The Play and Place of Criticism

Krieger, Murray

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The Marble Faun, of all Nathaniel Hawthorne’s fiction, may be the clearest acknowledgment of the uncertainty with which its author maintained his famed Puritanical morality. If the novel has been seriously underestimated, as I believe it has, it is because critics have commonly drained off its life by applying to it an a priori notion of Hawthorne’s moral austerity which the novel itself does not justify. It is unfortunate that commentators have failed to accord to Hawthorne the benefits of the critical generosity usually reserved for Henry James in his later versions of “the international theme” that makes its earlier and influential appearance in The Marble Faun. Even writers who concede that James was indebted to this novel in his formulating this theme and who normally allow to James the controlled transcendence of his moral opposition between American and European values continue to see Hawthorne as the priggish provincial who condescends to his Italian experience and idolatrously creates cold New England saints to protect himself from it and purge it from his pages. However, it is not only that in Hawthorne, as later in James, the novel is grounded in a profound conflict between the limited claims of American moralism and of European aestheticism, but also that in Hawthorne, as later in James, the totality of the novel in its multi-dimensionality sees round any single restrictive moral vantage point. The earlier as well as the later writer is aware, in the moral-aesthetic polarity, of an irresolvable either/or and displays an ambivalence toward either pole that forces any total choice to be made only with a tragic sense of loss. It is as much a mistake to deny Hawthorne a finally cosmopolitan awareness of the mutual attractions and disadvantages of his alternatives as it is to deny him the awareness of the conflict itself.

None of this is to deny that his heroine Hilda is, for the most part, an
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intolerably pallid New England version of a human being; but it is to deny that, to the total neglect of Miriam's claims, we can blandly identify Hilda with Hawthorne's conception of the human ideal and thus can rub off her insufficiencies on him. After all, some of James' ambassadors from Woollett, Massachusetts, are no more humanly satisfying, and yet we see the total structure of the novel revealing an awareness that towers over their dwarfed sensibilities. It is risky to assume that Hawthorne was so much less an artist, that he projected his limitations so single-mindedly that we can turn our reactions to Hilda upon her creator, when he has really protected himself against them by seeing her inadequacies, intending them to be seen as such, and containing them within a structure that defines and judges them in the full dramatic density of their human relevance.

But are Hilda's limitations in fact Hawthorne's? Even before we reach The Marble Faun itself, our expectations concerning his New Englander's insularity may lead us to underestimate the depth of the experience described in his Italian Notebooks, to dismiss his Italian experience by assuming that he self-righteously dismissed it. It is this experience, and the problems revealed in it, that are projected onto the novel. The complexity of one is clue to the complexity of the other. Thus it is worth stopping to observe the tensions revealed in the journal since they make their way, equally unresolved, into the novel.

The journal continually shows Hawthorne profoundly perplexed by the art and the sense of the past which engulf him in the seat of Catholicism. This is not to say, as some have, that his experience was refracted through a narrowly provincial Puritan mind which would allow no value to anything it encountered. At the same time it is certainly true that there was much in Italy of which he was contemptuous, even much that he hated. This is truer in his earlier pages, written in days and nights of physical discomfort; but throughout the journal we see him bored by the endless and wearying exhibition of art, shocked by the pagan nudity of the sculpture, and morally outraged by the general corruption and filth of Rome and its people. But as he comes more and more to be captivated by certain works of painting and sculpture and forced into admiration for certain aspects of Catholicism, we become increasingly aware of another side to this sensitive New Englander. Finally, he could not quite make up his mind about Italy, but unquestionably he saw that he could not reject it uncritically, that he could not bring himself to spit it out even if he never dared swallow it.

Thus it is with a sense of unavoidable loss that, at the end, he takes up
his Americanism and tries to forget the enigma that Rome became for him:

. . . nor do I wish ever to see any of these objects again, though no place ever took so strong a hold of my being as Rome, nor ever seemed so close to me and so strangely familiar. I seem to know it better than my birthplace, and to have known it longer; and though I have been very miserable there, and languid with the effects of the atmosphere, and disgusted with a thousand things in its daily life, still I cannot say I hate it, perhaps might fairly own a love for it. But life being too short for such questionable and troublesome enjoyments, I desire never to set eyes on it again.

