She welcomes the new members to the Blithedale community and addresses them individually as if she were holding court. The scene revolves around her voice in so far as she uses the occasion for her self-performance, while the newcomers are made to serve as her passive audience. Zenobia not only emerges as the main speaker, but she also has a “voice” in a figurative sense as her self-assured speech and regal presence allow her to virtually transform the parlour into a stage for her magnificent self-dramatization.

Hawthorne’s Zenobia is one of many female performer figures that appear in nineteenth and early twentieth-century narrative fiction. Novels of this period feature a striking abundance of female singers, actresses and speakers, which bespeaks a paradoxical fascination for the female voice performing in public at a time when bourgeois culture largely relegates and restricts women to the private sphere.<sup>1</sup> But how can we read this cultural fascination? By having their performers speak or sing in public, these texts raise the question of what it means for women to have a public voice. Indeed, by putting the voices of their performer figures centre stage, these novels can be seen to tap into the woman’s question and its central demand that women get a voice in public. This political dimension can be observed in texts about theatre performers, and it is even more pronounced in the case of political speakers such as Zenobia, who explicitly addresses feminist issues. Many novels foreground the public triumphs of their female performers. The fact that more often than not the performer eventually loses her voice, however, points towards the contemporaneous cultural anxiety over the figure of the woman who speaks in public.

Like many other performer novels, *The Blithedale Romance* highlights the powerful “voice” Zenobia possesses as a result of her self-assured performance as well as the ultimate loss of her living voice. However,

---

<sup>1</sup> The context of this article is a larger book project in which I focus on female performers – actresses, singers, speakers and preachers – in American and British narrative fiction. The project reconstructs a largely neglected, yet culturally resonant tradition of public feminine articulation, which ranges from mid-nineteenth-century representations of the emerging star performer to the early twentieth-century suffrage novel and the “voice” of authorship in modernist writing. At the same time, the study is also conceived as a theoretical contribution to current debates over voice, body, embodiment, performance and performativity. Examples I discuss include texts by George Meredith, George Eliot, George Du Maurier, Henry James, Theodore Dreiser, Willa Cather, Elizabeth Robins, Virginia Woolf and Isak Dinesen, among others.

what distinguishes Hawthorne's text from other examples is the way in which it juxtaposes Zenobia's voice with the voice of Coverdale, the narrator. Hawthorne's text is almost unique among performer narratives in that it uses a homo-diegetic narrator, who also appears as a character in the story he tells.<sup>2</sup> Coverdale relates the story of the Blithedale community twelve years after the events. He writes in order to contain and dispel the disturbing effect of Zenobia's voice through his poetic writing, seeking to gain control over the past that is still haunting him.

The conflict of voice I am concerned with can be described as a conflict between different medial modes, namely between the voice Zenobia projects as a performer and the voice Coverdale wishes to have as a narrator and poet. Yet even more important is the conflict between the different ideological interests and positions that are represented by their voices. In fact, the conflict that arises as a result of Zenobia's vocal self-assertion on the one hand and Coverdale's containment of her voice on the other refers us to a crucial cultural conflict defining nineteenth-century America, namely the debate over the question whether woman can speak for herself, whether she has a voice of her own. Written at the very cultural moment when America first saw the emergence of an organized women's movement,<sup>3</sup> *The Blithedale Romance* highlights the strong vocal presence of Zenobia as well as Coverdale's attempt at its erasure.<sup>4</sup> The feminist performer falls silent when she dies towards the end of the text. However, rather than silencing Zenobia, Hawthorne's treatment of the voices in his novel refers us to an irresolvable conflict. His text privileges neither of the two voices and, instead, shows how, even after her death, Zenobia's voice returns to haunt Coverdale's narrative.

As has often been noted, the voice is a curiously elusive phenomenon, which cannot be pinned down to a single category. The voice oscil-

---

<sup>2</sup> Another similar example in which several characters narrate the stories of their respective encounters with one and the same performer is Isak Dinesen's "The Dreamers" from her collection entitled *Seven Gothic Tales*.

