The Form of American Romance

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It was the coming true that was the proof of the enchantment, which, moreover, was naturally never so great as when such coming was, to such a degree and by the most romantic stroke of all, the fruit of one's own wizardry. I was positively—so had the wheel revolved—proud of my work. I had thought it all out, and to have thought it was, wonderfully, to have brought it. Yet I recall how I even then knew on the spot that there was something supreme I should have failed to bring unless I had happened suddenly to become aware of the very presence of the haunting principle, as it were, of my thought.

—Henry James, *The Sacred Fount*
For Hawthorne the shaping impulse of romance is a profound experience of loss and absence. His prefaces are pervaded by a sense of nostalgia, a longing of the heart for some other kind of fulfillment, and that nostalgia most often appears as a lament for a lost, autonomous form, one that brought together poetic, metaphysical, and intersubjective realms and made possible a happy, undisturbed relation between fiction and reality, imagination and perception, and writer and reader. But that form now belongs to an inaccessible yesterday and appears only in the guise of worn fragments and ghostly shadows. Hester's worn and faded A that “gives evidence of a now forgotten art, not to be recovered even by the process of picking out the threads” is “imparted” to Hawthorne by the “ghostly hand” of Surveyor Pue, and his “ghostly voice” exhorts him “to bring his mouldy and moth-eaten lucubrations before the public” (SL, 31, 33). For Hawthorne, the writer begins alone in a “dilapidated” world filled with structures “cobwebbed, and dingy with old paint” (7) and haunted by ghosts from the past. Like the attic of the Custom House, with its “heaped-up rubbish” or “the field near the Old Manse” with its Indian arrowheads, the world seems a “corpse of dead activity,” “dry bones” from which he must “raise up . . . an image” (29) of life, impart the “glow of passion” and the “tenderness of sentiment” to forms which retain the “rigidity of dead corpses” (34). His is a magic that seeks to give life to the dead by bathing the real in the light of the imaginary thereby producing a “new life” but one that feeds on “time-worn materials, like a tuft of green moss on a crumbling wall” (58). Such an art is one that dematerializes and vaporizes. The real is not desired or valued for its own sake but is placed in the service of the imagination that seeks to relieve it of the weight of gravity and to transform it into a “tribe of unrealities” (34).

But the product is the “semblance of a world” (37), best thought of as a soap bubble or a castle in the air whose continued existence depends upon the operation of literary conventions without which its “paint and pasteboard . . . composition” would be “painfully discernible” (BR, 2) and its originating
impulse seen as the result of a "false and unnatural relation with . . . decay" (SL, 75). Hawthorne, therefore, insists on the importance of "a certain propriety, of a kind always recognized in literature" and uses it both to validate the status of his fictive world and to justify his "assuming a personal relation with the public" (4). For while he understands that romance feeds on ruin and cohabits with death, he nevertheless hopes that it will provide him with a way of opening "an intercourse with the world" (TT, 6). By the use of the conventions of a Faery Land, an "Honored Reader," and a "prim old author" (MF, 1), he will establish and maintain relations with others. However, as an American writer Hawthorne's relation to literary conventions is an uneasy one in the sense that he can neither take them for granted nor do without them. As a romancer he needs the "atmosphere of strange enchantment" (BR, 2) that conventions generate but he worries about its effects on writer and reader. His "magic circle" at the Old Manse, for example, seems to generate a spell that offers "rest" to "weary and world worn spirits" (MOM, 29), but it is not a spell that can be celebrated unambiguously. "In one respect," Hawthorne writes, "our precincts were like the Enchanted Ground, through which the pilgrim travelled on his way to the Celestial City. The guests, each and all, felt a slumberous influence upon them; they fell asleep in chairs, or took a more deliberate siesta on the sofa, or were seen stretched out among the shadows of the orchard, looking up dreamily through the boughs" (28). Hawthorne refers here to the place in The Pilgrim's Progress that comes just before the Land of Beulah and that is "one of the last refuges that the enemy to pilgrims has," for the "air there [tends] to make one drowsy . . . and if a man sleeps, tis a question, some say, whether ever they shall rise or wake again in this world." The dark aspects of enchantment that Hawthorne points to with this reference suggest the ways in which the authority of convention maintains the authority of representation. The narrator of "The Custom House" cannot be present in his own person but appears as the "representative" (SL, 10) of others who are absent:
his ancestors, his “ancient predecessor, Mr. Surveyor Pue” (43),
even an earlier version of himself, a “scribbler of bygone days” (45). Substituting for self presence, according to the “law of literary propriety” (27) is the figure of a “literary man” (43), a “romance-writer” (35). And the magic of his art is one that maintains the illusion of presence. But, as the reference to Bunyan suggests, that conventional magic may be a fatal charm that draws the reader into the realm of the dead. This possibility is present as a troubling suggestion in all of Hawthorne’s romances, but in The Marble Faun, the last and darkest of his works, it becomes a dominating concern as the “spell of a tranquil spirit” (MOM, 29) turns into the “spell of ruin” (MF, 409) and death becomes the companion of the author.

The Marble Faun is a book of precipices and chasms, perspectives and distances, fragments and gaps; one haunted by enigmas, unanswered riddles, and impending catastrophes; a book whose characters are all “forlorn and wretched, under . . . [the] burthen of dusty death” (194). Separated from each other by a “voiceless gulf” (113) each finds himself or herself an “alien in the world” with “wholly unsympathetic medium betwixt himself and those whom he yearns to meet” (92). Other people are “within . . . view” and yet “beyond . . . reach” (66), isolated by a “strange distance and unapproachableness” (89). And they are also separated from the narrator who is distanced from them as they are from each other and who, in order to “interest” the reader in their “fortunes” (5) must weave a narrative from “Fragmentary Sentences.” Indeed, the entire novel is dominated by the difficulties of representing and interpreting the problems of writing and reading, and behind these issues two riddles of origins: “Was Donatello really a faun?” (459) and “What were Miriam’s real name and rank . . . ? (466) These are the questions that both generate representations and insure that they, like Kenyon’s bust of Donatello, must always remain fragmented and incomplete.
Most spectators mistake it for an unsuccessful attempt towards copying the features of the Faun of Praxiteles. One observer in a thousand is conscious of something more, and lingers long over this mysterious face, departing from it, reluctantly, and with many a glance thrown backward. What perplexes him is the riddle that he sees propounded there. . . . It was the contemplation of this imperfect portrait of Donatello that originally interested us in his history, and impelled us to elicit from Kenyon what he knew of his friend's adventures.