Yet he has earlier lamented his need to return from Rome and to be plagued by the seductions of his memory of it. He worries, "What shall we do in America?" He has worried earlier, in an unresolved way, about the future effect of his daughter's attachment to Rome:

We shall have done the child no good office in bringing her here, if the rest of her life is to be a dream of this "city of the soul," and an unsatisfied yearning to come back to it. On the other hand, nothing elevating and refining can be really injurious, and so I hope she will always be the better for Rome, even if her life should be spent where there are no pictures, no statues, nothing but the dryness and meagreness of a New England village.

There are many similar passages in which America comes off as poorly and Italy as favorably, although none is as sharp or as shocking as that indictment of Americans—prompted by his admiration of Florence—as "the meanest and shabbiest people known in history." I shall cite but one more:

I had a quiet, gentle, comfortable pleasure, as if, after many wanderings, I was drawing near Rome, for, now that I have known it once, Rome certainly does draw into itself my heart, as I think even London, or even little Concord itself, or old sleepy Salem, never did and never will.

In these passages we find in Hawthorne a sense of nostalgia at the loss of Europe's historic depth and aesthetic richness not much less than that of Lambert Strether, Henry James' richly confused ambassador. It is the judgment of a sensibility that, against its wishes, has been made somewhat cosmopolitan. He can even go so far as to "recognize the truth," in defense of an American expatriate, that "an individual country is by no means essential to one's comfort."

Most of these passages occur when we are well along in the Notebooks. Since his devotion to Italy increases with the length of his visit, we may assume that here is a man who is challenged and who is changing. After his
early apathy and disdain in Rome, we find him increasingly drawn by the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. Upon his return to Rome, everything appears more beautiful than before, so that he wonders at his previous insensitivity. At his first carnival he held himself aloof, scornful of what seemed to him to be artificial, scheduled merriment. At his second he joyfully joins in the throwing of confetti.

But of course Hawthorne is not quite so simple, and I do not mean to err in the other extreme. We must remember, for example, that not long after his new joy at returning to Rome as to home, he is able to lament:

I hate the Roman atmosphere; indeed, all my pleasure in getting back—all my home-feeling—has already evaporated, and what now impresses me, as before, is the languor of Rome, its weary pavements, its little life, pressed down by a weight of death.

His moral consciousness, his scrupulosity, never leave him utterly, so that at best his attitude is ambivalent. The tradition and age of Rome sometimes impress him favorably, even arousing his admiration as an inheritor of Western culture and his envy as a patriotic and apologetic American; but at the same time he sees this enormous burden of the past oppressing the present with the massive legacy of centuries that have multiplied sin with brutality. The very aesthetic heritage which draws him to the Church binds it irrevocably to the paganism which Catholicism superseded (or, Hawthorne might prefer to say, adapted) in Rome. He is profoundly struck by what in the novel he calls (and not always condescendingly) the “convenience” of Catholicism, by the unfailing understanding through which the Church has adapted itself to all human weakness and all human needs, by the easy and pleasant and beautiful comfort it has made of religion. What better evidence of how moved he is than that he allows the inviolable Hilda, Puritanism itself, to avail herself of this “convenience,” the Confessional, at a most crucial moment—and to be saved by it! Still never quite absent from his awareness is the feeling that this very paternal solicitude, however humanly soothing, contains an impurity and a corruption which can be avoided only by a hard and severe, individual and immediate religion, without worldly priestly intruders, illuminated by the light of heaven unfiltered by the deceptive man-made splendor of the stained-glass window.