<sup>3</sup> The Seneca Falls Convention, held on 19-20 July 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York, was the first national women's rights convention and is commonly regarded as the founding moment of the women's movement in the USA. In 1845 Margaret Fuller published *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, the first feminist manifesto written in America. Critics have often pointed out that the figure of Zenobia is in part modelled on Fuller (see for example Bards and Gossett 59; Tanner 18). Zenobia dies by drowning similar to Fuller, who in 1850 died in a shipwreck off Fire Island on her return from Europe, where she had worked as the first female newspaper correspondent for several years. For a general discussion of Hawthorne and the woman's question see Alison Easton.

<sup>4</sup> Another American novel that revolves around a female public performer and the containment of her powerful voice is Henry James's *The Bostonians*.

lates, for instance, between body and spirit, presence and evanescence.<sup>5</sup> Vocal sounds immediately start to fade away as soon as they are produced. At the same time, they can have a powerful impact on the listener. The voice does not only, and not always, convey semantic meaning, but it inevitably also carries a particular affective intensity, rhythm, tone and timbre. As Roland Barthes points out “there is not a single human voice in the whole wide world which is not an object of desire – or revulsion: There is no neutral voice [. . .]” (280; my translation). On the contrary, the voice harbours a surplus or excess in its power to seduce, fascinate, irritate and disturb.

But how are voices inscribed and marked in literary texts? How can the voice be conceptualized for a discussion of narrative fiction? Clearly there is no concrete sound that can actually be heard in a novel. The voice is, in other words, alien to – or perhaps even in conflict with – the type of literary language under discussion. Nevertheless, narrative texts evoke textually what escapes them medially. Similar to concrete voices, which are shot through with various colours, affects, moods and intonations, textual voices are marked by a multi-layered complexity they introduce into a text. An important approach for our discussion is Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the novel as a multi-voiced genre. According to Bakhtin, narrative fiction occupies a special status as a literary genre and aesthetic medium as it juxtaposes different voices and, in so doing, confronts different social accents, positions and perspectives with each other. “The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices organized” (Bakhtin 262).

Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia is particularly useful for a discussion of the conflict of voice in *The Blithedale Romance*. He uses this concept in order to describe the clash and collision between different textual voices – namely those of various characters, the narrator and the implied author – and the different social positions they stand in for.<sup>6</sup> What the concept of heteroglossia allows us to foreground is the ideo-

---

<sup>5</sup> For a description of the voice as a paradoxical threshold phenomenon combining both body and soul, materiality and spirit, the individual and the social, see Doris Kolesch and Sybille Krämer in their introduction to the interdisciplinary volume *Stimme: Annäherung an ein Phänomen* (12).

<sup>6</sup> As Bakhtin writes: “The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types [. . .] and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions. Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia [. . .] can enter the novel” (263).

logical discord or cultural conflict between different textual voices. As mentioned above, Hawthorne's performer and narrator use different modes of expression, namely speech and writing. However, in marking a conflict between different ideological positions, they also recall Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia. Zenobia challenges the gendered separation of the spheres as she makes her feminist speeches. Coverdale, on the other hand, writes his text in an attempt to contain her powerful feminine voice.

Another aspect that is important for our discussion of Hawthorne's performer text is the close link between the performer voice as a narrative theme and voice as a trope for feminine empowerment and self-expression. Thematically, the narrative of the performer novel usually revolves around the voice of the performer, i.e. the way in which the performer constructs herself through her voice as well as the way in which she gains and often loses her voice. Many texts also offer descriptions of the sound quality of the performer's voice. However, what is at stake is never just her concrete voice but also "voice" in a metaphorical sense. In what is her most explicit speech about the woman's question, Zenobia argues that in order to achieve their rights, women need to assert themselves in "the living voice" (120).<sup>7</sup> In so doing, she suggests that the concrete voice is closely linked to "voice" in a figurative sense. Especially since the emergence of emancipatory discourses, the voice has turned into a privileged trope for political agency as suggested by expressions such as "getting a voice" and "raising one's voice."<sup>8</sup> However, having a voice is not the same as having a voice of one's own; in order to have a voice of one's own, one also needs to be heard, acknowledged and recognized by others.<sup>9</sup>

In *The Blithedale Romance*, the conflict of voice hinges on a complex layering of various aspects of voice and takes place at different levels. A first instance of conflict can be observed in the tension between the different modes, namely Zenobia's speech and Coverdale's attempt to

---

<sup>7</sup> Also note the following passage in Zenobia's speech, in which she makes a claim for the eloquence of women, which so far has not yet found any expression: "It is my belief [. . .] that, when my sex shall achieve its rights, there will be ten eloquent women, where there is now one eloquent man. Thus far, no woman in the world has ever once spoken out her whole heart and her whole mind. The mistrust and disapproval of the vast bulk of society throttles us, as with two gigantic hands at our throats!" (120).