(381)

Entangled in this passage are most of the problems of the novel: the question of the relation between creative and copying acts, the nature and difficulties of the interpretive process, and the issue of the ontological status of the characters and their world and its relation to that of the narrator and reader. One effect of the passage is to complicate the meaning of the title, The Marble Faun.³ Does it refer to the Praxiteles faun or to Kenyon's bust of Donatello, which resembles the Praxiteles statue, and what relationship as a form of literary representation does it have to these other works of art? How are we to understand the narrator's "Man of Marble" who is "entirely imaginary" (4) and yet who seems to enjoy an existence that extends beyond the borders of the fiction, to show himself "in the same category as actually living mortals" (BR, 2)? These are some of the questions woven into the texture of The Marble Faun, questions of the status of fictional truths and the nature of their ground.

The novel begins with a problem of "resemblance," that of the "vivid likeness" between a "well-known master-piece of Grecian sculpture, and a young Italian" which makes the man seem the "very Faun of Praxiteles" (MF, 7). This recognition of resemblance produces two responses: the first from the narrator, who is moved to an "effort to express [the statue's] magic peculiarity in words" (8), a magic that seems to mingle and knead together the natural and human and invoke a time when "man's affinity with Nature was more strict, and his fellowship with every living thing more intimate and dear" (11), only to find that the
“idea grows coarse, as [he] handle[s] it, and hardens in [his] grasp,” (10); and the second from the characters, who are carried by their perception of the “resemblance between the Marble Faun and their living companion ... into a certain airy region, lifting up ... their heavy, earthly feet from the actual soil of life. The world had been set afloat, as it were, for a moment, and relieved them, for just so long, of all customary responsibility for what they thought and said” (16). But this sense of enchantment is only momentary, and as “their play of fancy subside[s] into a much more sombre mood” (18), the “beautiful statue” becomes a “corroded and discoloured stone” (17). With this change in mood comes a shift in setting as the action moves from the “sculpture gallery” to the “vast tomb” (24), the Catacomb of Saint Calixtus. And these introductory movements from rising to falling, enchantment to disenchantment, from the admiration of the “eternal repose of marble” (16) to an encounter with the “white ashes, into which the entire mortality of a man or woman had resolved itself” (24) will dominate the entire novel, for its “key-note” is the “wonderful resemblance” (22) that initiates them.

This “nameless charm” (16) of likeness that energizes the novel, the “spell of the Eternal City” (213) of art, is the natural magic of representation with its illusion of a direct and original relation between the sign and its object. But The Marble Faun questions and disturbs this charm of resemblance, for its world is one of pure representations, a world of re-creations, of pictures, sketches, statues, and words that “phantomize” presence by pointing to the absence of the persons and objects that they signify. Here there are no “genuine original[s]” (263), only, at best, things that are “something like the life” (121). The result is that the novel and its characters like Rome are “haunted” (176) by “ugly phantoms” (45). Of course the central phantom in the book, as a living model, is a figure for the process of representation itself. Known only as Miriam’s model, he appears first as “the Spectre of the Catacomb” (28), a “dusky, death-scented apparition” (36) who seems to “have stept out of a picture” (19); and
it is his “spectral figure” (432) that haunts the world of the novel, blurring distinctions between life and death, object and image, and undermining any notion of meaning as presence and plenitude. But it is this figure, too, that generates narrative, for it is his “death” that is the enabling energy of “the Romance of Monte Beni” (434), the parallel stories of the transformation of Donatello and Hilda.

First there is the story of Donatello, the account of the corruption of natural man, a “beautiful creature, standing betwixt man and animal, sympathizing with each, comprehending the speech of either race, and interpreting the whole existence of one to the other” (13). Because he is able to speak in the “original voice and utterance of the natural man” (248) which has since been “laid aside and forgotten . . . now that words have been feebly substituted in the place of signs and symbols” (77–78), this creature is free of the burden of interpretation. “Before the sophistication of the human intellect formed what we now call language” (248), the world interpreted itself “without the aid of words” (258). In the place of language which seeks through endless analogies to mediate the distance that now exists between man and nature there once existed a power of sympathy that brought all parts of existence together and allowed them to communicate instantly and completely: “he was believed to possess gifts by which he could associate himself with the wild things of the forests, and with the fowls of the air, and could feel a sympathy even with the trees, among which it was his joy to dwell” (235).

As Donatello’s adventures make clear, that instinctive sympathy that once united man to his natural milieu no longer exists. When the young primitive loses that “power of sympathy” (320) that binds him to the natural world he finds it impossible to live the life of his forefathers. “He could not live their healthy life of animal spirits, in sympathy with Nature, and brotherhood with all that breathed around them. Nature, in beast, fowl, and tree, and earth, flood, and sky, is what it was of old; but sin, care, and self-consciousness have set the human portion of the world
askew; and thus the simplest character is ever the surest to go astray” (239–40).