Hawthorne’s unresolved double vision in the Notebooks should warn us to expect no simple thematic resolution in The Marble Faun. The writer of the journal could hardly produce a partisan victory. And the closeness of
the novel to the journal is striking in detail as well as in the larger thematic concerns that we have been observing. Since Hawthorne thought of himself as a romancer rather than a realistic reporter and since he indeed was a most inventive storyteller, a maker of fables, it is surprising to find so much material carried over from the *Notebooks* into the novel without being significantly reshaped to fulfill a uniquely fictional purpose. And when we recognize the thematic and even symbolic use to which borrowings from the *Notebooks* are put, our surprise at the similarity of fact and fiction, of personal reaction and aesthetic creation, increases. These occurrences suggest that Hawthorne in his original autobiographical involvement was already thinking in the thematic and symbolic terms out of which the novel later emerged. And our observations have tended to confirm this suggestion. Italian works of art offer especially persuasive further evidence. Hawthorne makes special use of painting and sculpture which he had observed in Italy. Having made extensive moral-literary interpretations of them in the journal, he creates much of his thematic structure in the novel from them. Yet many of these interpretations in the novel seem reproduced almost bodily from the journal. For example, a comparison of his journal comments on the *Faun* of Praxiteles, Story's *Cleopatra*, Guido's *Beatrice Cenci*, and Guido's *Angel* with his dramatic use of them shows how little artistic transformation has taken place. Even the chronological structure of the novel is significantly related to that of the Italian visit recorded in the *Notebooks*. While his stay extends from late winter, 1858, until late spring, 1859, it is the two carnivals which seem essentially to frame his journal. The novel similarly runs from one early Italian spring to the next, ending in the carnival. And in both the *Notebooks* and the novel the background of Rome yields to a less uncomfortable location in the summer, although in both, too, the travelers are to return, and to return transformed.

I have said that it is surprising to find in a novelist of Hawthorne's kind so great a dependence on relatively unaltered materials from life. Even if we view the *Notebooks* as a sort of apprenticeship to the central issues of the novel, still we must wonder why the materials were not forced to respond more plasticly to the demands of Hawthorne's "romance," which, according to his own prescriptions, must create a reality of its own distinct from that of ordinary existence. And the major difficulty in *The Marble Faun*, the weakness probably responsible for its unfortunate neglect, stems from his inability to create a unique realm of being for the characters and incidents in the romance; that is, his inability to decide whether the novel's
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reality was to stem from the Italian actualities borrowed from the *Notebooks* or from a special, fabulous world created in terms of its own symbolic necessities.

In his famous metaphorical definition of a romance in the lengthy introductory chapter to *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne has told us of the romancer's power to "dream strange things and make them look like truth." He can manage this power because his romance is an independent, specially illuminated world, "a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairyland, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other." In Hawthorne's metaphor familiar, even commonplace objects are acted on first by the cold lucidity of moonlight and secondly by the genial domesticity of a dim coal fire. The first transforms the objects into intellectual abstractions; the second informs those abstractions with the warmth of life, turning them "from snow-images into men and women." It is perhaps this metaphor Henry James refers to in his book on Hawthorne when he objects to unjustifiably abstract or allegorical elements in his predecessor by complaining of them as "moonshine" or as the products of a "lunar" mist.

The failings of *The Marble Faun* are mainly of this kind, but they occur because Hawthorne tries to ground his "lunar" elements in the precise and detailed realities provided by his *Notebooks*. Despite his intentions, his work, alas, is only half romance, and it cannot satisfy two realms of probabilities at once. An author is quite justified in establishing his own world, with its special laws, if he will not remind us too much of ours. But fantasy is difficult to follow or allow when it takes place before so vividly reported a backdrop as Hawthorne's Rome. He needs Rome and its many masterpieces which give meaning to the action and allow conversations which importantly reflect the speakers. But he must pay the price in realism for his use of this scenery. It is here that he becomes half-hearted, unable to make his fantasy literally sensible and not quite unwilling to try. He multiplies coincidences that often, with his encouragement, seem mysteriously induced and then belatedly and without conviction tries to account for them. He cannot manage to make Miriam's persecutor either man or Satan, although on differing occasions he tries to make him both, even as these several occasions and their presuppositions about the persecutor are mutually contradictory. He has a similar problem with Donatello as man and/or faun.