<sup>8</sup> In some languages there is even a direct relation between the voice and the political vote (note, for example, the French *donner sa voix*, *compter les voix*, or the German *seine Stimme abgeben*, *Abstimmung*, *Stimmauszählung*). On this linguistic coincidence also see Mladen Dolar's chapter on "The Politics of the Voice" (104-124).

<sup>9</sup> This idea is derived from Stanley Cavell's discussion of George Cukor's 1944 film *Gaslight* (*A Pitch of Philosophy* 134-136; *Contesting Tears* 47-78).



contain the disturbing effects of her voice in and through his poetic writing. At the same time, their voices stand in for conflicting social positions in the sense of Bakhtin's heteroglossia. In so doing, they also mark a cultural conflict which, importantly enough, revolves around the woman's voice, namely the question of whether or not she has a "voice" that translates into political and cultural power.

This conflict is already staged in the parlour scene at the very beginning when Coverdale meets Zenobia for the first time and notes that she addresses the newcomers "in a fine, frank, mellow voice" (14). "She had something appropriate [. . .] to say to every individual" (14), he adds. And he then goes on to quote at length and in direct speech her remarks on his poems, which she says he will hear her sing sometimes in the summer, as well as on the social situation of women in general and at Blithedale in particular. She seems to continue to dominate the scene as the main speaker. But as she is talking to his companions, Coverdale's attention begins to drift off. Instead he comes to focus on her appearance: "Her hair – which was dark, glossy, and of singular abundance – was put up rather soberly and primly, without curls, or other ornament, except a single flower" (15). In stark contrast to her simple dress, the exotic hothouse flower marks her as a figure of excess:

So brilliant, so rare, so costly as it must have been, and yet enduring only for a day, it was more indicative of the pride and pomp, which had a luxuriant growth in Zenobia's character, than if a great diamond had sparkled among her hair. (15)

By being so enthralled not just by her extravagant ornament but also by her mature figure and her radiant vitality – "Zenobia's bloom, health, and vigor, which she possessed in [. . .] overflow" (16) – Coverdale shifts from the sound quality of her voice and the content of her speech to her visual appearance. In fact, he moves into his fantasy realm as if to counteract and contain Zenobia's vocal self-dramatization. He gives in to an impulse, which, he says, is "hardly felt to be quite decorous," and pictures the "perfectly developed figure" of Zenobia in the nude, or in his words, "in Eve's earliest garment" (17). As Coverdale notes in retrospect, Zenobia's "free, careless, generous modes of expression often had this effect of creating images" (17). Her speech arouses erotic fantasies, Coverdale claims, as it were against his will.<sup>10</sup> Zenobia and the complexity she marks as a politically positioned feminine subject are thus re-

---

<sup>10</sup> Coverdale's argument recalls a long-standing cultural tradition in which female expression is regarded not just as improper but also as indecent. See Bardes and Gossett (59) for a reading of *The Blithedale Romance* that foregrounds this tradition.

duced to what Lauren Berlant in her reading of the novel calls a “sex effect” (35).

In fact, the shift of focus in Coverdale’s account from the sound of Zenobia’s voice to Coverdale’s mental image is crucial for the conflict of voice in *The Blithedale Romance*. Zenobia has a “voice” in this passage because she manages to turn the parlour into her own stage, a space that is completely dominated by her self-performance. Confronted by her powerful voice, Coverdale can but subject himself to her self-performance. This is the reason why he turns away from the voice she has as a performer and instead seeks to transform her into an erotic image which he can shape and control by virtue of his own imagination, thus shifting from her theatrical self-performance to what he will later call his inner “private theater” (70). In fact, in writing his text, Coverdale tries to absorb her into his imagination together with the characters surrounding her and even refers to them as “actors in a drama” that unfolds on “my mental stage” (156).<sup>11</sup>