Nor is it possible to discover the source or origin of that lost unity. "It would have been as difficult . . . to follow up the stream of Donatello’s ancestry to its dim source, as travellers have found it, to reach the mysterious fountains of the Nile” (231). Heralds trace the family to the “early morn of Christendom” but at that “venerable distance” give up “in despair.” Nevertheless, where written record leaves the genealogy of Monte Beni, tradition takes it up and carries it back to the “sylvan life of Etruria” where it was “supposed to have had its origin” (232). A “romancer” might go “beyond the region of definite and demonstrable fact” but he “must needs follow his own guidance and probably arrive norwhither at last” (231). Moreover, even to him the “original founder of the race” (234) remains hidden, and he must base his speculations on the imperfect copies of the inaccessible original that occasionally appear along the family line. Donatello appears to his butler and to the “peasantry of the estate and neighboring village” as a “Monte Beni of the original type” (236), and this fact seems to Kenyon to afford a “shady and whimsical semblance of an explanation for the likeness, which he, with Miriam and Hilda, had seen, or fancied between Donatello and the Faun of Praxiteles” (232–33). But this association complicates further the question of Donatello’s origin and status, for it knots together genealogical and representational issues. Donatello seems to resemble not a faun but the representation of one, and that representation is the expression of, rather than the solution to, a mystery. “Praxiteles has subtly diffused, throughout his work, that mute mystery which so hopelessly perplexes us, whenever we attempt to gain an intellectual or sympathetic knowledge of the lower forms of creation” (10). The meaning of the statue, like the source of Donatello’s family line, is in the form of a riddle, an unanswered question that is the sign of a primeval origin lost forever and available only in the form of a “poet’s reminiscence of a period when man’s affinity with Nature was more strict, and his fellowship
with every living thing more intimate and dear” (11).

However, this is not to suggest that art can provide a cure for the alienation that results from man’s separation from his source. Hawthorne dramatizes the loss at the level of culture as well as of nature. Hilda’s initial innocence is not the Arcadian unselfconsciousness of the Old World pagan and does not manifest itself in the form of a special enjoyment of the “warm, sensuous, earthy side of Nature” (13). As a “daughter of the Puritans” (54), she is “perplex[ed]” (13) by Donatello’s apparent affinity with nature. Her innocence is the result of a special relationship to divinity; she looks at “humanity with angel’s eyes” (53). She is a “poor, lonely girl, whom God has set here in an evil world, and given her only a white robe, and bid her wear it back to Him, as white as when she put it on” (208). Her innocence, therefore, takes the form of a “silent sympathy” not with nature but with the religious paintings of the Old Masters, those products that are at once the expression of man’s highest accomplishments and the “true symbol of the glories of the better world, where a celestial radiance will be inherent in all things and persons, and render each continually transparent to the sight of all” (304). By the use of a “guiding light of sympathy, she went straight to the central point, in which the Master had conceived his work. Thus she viewed it, as it were, with his own eyes, and hence her comprehension of any picture that interested her was perfect” (57).

For the unfallen Hilda, as for Donatello, interpretation poses no problem. Her sympathetic insight allows her to penetrate to the “spirit and essence” (58) of the picture and to represent it on her canvas. While other copyists must work “entirely from the outside” and are able “only to reproduce the surface” (60), thereby representing the painting’s superficial qualities but missing the inner core of meaning, Hilda is able to “interpret what the feeling is, that gives [the] picture such a mysterious force” (65). And she is able to use this same insight to open the eyes of others: her “silent sympathy was so powerful that it drew your own along with it, endowing you with a second-sight
and enabled you to see the excellences with almost the depth and delicacy of her own perceptions” (62).

Because her interpretive powers derive from her special relationship to God—“I had only God to take care of me, and be my closest friend” (359)—these powers vanish when the crime that she witnesses disrupts the relationship: “the terrible, terrible crime, which I have revealed to you, thrust itself between Him and me; so I groped for Him in the darkness, as it were, and found him not—found nothing but a dreadful solitude, and this crime in the midst of it” (359). The result is a “dimness of an insight,” a loss of her power of “self-surrender . . . and sympathy” (335), and in the place of that lost sympathy is a “keen intellectual perception” that produces “irreverent” rather than sympathetic criticism as Hilda grows “sadly critical.” “Heretofore, her sympathy went deeply—into a picture, yet seemed to leave a depth which it was inadequate to sound; now, on the contrary, her perceptive faculty penetrated the canvas like a steel probe, and found but a crust of paint over an emptiness” (341). The point here is not simply that the process of interpretation is now a violent act but also that the violation reveals not a core of hidden meaning but an absence which implies that the “pictorial act” might be “altogether a delusion” (336), and her earlier response to the pictures therefore the result of a mystification.

Hilda approaches at this point a vision of culture similar to the one voiced by the more pessimistic Miriam. “The chasm was merely one of the orifices of that pit of blackness that lies beneath us, everywhere. The firmest substance of human happiness is but a thin crust spread over it, with just reality enough to bear up the illusive stage-scenery amid which we tread. It needs no earthquake to open the chasm. A footstep, a little heavier than ordinary, will serve; and we must step very daintily, not to break through the crust, at any moment” (161–62). From Miriam’s Conradian perspective, human life seems permeated by an artificiality that robs it of durability and significance. Surrounded by the ruins of Rome, she becomes aware of the “transitoriness of all things” (150) and comes to believe that her own
culture is doomed to go the way of the cultures of the past, for
in Rome one looks "through a vista of century beyond century—
through much shadow, and a little sunshine—through barbar-
ism and civilization, alternating with one another, like actors
that have prearranged their parts. . . . Your own life is nothing,
when compared with that immeasurable distance" (410).

The ruins of Rome, then, point to the same emptiness that
the disenchanted Hilda finds beneath the paint-covered canvas
of the Old Masters and which the more bitter Miriam senses
beneath everything. The ruins are not symbols of human ac-
complishment and survival but rather ominous reminders of
man's mortality. For Hawthorne, material ruins always imply—
often contain—decayed human ruins; hence Rome is a "sepul-
chral store-house of the past" (436), a "vast tomb"(24) containing
a "long decaying corpse, retaining a trace of the noble shape it
was, but with accumulated dust and a fungous growth over-
spreading all to more admirable features" (325). The forms of
culture, in short, are as fragile as man himself, his memorials
symbols of oblivion rather than a protection from it. The
tombs of the Appian Way, for example, built by men "ambi-
tious of everlasting remembrance" (420), have lost their human
meaning and now retain nothing "except their massiveness" and
hence are "alien from human sympathies" (419). Monuments
originally designed as memorials perpetuating memories have
become instead signs of a lost significance, an abandoned cult, a
vanished god, a forgotten family. Even worse, with their sugges-
tions of putrefaction, they stand as reminders of the grossness
and horror of man's imprisonment in an envelope of flesh. In a
remarkable passage in The French and Italian Notebooks Haw-
thorne observes that "there seems to be something . . . in the
monuments of every kind that they [the Romans] have raised
that puts people in mind of their earthly necessities, and incites
them to defile therewith whatever temple, column, ruined pa-
lace, or triumphal arch may be nearest at hand" (FIN, 481). It is
the odors of rotten flesh and human excrement that poison the
atmosphere of Rome, making it "unwholesome" (MF, 36) and
“corrupt” (54) and create a “contagious element, rising foglike . . . and brooding over the dead and half-rotten city” (FIN, 412). Surrounded by the “smell of ruin” and “decaying generations” (MF, 74) the resident of Rome seems unable to find comfort and safety anywhere.