Finally, the very source of the action depends on an ever-deepening
mystery about Miriam's family and personal history and her relations with her persecutor. The intrusion of vague Gothic elements which remind us of unspeakable and unholy terror—a metaphysical horror which makes any action possible—cannot satisfy us. We simply do not believe that Hawthorne can satisfy us, that any literal reality can satisfy the supernatural requirements he has placed on his situation, and we can believe that the terror remains unspeakable only because the author dare not speak lest it evaporate before the breath of a reality that he cannot make impressive enough. So we never do find out the details. Late in the novel we are told that Kenyon has been the author's narrator and his sole source of information, even though only an omniscient author could have told us much of the story that has preceded. But Hawthorne introduces this narrator in this ad hoc way in order to impose this limit upon his omniscience so that we shall excuse him for not knowing what we must never find out. When he feels pressed by exasperated readers to add his chapter of "Conclusion," he apologizes for his Gothic vagueness by reinventing his definition of romance and then, with regrettable coyness, at once provides inadequate explanations and introduces further mystifications to cover up for them. And again we feel the futility of this attempt at a romance in which, perhaps thanks to the borrowings from the realities of the Notebooks, he cannot totally believe. He cannot root his allegory in bedrock reality, even though it is biographical and geographical reality which permits it to take shape.

It is in the Preface to the novel that Hawthorne relates his notions about romance to his opposition between Italy and America, feeling that especially in Italy history can provide mystification (or mythification):

No author, without a trial, can conceive of the difficulty of writing a romance about a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a commonplace prosperity in broad and simple daylight, as is happily the case with my dear native land. It will be very long, I trust, before romance-writers may find congenial and easily handled themes within the annals of our stalwart republic, or in any characteristic and probable events of our individual lives. Romance and poetry, ivy, lichens, and wall-flowers need ruin to make them grow.

This passage, dedicated to the distinction between realism and romance, fact and fancy, the literal and the symbolic, also returns us to Hawthorne's duality of attitude toward the old world and the new. And as we recall my earlier discussion of the aesthetic-moral conflict between these worlds and my observation that his original definition of romance in The Scarlet Letter at once opposed the real to the allegorical and human warmth to cold
intellectual abstraction, we may be permitted to wonder whether the aesthetic difficulties we have seen him fall prey to in the novel are not the reverse side of the moral perplexities and indecisiveness we have seen him fall prey to in Italy. Could it not be that his inability to choose consistently between actuality and symbolic overlay or to synthesize them into his "neutral" realm of romance is a reflection of his inability to choose consistently between the inhuman austerity of New England moralism and the all-too-human license of aged Italian aestheticism or to synthesize these? Thus the relation of the Notebooks to the novel, of both of these to his notion of romance in contrast with reality, and of all these to the conflict between corrupt warmth and intellectual frigidity reveals how unified the aesthetic and thematic dimensions—and difficulties—of The Marble Faun come to be.

Hawthorne's own aesthetic, as we can derive it from what he says about the romance, indicates how much he concedes to the need for human warmth and how clearly he relates this need to the need for historical depth, even as the latter brings sin in its wake. The warmth of the hearth is the romancer's only protection against sheer moonshine, the only way to bring men and women out of snow-images. Hawthorne gives to Kenyon, his American sculptor in The Marble Faun, a similar artistic problem. Working in marble, he must imbue his objects with the warmth of humanity. And in moments of despondence he fears that after all the cold severity of his medium has proved too much for him. When his American moral overscrupulosity leads him to turn aside from Miriam in her need to confess to him, she cries, "You are as cold and pitiless as your own marble." Again Hawthorne's equation of the unfeeling virtue of moral severity with coldness and the yielding grace of faulty humanity with warmth. And again his aesthetic problem and his thematic problem are seen to join, his aesthetic sense conditioning his moral sense in broadening his awareness as a romancer even as it did in broadening his reactions to his Italian experience.