The fierce power struggle that develops between Zenobia’s self-performance and Coverdale’s containment of her feminine voice by virtue of his own imaginary redefinition suggests Friedrich Nietzsche’s definition of culture as a battleground of opposing forces. According to Nietzsche, cultural values emerge from a violent struggle between different ways of interpreting the world. Any cultural system is defined by values and interpretations that have triumphed over another set of values and interpretations. This renders culture a perpetual process of overpowering, in which different descriptions and interpretations compete with each other for dominance as they seek to overwhelm, subdue and vanquish each other.<sup>12</sup> While Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia highlights the clash between different social voices, positions and perspectives, Nietzsche foregrounds the violent conflict between different interpretations.

The violence of interpretation is a useful notion to examine the clash between Coverdale and Zenobia in terms of a cultural battle revolving around the voice of the woman. What is at stake in their power struggle is the question whether woman can represent herself, or whether she is

---

<sup>11</sup> Zenobia’s half-sister Priscilla is also a public performer. However, as a medium who is mesmerized and ventriloquized by her master Westervelt, she has no “voice” of her own.

<sup>12</sup> Note the following salient passage from Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morals*: “[. . .] anything which exists, once it has somehow come into being, can be reinterpreted in the service of new intentions, repossessed, repeatedly modified to a new use by a power superior to it; [. . .] all overpowering and mastering is a reinterpretation, a manipulation, in the course of which the previous ‘meaning’ and ‘aim’ must necessarily be obscured or completely effaced” (57-58).



defined and described by a voice other than her own. As a performer figure, Zenobia uses theatrical means for her public self-presentations. She entertains the Blithedale community with theatre performances, *tableaux vivants*, Shakespeare readings and her improvised story telling. But even aside from her explicit theatrical playacting, she never stops performing. Quite on the contrary, she is an arch-performer who continually stages herself and performs a drama of her own by presenting a series of extravagant gestures and melodramatic poses. It is by fashioning herself in and through her self-performances that she positions herself as a self-determined "voice."

Coverdale, on the other hand, is relegated to a position from which he can only passively witness her powerful presence. Zenobia and her entourage form "the vortex of my meditations around which they revolved, and whitherward they too continually tended" (70). But although these "characters figured so largely on my private theatre, I [. . .] was at best but a secondary or tertiary personage with either one of them" (70). Playing no actual role in Zenobia's life,<sup>13</sup> Coverdale turns into a compulsive voyeur who wishes to gain both knowledge and power by virtue of his spying.<sup>14</sup> Trying "to live in other lives" (160), he constantly watches and eavesdrops on the performer as she is interacting with other characters. When Zenobia, who feels observed by him, asks him what he wants to discover in her, he replies: "The mystery of your life [. . .]. And you will never tell me" (47). What he seeks to do is to read her against her wish and to dispel her powerful voice by replacing the performer's self-definition with his own description of her. It is in this sense that the conflict of voice in *The Blithedale Romance* can be described as a Nietzschean struggle for power: With Coverdale and Zenobia, we have two opposing interpretations of the feminine voice which compete for dominance over one another.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> See Mary Suzanne Schriber, who writes: "Zenobia's independence and seeming self-sufficiency give Coverdale, unimaginative and conventional as he is, no role to play in her presence" (66).

<sup>14</sup> For a detailed discussion that puts the spying narrator and artist *manqué* Coverdale into the American context see Tony Tanner.

<sup>15</sup> The conflict of voice between Coverdale and Zenobia is not the only power struggle in *The Blithedale Romance*. Virtually all the characters are linked to each other by mysterious power relationships. Zenobia and Priscilla, for instance, fall under the potent spell of the former blacksmith and prison reformer Hollingsworth, a massive figure of rude strength, and almost everyone seems to compete for control over the weak Priscilla. In his discussion of the novel, Tony Tanner writes that "[p]sychologically, Hawthorne was clearly [...] interested in how relationships could in fact be power struggles [. . .]" (25). What distinguishes the conflict between Coverdale and Zenobia from the other power struggles in the text is their will to vocal power as well as the cultural conflict over the woman's voice this highlights.