But if the atmosphere of Rome can poison, it also seems capable of engendering. To artists it seems so “congenial” that they are “loath” to leave “after once breathing the enchanted air” (132). Here they enjoy a “social warmth from each other’s presence” that is missing in the “unsympathizing cities of their native land.” However, this “warmth” does not generate “mutual affection” or reduce the “jealousies and animosities” which “know into [their] hearts”; nor does it inspire their imaginations, for while “they linger year after year in Italy . . . their originality dies out of them, or is polished away as a barbarism” (132). Perhaps that is why most of the artists in The Marble Faun are copyists, reproducing the representations of others rather than creating “original” works of their own. A strong sense of artistic weariness permeates the novel, a sense that art has “wrought itself out, and come fairly to an end” (124). As the Eternal City, Rome has put the artists “at odds with Nature” and made it impossible for them to imitate her directly. Here art itself becomes a “second and stronger Nature . . . a stepmother, whose crafty tenderness has taught us to despise the bountiful and wholesome ministration of our true parent” (MOM, 247). Here “whenever man has hewn a stone, Nature forthwith relinquishes her right to it, and never lays her finger on it again. Age after age finds it bare and naked, in the barren sunshine, and leaves it so” (MF, 165). The result is works of art that “make us miserably desperate,” “pathetic relics,” and “dim ghosts,” signs of the death of the body rather than “symbols of the living spirit” (303).

Seen from the perspective of Rome’s ruins, culture no longer represents the noble dream of the reconciliation of spirit and world but stands as an example of the distance that separates man from his lost origins. The Marble Faun sets out to reveal the
enchantments in which we live by exposing the spell of ruin that generates them all. Consider, for example, the grounds of the Villa Borghese which offer to “all who breathe the Roman air” an opportunity “to taste the languid enjoyment of the daydream that they call life” (70). Here man has arranged the landscape so artfully that his transforming powers seem to bring him closer to nature rather than to separate him from it. Here there is “enough of human care . . . bestowed long ago, and still bestowed, to prevent wildness from growing into deformity; and the result is an ideal landscape, a woodland scene, that seems to have been projected out of a poet’s mind” (72). Here the “soft turf of a beautiful seclusion” (70) offers welcomed relief from the “stony-hearted streets” (73) of Rome. Here the “ancient dust, the mouldiness of Rome . . . the hard pavements, the smell of ruin, and decaying generations; the chill palaces, the convent-bells, the heavy incense of altars . . . [rise] from . . . consciousness like a cloud” (74). Consequently people of all social ranks and nationalities may meet and celebrate their shared freedom. No longer separated by artificial distinctions, they are able to participate in a “sylvan dance” which celebrates a new transparency and total reciprocity. “Here, as it seemed, had the Golden Age come back again, within the precincts of this sunny glade; thawing mankind out of their cold formalities; releasing them from irksome restraint; mingling them together in such childlike gaiety, that new flowers . . . sprang up beneath their footsteps” (88).

Unfortunately, however, such visions of harmony are the result of a mystification produced by the hallucinating air of a present freed from its ties to past and future. “Tomorrow will be time enough to come back to my reality,” Miriam decides. “Is the past so indestructible?—the future so immitigable” (82)? And as she gives herself up to the “magic” (87) of the moment, reality seems transformed into fantasy. But this experience is no more than a delusion. The grounds of the “Suburban Villa” cannot duplicate the landscape of the unfallen world because they are the products of artifice and decay. “Scattered here and there, with
careless artifice, stand old alters, bearing Roman inscriptions. . . . What a strange idea . . . to construct artificial ruins in Rome, the native soil of ruin! But even these sportive imitations, wrought by man in emulation of what Time has done to temples and palaces, are perhaps centuries old" (72-73). As a result of this artifice, the grounds are “pensive, lovely, dreamlike, enjoyable, and sad” (73). And adding to the “dreamlike melancholy that haunts the spot” (73) is malaria, a curse which insures that it will never be the “home-scenery of any human being” (73) for it can be safely visited only in winter and early spring.

Initially, then, the grounds were the product of a vision that sought a partial reconciliation of man and nature through the employment of a mild irony. They were designed not as a Quixotic attempt to recover a moment of lost plenitude but in an attempt to come to terms with that loss by reflecting on it. The result is the creation of a place where man seeks partially to alleviate his alienation by indulging in a gentle nostalgia for the lost unity. His “sportive imitations” of the effects of time, he hopes, will place him outside those effects and protect him from them. But this is a possibility that is put into question by the narrator’s description of the final moments of the sylvan dance.

Or it [the dance] was like the sculptured scene on the front and sides of a sarcophagus, where, as often as any other device, a festive procession mocks the ashes and white bones that are treasured up, within. You might take it for a marriage-pageant; but, after a while, if you look attentively at those merry-makers, following them from end to end of the marble coffin, you doubt whether their gay movement is leading them to a happy close. . . . Always, some tragic incident is shadowed forth, or thrust sidelong into the spectacle; and when once it has caught your eye, you can look no more at the festal portions of the scene, except with reference to this one slightly suggested doom and sorrow. (88-89).