The structure of the novel is primarily controlled by the dramatic terms given the oppositions which have been concerning us, and with about the same ultimate indecisiveness, which explains why I quarrel with the common relegation of the novel and with the facile disposition of Hilda's place in it. Hilda must rather be seen as a person who is in one sense admirable, if not saintly, but in another sense seriously incomplete. Again it is the grim confrontation of cold and warmth, together with the grimmer insistence that there is no acceptable bridge between them. Each has the derivative qualities we have noticed: warmth has Catholicism, aestheticism, and tradition; cold
has Protestantism, moral simplicity, and immediacy. Each set of qualities has its desirable and undesirable consequences: Catholicism is "convenient" but corrupt, aestheticism is enriching but pagan, and tradition is profound but carries along its burden of sin. The alternative qualities invert these attributes, correcting the moral deficiencies but losing their relevance to the needs of the human heart. Thus Protestantism is seen as a religion for angels and Catholicism as a religion for men. If the former will not bend to man to help him in his need, the latter cannot raise him so as to obliterate that need.

It is of course in Miriam and Hilda that this opposition realizes itself. Miriam not only is the essence of Rome but is made its literal incarnation. If Rome, home of the universal and traditional religion and of the pagan world's universal state is an exquisite choice as the symbol of warmth, Miriam is an exquisite choice as the symbol of Rome. She is beautiful, brilliant, charming—attractive in every way. Yet there is a fatality about her which is inevitably associated with her sin-ridden heritage. In the not quite idyllic early scene in the Villa Borghese, Rome's bloody inheritance from the ages and its own fatality, together with its beauty, are juxtaposed to hers. Rome is likened to Eden, but it is like Eden in its fatality—here represented by malaria—as in its loveliness. Immediately after this description Miriam warns Donatello to protect his innocence by avoiding her. He answers, "I would as soon think of fearing the air we breathe." Her reply completes the metaphor: "And well you may, for it is full of malaria. . . . Those who come too near me are in danger of great mischiefs, I do assure you." The murder she commits through Donatello is consistent with this metaphor. He hurls the persecutor-model from the Tarpeian Rock in what amounts to a pagan execution ceremony. Not only has Miriam given the assent of her eyes, but just before the act she has defended the principle behind the ancient Roman use of the Rock. Thus her crime, initially precipitated by an evil to which she was born but of which she was innocent, is committed in a manner similarly dictated by history.

If Miriam is the Roman ideal, certainly Hilda is the Puritan. She is as spotless and as unearthly as the doves who at once symbolize and accompany her. But despite her transcendent moral perfection, she is humanly insufficient. At the start she has no knowledge of sin, and when its existence is forced upon her, her sole reaction is fear of contamination. She fears that, once mixed, evil will appropriate good rather than good evil. In her severity she fails Miriam irrevocably and crucially as a friend. Miriam forcefully and
repeatedly charges her willful blindness to the evil principle and her austere refusal to acknowledge and combat it with being serious human, if not moral, shortcomings. Her moralistic lover Kenyon joins in making these accusations, on occasion with surprising intensity; and even Hilda herself acknowledges their justness. All insist, however, that her action is right for her, that her nature makes it inevitable. Still there remains the unmistakable implication that this nature of hers is woefully inadequate.

The opposition between Miriam and Hilda is also developed in response to several paintings. Guido's *Beatrice Cenci* is an especially eloquent vehicle. The essence of this picture, as Hawthorne describes it, consists of a girl's intimate but guiltless awareness of evil. At the start of the novel she is the mirror of Miriam, who desperately tries to flee the sins of the ages which have descended upon her in her innocence. When Miriam sins, she enmeshes in this ancient and awesome network which has also claimed Donatello the innocent Hilda who, as witness to the deed, now takes up the place that Miriam held. And from this point it is Hilda who is reflected in Beatrice. Confession is made centrally relevant in this sequence. When Miriam was our Beatrice Cenci, she felt urgently the need to unburden herself; but Hilda was of course out of reach, Kenyon put her off, and Donatello perpetrated her crime the night before she was to tell him all. We are allowed to suppose that confession might have saved her. Hilda's knowledge later oppresses her similarly, but the Church's "convenience," the confessional, gives her the relief she needs. At the same time we may be sure that Hilda could not have fallen in any case, since she also has the faith for which Miriam envies her. This faith allows her to use the "convenience" safely, Kenyon's foolish fears of her conversion notwithstanding, since she can live only in "the pure, white light of heaven." Her direct relationship to God can never be finally threatened.