A key moment in the power struggle between the narrator and the performer is the strange episode during Coverdale's temporary stay at a hotel in the city. As Coverdale is looking out of his rear window, he can see the back façade of a stylish boarding house right opposite his hotel. The following night he has a bizarre dream about Zenobia. And the next day, he positions himself again at the window. What he sees initially appears as though it were produced by his imagination:

There was a presentiment in my mind [. . .]. At any rate, it was no positive surprise, but as if I had all along expected the incident, that, directing my eyes thitherward, I beheld – like a full-length picture, in the space between the heavy festoons of the window-curtains – no other than Zenobia! (155)

Zenobia appears in the window as if conjured up by Coverdale's dream and premonition. Moreover, he looks at her figure as though she were a painting – a gesture which repeats his earlier attempt to reduce the embodied performer to a disembodied image controlled by his (erotic) imagination. As he is spying on her, Coverdale notices that Zenobia is joined by another character. He continues to watch them "transfixed" (157), trying to figure out the precise nature of their relationship.

What this passage highlights is Coverdale's desire to read Zenobia. At the same time, the scene also dramatizes Zenobia's insistence on her self-definition. Coverdale is first recognized by the other character. But it is Zenobia who makes sure that Coverdale can no longer observe them:

She signified her recognition of me by a gesture with her head and hand, comprising at once a salutation and a dismissal. The next moment, she administered one of those pitiless rebukes which a woman always has at hand, ready for an offence, [. . .] by letting down a white linen curtain between the festoon of the damask ones. (159)

Coverdale comments that Zenobia's intervention to obstruct his view of her "felt like the drop-curtain of a theatre, in the interval between the acts" (159). However, what Zenobia signals is clearly no intermission. She closes the curtain because she wants to defend the privacy of her drawing room from his intrusive gaze. Indeed, she protects her own "private imagination and history" (Levine 217) throughout the text and never agrees to disclose them to Coverdale.

Coverdale's peculiar reaction underlines his unwillingness to acknowledge her self-definition as an independent subject. He still attempts to decipher her and thus continues to watch her window. But all he can see is the light of a lamp shining through the white curtain.

"The shadow of a passing figure was now-and-then cast upon this medium, but with too vague an outline for even my adventurous conjectures to read the hieroglyphic that it represented" (161-162). Coverdale is unable to make out the action of the moving shadows that are projected onto the curtain fabric. His spontaneous subsequent visit to her luxurious drawing room echoes the earlier scene of their first encounter in the Blithedale parlour. But this time Zenobia meets the gaze of her visitor by wearing "costly robes" and "flaming jewels" (163) and, in so doing, presents herself as a self-created "work of art" (164).

Coverdale believes that he is now finally able to unmask the performer. However, his triumph in condemning her spectacular self-dramatization is only brief as we can see in his description of their Nietzschean power struggle:

... the next instant, she was *too powerful* for all *my opposing struggles*. I saw how fit it was that she should make herself as gorgeous as she pleased, and should do a thousand things that would have been ridiculous in the poor, thin, weakly character of other women. (165; emphasis added)

Instead of arriving at an interpretation and judgment of the extravagant Zenobia, he finds his desire thwarted by her perpetual performance. Literally dazzled by her brilliant self-presentation, he notes that no matter what guise she adopts, there is always "something like the illusion which a great actress flings around her" (165). Coverdale's effort to interpret the performer and reveal her "true character" (165) turns out to be futile. Zenobia can never be unmasked, never pinned down to any fixed identity.

As suggested earlier, the episode in the city illustrates the struggle between Coverdale's will to interpretation and Zenobia's insistence on her self-definition. We have already seen the narrator's attempt to contain the power of the performer and absorb her into his imagination in his mental striptease in the Blithedale parlour scene, in which he turns her into an erotic image. However, as the scene in Zenobia's elegant drawing room shows, the dazzling surface of the performer persona cannot be penetrated. In fact, it is no accident that throughout the text, the performer is referred to by her pseudonym "Zenobia," which is "merely her public name; a sort of mask in which she comes before the world, retaining all the privileges of privacy" (8).<sup>16</sup> Although we never

---

<sup>16</sup> Coverdale's wish to find a hidden meaning behind real material surfaces is reminiscent of the Puritan allegorical tradition as well as Transcendentalist philosophy, both of which emphasize the discovery of a spiritual dimension in their reading of natural signs. In the case of Coverdale, however, this hermeneutic practice no longer seems to work. Picking up on Foucault's discussion in "Nietzsche, Freud, Marx," one

learn whether Coverdale knows her actual name, the constant use of her *nom de plume* underscores the “voice” she has as a result of her self-fashioning as a performer.