Here art functions as a mystified defensive strategy that seeks to offer an escape from the destructive effects of time. Like the
succession of discontinuous movements of the sylvan dance each of which “had a grace which might have been worth putting into marble, for the long delight of days to come” (85), the figures on the sarcophagus seem to imply the supremacy of art over nature through the transcendance of the effects of temporal duration. The “unweariable steps” (88) of the dancers mock the “Demon of Weariness” (336) who haunts the streets of Rome in the same way that the figures on the sarcophagus mock the “ashes and white bones” that it contains. However, at the very moment that man is celebrating his powers of renewal, the destructive forces of time are secretly at work. Death appears as a haunting shadow, as a disturbing echo or suggestion, and its presence disenchant, since from the point of view of death all human activity has the “character of fantasy” (90). “The spell being broken, it was now only that old tract of pleasure-ground, close by the people’s gate of Rome; a tract where crimes and calamities of ages, the many battles, blood recklessly poured out, and deaths of myriads, have corrupted all the soil, creating an influence that makes the air deadly to human lungs” (90).

The “suburban Gardens,” then, can offer no real escape from the threatening atmosphere of Rome. The “enchanted ground” (75) at best can provide no more than a moment’s mystification, and the disenchantment that inevitably follows it invalidates the mildly ironic vision that produced the grounds in the first place. And once the spell is broken the pain of human relations overwhelms the effects of “careless artifice” (72).

A moment afterwards [after the appearance of Miriam’s model], Donatello was aware that she had retired from the dance. He hastened towards her and flung himself on the grass, beside the stone-bench on which Miriam was sitting. But a strange distance and unapproachableness had all at once enveloped her; and, though he saw her within reach of his arm, yet the light of her eyes seemed as far off as that of a star; nor was there any warmth in the melancholy smile with which she regarded him. (89)
Donatello and Miriam have not been able to use the artificial gardens to bridge the “great chasm” (207) that separates them. He, it is true, is the representation of a happier time when a closer relationship with nature was possible and seems able even now to identify with the nonself, but that sense of identification can never lead him toward another person. Indeed it is his commitment to another self that destroys his identification with nature. However, an awareness of the distance between nature and self does not insure that interpersonal contacts will be easier to establish, although this is Donatello’s and Miriam’s initial assumption. Their shared glance that condemns the model, seems at first to establish a “new sympathy” that “annihilated all other ties” and “knits” their “heart-strings together” (175).

“I feel it Miriam,” said Donatello. “We draw one breath; we live one life.”

“Only yesterday,” continued Miriam; “nay, only a short half-hour ago, I shivered in icy solitude. No friendship, no sisterhood, could come near enough to keep the warmth within my heart. In an instant, all is changed. There can be no more loneliness.” (175)

As with their experience at the “Suburban Villa,” however, this sense of wholeness is a delusion, the result of a “moment of rapture” that ends with the appearance of the corpse of their victim. At this point Miriam can no longer “bring his mind into sympathy with hers” (197), and her words of love and devotion are met with a “heavy silence” (198).

But if human separateness cannot be overcome either by distancing oneself through art from the destructive forces of life or by violating civilization’s laws of restraint, perhaps the forms and usages of culture can themselves be used to mediate between isolated selves. Miriam and Donatello explore this possibility when they participate in the “scenic and ceremonial” (436) carnival near the end of the novel. Having failed in their earlier
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attempts in the suburban villa to transform themselves into faun and nymph, they now adorn themselves with masks and costumes and become “the Peasant and the Contadina” (439). Perhaps the “sympathetic mirth” (438) of others, the “sympathetic exhilaration of so many people’s cheerfulness” (324) will enable them to bridge the distance that separates them. In contrast to the magic of the sylvan dance which thaws the participants out of their cold formalities and mingles them together in a “childlike gaiety” (88), the spell of the carnival seeks to unite people by recognizing and exaggerating the distance that separates them from nature and each other. Here one finds “orang-outangs; bear-headed, bull-headed, and dog-headed individuals; faces that would have been human, but for their enormous noses . . . and all other imaginable kinds of monstrosity and exaggeration” (446). These disguises hardly represent nostalgic attempts to recover the lost resemblance between man and nature. Rather they imply a comic recognition of the differences between the two realms and are an implicit affirmation of the superiority of the human. People are brought closer together when any assertion of a resemblance between the human and natural is made to seem untenable. In a similar way, the other costumes and masks, which from the point of view of unclothed nature imply human separateness and civilized restraint, in the context of the carnival suggest relief from the burdens of class and profession and protection from the dangers of the threatening gaze of others, for they allow individuals to form a “mad, merry stream of human life” (439).

However, the carnival, too, is the product of a deceitful magic that covers a “stern and black reality” with “fanciful thoughts” (428) and the “sympathetic mirth” (438) that it generates is “like our self-deceptive pretense of jollity at a threadbare joke” (437). The sugar-plums that the participants throw at one another “were concocted mostly of lime, with a grain of oat or some other worthless kernal in the midst” (439), and the carnival flowers, which have been “gathered and tied up by sordid hands,” are “wilted,” “muddy,” and “defiled . . . with the wicked
filth of Rome” (440). The carnival, in short, is the “emptiest of mockeries” (437) composed of a host of absurd figures who in “pretending to sympathize” (446) with one another only make more obvious the absence of any real sympathy. Miriam, a participant in the “sad frolic” (446), hides a “tear-stained face” beneath her mask and speaks with a “profound sadness in her tone” (448). Appropriately, she and Donatello are arrested by the authorities at the height of the revelry, and their arrest is misinterpreted as “some frolic of the Carnival, carried a little too far” (451).

A deceiving magic is present too in the activities of the Catholic Church. Like the carnival, it is “traditionary not actual” (436) and is “alive, this present year, only because it has existed through centuries gone by” (436). It stands, therefore, as another example of absence, for it has lost the “dignity and holiness of its origins” (345). In the place of “genuine medicants” (345) for the sick soul, it can offer only “cordials” (344) and “sedatives” (345). St. Peter’s Cathedral contains no “cure ... for a sick soul, but it would make an admirable atmospheric hospital for sick bodies” (369). And the deceitful magic that seeks to substitute the physical for the spiritual also attempts to transform a theocentric relationship into an interpersonal one.