But the contrast between our alternative heroines is perhaps seen most clearly in their reactions to Guido's *Archangel*. Miriam has never cared for the picture which moves Hilda to ecstasy. Only Hilda can appreciate the placid disdain of Michael in his triumph over Satan (or is it Miriam's persecutor-model?). Miriam, on the other hand, herself involved, sees this conflict between good and evil as bloody and cruelly fought with a complete commitment on both sides, even if she is heretically uncertain about who will finally win. Guido's painting seems totally inadequate to her. Her magnificently frightening description of what the picture should have been
so moves Kenyon that even this conservative commentator begs Miriam to paint it. And Kenyon's word ought to be rather good authority to persuade us that Miriam has some share of truth in her view and that Hilda, after all, can be as optimistic as she is only because, out of fear of the Manichaean alternative, she can never give due credit to the existence of evil.

The Donatello story, obviously enough, is a parable of the fall of man. Through him the problem is clearly put to us at the end: was the Fall fortunate? If it was, then the existence of evil is theologically justified since good will come of it. And Puritan insufficiency, as represented by Hilda's refusal to compromise with the human state, is indeed proved to be insufficient. As we might expect, Miriam believes the Fall was fortunate, Hilda is shocked at the very notion, and Kenyon vacillates. Here again, as in the other opposed alternatives Hawthorne has treated, the answer is not definitive and any gain carries its consequent loss along with it. The loss of Donatello's perfect but amoral and unintellectual innocence must be mourned; but the moral consciousness and intellectual awareness which replaced it have brought him a new richness of person. Only his crime could have effected this transformation. And before he gives himself up to punishment, we find him for a moment both a Faun and a sensitive human being. Even his final imprisonment cannot shake our belief in what is after all a spiritual development. But at what a price! Perhaps Kenyon gives us a compromise, if compromising, answer in his statement that in the present world the innocence of Eden is an impossible incongruity. Thus Donatello's fall could be inevitable, and even fortunate, in view of the demands of reality, without forcing us to view the original Fall in this way. Of course, "the hopeful and happy-natured Hilda" cannot accept this modest formulation either.

Obviously this quarrel still concerns the problem of mixing good and evil. Are we to have Hilda's Michael, Miriam's Michael, or Satan? Will good remain aloof, will it struggle with evil and win, or will it struggle and be overcome? Indeed, can it struggle without being overcome in the process, win or lose? This is to ask whether we can have Miriam's Michael without having him inevitably transformed to Satan. The development of Donatello would seem to be clear evidence that for Hawthorne some good can come from evil. It would then be evidence, too, that for Hawthorne Hilda again fails as an all-encompassing ideal. She is, in the end, as she has always been, only half the story and half its meaning, even if the two halves continually
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overlap and cross over. Forced into a choice, we may have to choose her in the end, however great our losses, but only with the great sorrow of having been shown that our novel has made a choice necessary.

All that we have seen in The Marble Faun may partially confirm Henry James' insistence that Hawthorne used his Puritan heritage only as an objectively transformed element in his work, that this heritage represented his data rather than his commitment. But Hawthorne is not quite James, and we must also avoid the other extreme which would totally divorce Hawthorne from any subjective concern with Puritanism. It would seem fair to insist, at the very least, that on his European trip Hawthorne became increasingly open and aware—and thus increasingly troubled, if increasingly perceptive—and that The Marble Faun, considered in its fullness, achieved a cosmopolitanism that foreshadowed one of the most important themes in our literature. Of course all the awarenesses that are loosed in the novel have not yet achieved their total fusion in it and often seem rather to be mutual blockages. But for all its faults, this novel was impressive evidence that the American sensibility, without sacrificing its own unique vision, was, together with its forms of literary expression, coming to full maturity.