But how is Zenobia’s voice marked in the narrative of Coverdale, who is intent on effacing her voice? Given that Coverdale is the narrator of the text, anything we learn about Zenobia is refracted through his narration. This would seem to give him an advantage over her in their struggle for dominance. However, the implied author continually points to the limitations and discrepancies of Coverdale’s text. Not only do we realize as readers that Coverdale cannot acknowledge the voice Zenobia has as a result of her self-definition as an independent subject, that instead he seeks to supersede her “voice” with his own narration and definition of her. But his entire narrative is underpinned by a paradoxical gesture – the fact that he needs to evoke the voice he wants to erase and exorcize. In other words, Coverdale’s wish to assert his power over Zenobia means that he has to continually invoke her powerful voice. At the same time, even as he represents the performer in his text, he fails to read her. And it is precisely by emphasizing his failure to read her that Hawthorne’s text allows us to hear Zenobia’s voice.

The ultimate obstacle to Coverdale’s interpretation of Zenobia is posed by her death. Towards the end of the text, the self-assertive performer suffers a tragic fate as her love-interest leaves her for her younger, self-effacing half-sister Priscilla. When Coverdale and two other men recover Zenobia’s drowned corpse from the depths of the river, they are confronted with a disturbing sight. They try to mitigate “the perfect horror of the spectacle” (235). Yet they fail not only to manipulate the appearance of Zenobia’s corpse but also to interpret her posture. Her lifeless body offers a grotesque refiguration of the *tableaux vivants* which she used to perform in front of the Blithedale community. Her arms have “grown rigid in the act of struggling” (235), and her legs are bent, too. In order to aestheticize what he sees, Coverdale describes the final rigid pose in which her lifeless body is arrested as “the marble image of a death agony” (235). However, although the performer has fallen silent for good, she remains a figure of struggle and thus resists any appropriation.<sup>17</sup> This is illustrated by the violent but unsuccessful

---

might say that Coverdale’s search for the true interior character of Zenobia posits a depth that is criticized by Nietzsche as an illusion: “in reality, when one interprets one can trace this descending line only to restore the glittering exteriority that was covered up and buried” (Foucault 273).

<sup>17</sup> Note Elisabeth Bronfen’s suggestion that even in her death Zenobia remains an “agent of strife” (245).

attempts the men make to put her defiant body at rest. One of the men tries to rearrange her arms into a more peaceful pose. Because of the rigidity her struggling arms have assumed, he applies sheer force: "He endeavoured to arrange the arms of the corpse decently by its side. His utmost strength, however, scarcely sufficed to bring them down; and rising again, the next instant, they bade him defiance exactly as before" (236). In a similar effort to contain Zenobia's outrageous gesture, Coverdale would like to imagine that her pose signifies an "attitude of prayer" (235). But he finds his reading contradicted by her hands, which are "clenched in immitigable defiance" (235). Zenobia's body thus yields neither to physical force nor to Coverdale's will to interpretation. There is an excess of "voice" even in her death pose, which makes it impossible to absorb her and turn her into a mute "marble image." Instead her final *tableau mort* presents a spectacle of irresolvable conflict.<sup>18</sup>

The novel, Bakhtin writes, "often deliberately intensifies difference" between languages, "gives them embodied representation and dialogically opposes them to one another in unresolvable dialogues" (291). What our focus on the conflict of voice between Zenobia and Coverdale allows us to see (or rather hear) are their conflicting interests as well as their will to power. *The Blithedale Romance* is both Nietzschean and compelling as example for a discussion of cultural conflict because the novel does not offer any resolution to the cultural conflict it evokes through its heteroglossia. In fact, it makes sense to talk not just about the voices *in* the text but also the "voice" *of* the text, namely the tone that emerges as a result of the way in which the text orchestrates the different textual voices. Here, too, conflict is sustained because significantly enough, the text does not align itself with either one of the two voices. Hawthorne, as the implied author, juxtaposes the voices of Coverdale and Zenobia in their gendered power struggle. But he privileges neither one of them. Instead, by having them clash over the question of the woman's voice, the text appears to imagine culture – and, more specifically, the American cultural project – in terms of a continual struggle without closure.