Hilda saw peasants, citizens, soldiers, nobles, women with bare heads, ladies in their silks, entering the churches, individually, kneeling for moments, or for hours, and directing their inaudible devotions to the shrine of some Saint of their own choice. In his hallowed person, they felt themselves possessed of an own friend in Heaven. They were too humble to approach the Deity directly. Conscious of their unworthiness, they asked the mediation of their sympathizing patron, who, on the score of his ancient martyrdom, and after many ages of celestial life, might venture to talk with the Divine Presence almost as friend with friend. (346-47)

The sympathy generated by such a relationship is as much a mystification as that produced by the sylvan dance and the carnival.
Donatello kneeling in the public square of Perugia in front of the statue of Pope Julius the Third receives the “bronze Pontiff’s benediction” (315) as he seems by his “look and gesture” (324) to approve the young Italian’s union with Miriam, only to be separated from her and imprisoned by the “priestly rulers” (465) of Rome. Similarly, Hilda, seeking relief from her troubled conscience, receives the benediction of the old priest who hears her confession and later becomes a “prisoner” (466) in the convent of the Sacre-Couer watched over by that same priest. The forms of the church, in other words, no longer derive authority from a higher power; its “mighty machinery” (345) is managed by human engineers, and it operates in a world where things have lost their analogical senses. High and low no longer indicate the directions of salvation and damnation; the Palazzo del Torre does not “sink into the earth” (400) when the lamp of the virgin is extinguished, as a priest had insisted that it would. Hilda’s tower is no more symbolic than Donatello’s. One is a “dove-cote” (54), the other an “owl-tower” (252), one a shrine to the virgin, the other a “strong-hold of times long past” (215), and both are “square,” “lofty,” and “massive” (51, 214), and Kenyon, standing in one tower, is reminded of the other “turret that ascended into the sky of the summer afternoon” (264). The point, of course, is that neither Hilda’s tower with the shrine and doves nor Donatello’s with the crucifix and death’s head allows them to avoid sin or to deal with its consequences. Both structures mock man’s “feeble efforts to soar upward” (256), for they imply the absence of any sort of hierarchy. Donatello finds relief only when he leaves his ancestral tower for the crowded marketplace of Perugia and Hilda comes “down from her old tower, to be herself enshrined and worshipped as a household Saint, in the light of her husband’s fireside” (461).

The actions of the fallen innocents, then, seem to suggest that the problem of distance can be solved if it is at first secularized. Perhaps the other attempts to overcome it fail because it is seen
as a lack, an emptiness, the result of a loss rather than an indication of "human promise" (461). Perhaps what people must do is to renounce the towers, the ceremonies, and representations of the old world, which in seeking to overcome absence only succeed in signifying it, and turn with Hilda and Kenyon toward the new world. To make that turn, however, is to abandon the interpretive enterprise altogether. Near the end of the novel, Kenyon, whose interest in Donatello is the source of the narrator’s, offers an interpretation of the meaning of his friend’s adventures.

It seems the moral of his story, that human beings, of Donatello’s character, compounded especially for happiness, have no longer any business on earth, or elsewhere. Life has grown so sadly serious, that such men must change their nature, or else perish, like the antediluvian creatures that required, as the condition of their existence, a more summer-like atmosphere than ours. (459–60)

Hilda, however, who is “hopeful and happy-natured” (460), rejects his interpretation as too dark, and Kenyon, who loves her, willingly abandons it and offers instead a reading based on Miriam’s interpretation of Donatello.

“Then, here is another; take your choice!” said the sculptor, remembering what Miriam had recently suggested, in reference to the same point. “He perpetrated a great crime; and his remorse, gnawing into his soul, had awakened it; developing a thousand high capabilities, moral and intellectual, which we never should have dreamed of asking for, within the scanty compass of the Donatello whom we knew.”

“Here comes my perplexity,” continued Kenyon. “Sin has educated Donatello, and elevated him. Is sin, then . . . like Sorrow, merely an element of human education, through which we struggle to a higher and purer state than we could otherwise have attained? Did Adam fall, that we might ultimately rise to a far loftier Paradise than his?” (460)
But Hilda, "shocked... beyond words," by a theory which makes a "mockery... not only of all religious sentiment, but of moral law" (460) rejects this interpretation more emphatically than she had the first. At this point Kenyon abandons his interpretive quest altogether, faces the meaninglessness of his exiled condition, and looks to Hilda to provide a ground for his existence.

I never did believe it [his interpretation]! But the mind wanders wild and wide; and, so lonely as I live and work, I have neither pole-star above, nor light of cottage-windows here below, to bring me home. Were you my guide, my counsellor, my inmost friend, with that white wisdom which clothes you as with a celestial garment, all would go well. Oh, Hilda, guide me home. (460-61)

Here, as at the end of The House of the Seven Gables, the enchantment of love is offered in the place of an unequivocal interpretation of the novel's meaning. Hilda does not solve Kenyon's problems, but she smoothes them away, leading him to project on the rest of the world the light of his own happiness. To him the world now seems full of human promise, and he plans to turn his back on the problem of the meaning of Donatello's adventures and return to his "own land" (461). The narrator, however, puts the dream of the lovers' happiness into question by pointing to the possibility that at their return they may discover that their "native air has lost its invigorating quality, and that life has shifted its reality to the spot where we have deemed ourselves only temporary residents" (461). He recognizes, in other words, that the idea of a home, a "house and moderate garden-spot of one's own" (HSG, 136) is as much an ideal out of reach, as much "beyond the scope of man's actual possessions" (MF, 73) as is the possibility of an unequivocal interpretation.

The ending of The Marble Faun, then, seems to validate Kenyon's earlier assertion that the "seven- branched golden candlestick, the holy candlestick of the Jews," which is capable of
providing the “whole world...the illumination which it needs” (370–71), is lost forever. Nor can the flickering light of the domestic fireside serve as an adequate substitute, for it is not capable of illuminating the “sevenfold sepulchral gloom” (462) cast by the Etruscan bracelet that Miriam sends Hilda as a bridal gift.

Still there is the possibility that the narrator may be able to provide the answers that his characters seek unsuccessfully. Although his position is not the privileged one of the “disembodied listener” (HSG, 30) of The House of the Seven Gables since he is at times seen as well as seeing, he is nevertheless able to cross the distance that separates Miriam, Hilda, Kenyon, and Donatello one from the other, to view the conduct of each “from his own point of view, or from any side-point” (MF, 385). Perhaps this ability will allow him to offer a final and complete interpretation of Donatello’s adventures. Unfortunately, however, the narrator knows little more about his characters than they know of each other. For example, he overhears part of a private conversation between Miriam and her mysterious Model that takes place in the solitude of the Borghese Grove, but the fragments of speech that he hears makes their relationship not less but more inscrutable.

Owning, it may be, to this moral estrangement—this chill remoteness of their position—there have come to us but a few vague whisperings of what passed in Miriam’s interview, that afternoon, with the sinister personage who had dogged her footsteps ever since the visit to the catacomb. In weaving these mystic utterances into a continuous scene, we undertake a task resembling, in its perplexity, that of gathering up and piecing together the fragments of a letter, which has been torn and scattered to the winds. Many words of deep significance—many entire sentences, and these possibly the most important ones—have flown too far on the winged breeze, to be recovered. If we insert our own conjectural amendments, we perhaps give a purport utterly at variance with the true one. Yet, unless we attempt something in this way, there must remain
an unsightly gap, and a lack of continuousness and dependence in our narrative; so that it would arrive at certain inevitable catastrophes without due warning of their imminence. (92–93)

The problem of writing is a problem of revealing significant connections and relations, of unraveling and reweaving the myriad threads of human lives. The "life line[s]" of the characters whose fates are to form the figure in the tapestry of *The Marble Faun* are, like those of Miriam and her Model, knotted and "twisted" (259) together: "Our fates cross and are entangled. The threads are twisted into a strong cord, which is dragging us to an evil doom. Could the knots be severed, we might escape. But neither can your slender fingers untie those knots, nor my masculine force break them" (95) Like the air of Rome which is "full of kindred melodies that encountered one another, and twined themselves into a broad, vague music, out of which no single strain could be disentangled" (163), the "miserable entangled" (332) lives of the characters do not offer an intelligible pattern. The connections between them are tangled rather than significant ones, and the narrator must unravel and reweave the threads of relationship so that random lines of action are made to form a single structure. And this is as much a process of reading and interpretation as a process of writing, for it is also the one that is used to discover the significance of both natural symbols and allegorical structures. An "old grape-vine...clinging fast around its supporting tree" has a "moral" that "you might twist...to more than one grave purpose, as you saw how the knotted, serpentine growth imprisoned within its strong embrace the friend that had supported its tender infancy" (291), and the "series of frescoes" on the walls of the Monti Beni house are "bound together" by the "links of an allegory...which it would be impossible, or, at least, very wearisome to unravel" (227).

However, as the above passage implies, to unravel or untangle may be to tear or break, and hence in the novel the themes of
tangling and fragmenting are joined. As a romance of Rome, it is a narrative pieced together from "Fragmentary Sentences," for that city is a place of "strewn fragments of antique statues, headless and legless torsos, and busts that have invariably lost . . . the nose" (37), a "confusion of pillars, arches, pavements, and shattered blocks and shafts—the crumbs of various ruin, dropt from the devouring maw of Time" (164), a place where the forms of Western culture "fall asunder" into a "heap of worthless fragments" (424), "pathetic relics" (303) that are no more than "broken rubbish" (110). The writer, therefore, through the magic of his art must try to convert a "heap of forlorn fragments into a whole" (423) so that the fragmentation will be replaced by a formal and thematic continuity, unconnected pieces joined together in a carefully structured narrative. Needless to say the pattern produced by such novelistic weaving is likely to be both fragile and unconvincing.

The Gentle Reader, we trust, would not thank us for one of those minute elucidations, which are so tedious, and, after all, so unsatisfactory, in clearing up the romantic mysteries of a story. He is too wise to insist upon looking closely at the wrong side of the tapestry, after the right one has been sufficiently displayed to him, woven with the best of the artist's skill, and cunningly arranged with a view to the harmonious exhibition of its colours. If any brilliant, or beautiful, or even tolerable, effect have been produced, this pattern of kindly Readers will accept it at its worth, without tearing its web apart, with the idle purpose of discovering how its threads have been knit together; for the sagacity, by which he is distinguished, will long ago have taught him that any narrative of human action and adventure—whether we call it history or romance—is certain to be a fragile handiwork, more easily rent than mended. (455)

To seek the meaning of his story, the narrator implies here, is to violate it in some way, to tear it, or perhaps change it, for narratives are fragile structures whose beautiful effects must be
accepted at face value. However the "beautiful . . . effect" that the writer works to produce is that which invites the very violence he deplores, for it is the "gleam of beauty" that "induce[s] the beholder to attempt unravelling" the "scheme and purport" (306) of its figures. In a postlapsarian world there is no innocent reading, no intuitive understanding that can grasp the "inestimable something, that constitutes the life and soul" (60) of the work of art without disturbing its surface. There is, in short, no Gentle Reader. That "all-sympathizing critic" (1), that "Gentle, Kind, Benevolent, Indulgent, and most Beloved and Honored Reader" (2) belongs to that time of lost plenitude, that "Golden Age, before mankind was burdened with sin and sorrow" (84). He has now "withdrawn to the Paradise of Gentle Readers" and is available if at all only in the form of "some mossy gravestone, inscribed with a half-obliterated name, which I shall never recognize" (2). The death of the Gentle Reader, then, is the equivalent for the narrator of the loss of sympathy that he recounts in his narrative, a loss which in his case as in those of his characters complicates the problems of representing and interpreting. He, too, is an exile who looks to "ceremony" to help replace the "apprehensive sympathy" (2) that once bound writer and reader together and in the process discovers that ruin must be the source of his creativity.