The fact that Coverdale writes his entire narrative twelve years after the events renders their power struggle all the more paradoxical. Zenobia has lost her voice as a result of her death. Coverdale is the

---

<sup>18</sup> In his reading of the death-scene, Ffrangcon Lewis goes as far as to suggest that "Zenobia's final gesture is [. . .] an eloquent piece of self-conscious self-dramatization" (78). In her "final role as actress and tragic queen," she offers a macabre mockery of the previously enacted *tableaux vivants*, speaking out "not with her 'living voice,' but with the silent and appalling eloquence of her dead body" (79).

surviving figure and could theoretically position himself as the predominant voice. However, his narrative highlights Zenobia's continuing presence. Although the performer cannot sustain her living voice, she keeps haunting Coverdale from beyond the grave. He attempts to turn her into an image, a text, in short, an aesthetic representation created by himself, but he cannot subsume her under his imagination. Wishing to possess an artistic voice, the artist *manqué* is instead possessed by the voice of the dead Zenobia. As a result, what is at stake in *The Blithedale Romance* is a curious struggle between the voice of the surviving narrator and the voice of the dead performer. Rather than being able to absorb the performer into his fantasy and writing, he realizes that he is captivated by Zenobia and her closest companions – they “had absorbed my life into themselves” (194). At the end of the text, we learn that by the time Coverdale writes his narrative, he has turned into a middle-aged bachelor who has lost his artistic creativity (246). The text thus juxtaposes the depletion of Coverdale with the survival of Zenobia's energy. In a paradoxical reversal of life and death, Zenobia's voice returns to speak through Coverdale's writing. This shows that their conflict of voice persists even after her death. Zenobia's voice continues to provoke conflict and struggle and, as a result, keeps its powerful presence.

---



## References

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. "The Discourse of the Novel." *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981. 259-422.
- Bardes, Barbara and Suzanne Gossett. *Declarations of Independence: Women and Political Power in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction*. New Brunswick, London: Rutgers University Press, 1990.
- Barthes, Roland. "Die Musik, die Stimme, die Sprache." *Der entgegenkommende und der stumpfe Sinn*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990. 279-285.
- Berlant, Lauren. "Fantasies of Utopia in *The Blithedale Romance*." *American Literary History* 1.1 (Spring 1989): 30-62.
- Bronfen, Elisabeth. *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992.
- Cavell, Stanley. *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1994.
- . *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Dinesen, Isak. "The Dreamers." *Seven Gothic Tales*. 1934. London: Putnam, 1969. 327-430.
- Dolar, Mladen. *A Voice and Nothing More*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 2006.
- Easton, Alison. "Hawthorne and the Question of Women." *The Cambridge Companion to Nathaniel Hawthorne*. Ed. Richard H. Millington. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 79-98.
- Foucault, Michel. "Nietzsche, Freud, Marx." *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Michel Foucault, Vol. 2*. Ed. James Faubion. London: Penguin, 1998. 269-278.
- Fuller, Margaret. *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. 1845. New York, London: Norton, 1998.
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Blithedale Romance*. 1852. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- James, Henry. *The Bostonians*. 1886. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Kolesch, Doris and Sybille Krämer, eds. *Stimme: Annäherung an ein Phänomen*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006.
- Levine, Robert S. "Sympathy and Reform in *The Blithedale Romance*." *The Cambridge Companion to Nathaniel Hawthorne*. Ed. Richard H. Millington. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 207-229.
- Lewis, Ffrangcon. "Women, Death and Theatricality in *The Blithedale Romance*." *Journal of American Studies* 26.1 (1992): 75-80.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic*. 1887. Trans. Douglas Smith. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Scriber, Mary Suzanne. "Justice to Zenobia." *The New England Quarterly* 55.1 (1982): 61-78.

Tanner, Tony. "'A Summer in the Country': Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*." *The American Mystery*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 9-38.

\* \* \* \* \*