The story of his loss is narrated in the preface to The Marble Faun, which is, like the novel itself, a nostalgic lament for a lost world of sympathetic involvement. It begins with a backward glance toward earlier prefaces that were "addressed nominally to the Public at large," but were really intended for that "one congenial friend . . . that all-sympathizing critic" (1) who was to receive the "scrolls which I flung upon whatever wind was blowing in the faith that they would find him out" (2). But now since he no longer is able to "presume upon the existence of that friend of friends, that unseen brother of the soul, whose apprehensive sympathy . . . encouraged [him] to be egotistical in [his] Prefaces," he will replace the "familiar" with the ceremonial and curtain himself off from the reader. "I stand upon ceremony,
now, and, after stating a few particulars about the work which is here offered to the Public, must make my most reverential bow, and retire behind the curtain” (2).

However, it is worth noting that the pre-texts, which from Hawthorne’s present perspective seem to embody a lost plenitude, specifically reject that possibility. In “The Old Manse” he denies being one of those writers who “serve up their own hearts delicately fried, with brainsauce, as a tidbit for their beloved public” (MOM, 33), and in “The Custom House” he rejects the practice of those authors who “indulge themselves in such confidential depths of revelation as could fittingly be addressed, only and exclusively, to the one heart and mind of perfect sympathy; as if the printed book, thrown at large on the wide world, were certain to find out the divided segment of the writer’s own nature, and complete the circle of his existence by bringing him into communication with it” (SL, 3-4). Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, most of Hawthorne’s prefaces suggest that the creative energy of romance derives from a tension between the hidden and the shown, that it, like the scarlet A, can reveal and conceal simultaneously, thereby making it possible for a writer to speak to a potentially hostile audience about matters of which silence is the safest form of expression and for the reader to respond to his words without the fear of becoming his mystified victim.7

In the preface to The Marble Faun these earlier strategies of indirection are replaced by a myth of original innocence and loss that nostalgically posits a moment when writer and reader were free of the burden of interpretation and reduces the present to a barren world of ruins and fragments that cannot be shaped into an ordered and consistent form and hence precludes any interpretive dialogue between writer and reader. Although this preface echoes earlier ones in denying any attempt “to describe local manners” (HSG, 3) and in pointing to the importance of establishing a “poetic or fairy precinct” (MF, 3) that will provide a “foothold between fiction and reality” (BR, 2) the emphasis is significantly different. The focus falls not on the question of how
to “dream strange things, and make them look like truth” (SL, 36), not on the mysterious process of “creating the semblance of a world out of airy matter” (37), but rather on the more prosaic problem of revision. The romance is “sketched out” in Italy, is “rewritten and prepared for the press in England” (MF, 2), and it is this process of “reproducing the book, on the broad and dreary sands of Redcar, with the gray German Ocean tumbling in upon me, and the northern blast always howling in my ears” (3) that dominates the preface. And this process is not one of transforming substance into shadow, of building castles in the air but of trying to manage the “realities of the moment” (HSG, 3). For the “actual reminiscences,” which in earlier work had been used simply to give a “more lifelike tint to the fancy-sketch” (BR, 1) now become primary. The “various Italian objects, antique, pictorial, and statuesque that “fill the mind everywhere in Italy . . . cannot easily be kept from flowing out upon the page” (MF, 3), and it is these “Italian reminicences” (3), “reminiscences . . . broken into fragments, and hopelessly intermingled” (24), that dominate in The Marble Faun. As Thomas Woodson has observed, the novel is pervasively indebted to The French and Italian Notebooks. Nine-tenths of its chapters include material taken directly from the Notebooks, and some consist almost entirely of such material. Moreover, the notebooks themselves are filled with the same sense of weariness and despair that pervades the novel, a weariness brought on both by the Roman scene and the act of writing itself.

From the beginning of his writing career Hawthorne had associated romance with the “old countries” (BR, 1) and with the idea of a “Faery Land, so like the real world, that, in a suitable remoteness, one cannot well tell the difference . . . ” (BR, 2), but he now comes to see that such a realm depends on ruin and death. “Romance and poetry . . . need ruin to make them grow” (MF, 3), and “there is reason to suspect that a people are waning to decay and ruin, the moment that their life becomes fascinating either in the poet’s imagination or the painter’s eye” (296). Moreover, if any “gloom within the heart corresponds to the
spell of ruin, that has been thrown over the site of ancient empire," if there is "ruin in your heart" (409), then "all of the ponderous gloom of the Roman Past will pile itself upon that spot, and crush you down" (410), as a "mean reality" thrusts itself "through life's brightest illusions" (303).

Standing amid so much ancient dust, it is difficult to spare the reader the commonplaces of enthusiasm, on which hundreds of tourists have already insisted. Over this half-worn pavement, and beneath this Arch of Titus, the Roman armies had trodden in their outward march, to fight battles, a world's width away. Returning, victorious, with royal captives and inestimable spoil, a Roman Triumph, that most gorgeous pageant of earthly pride, had streamed and flaunted, in hundredfold succession, over these same flag-stones, and through this yet stalwart archway. It is politic, however, to make few allusions to such a Past; nor, if we would create an interest in the characters of our story, is it wise to suggest how Cicero's foot may have stept on yonder stone, nor how Horace was wont to stroll near by, making his footsteps chime with the measure of the ode that was ringing in his mind. The very ghosts of that massive and stately epoch have so much density, that the actual people of to-day seem the thinner of the two, and stand more ghostlike by the arches and columns, letting the rich sculpture be discerned through their ill-compacted substance. (159–60)

This passage is interesting because of the way that it both suggests and reverses a number of familiar Hawthornian themes. Here, as in the prefaces to The Scarlet Letter and The Blithedale Romance, Hawthorne focuses on the problem of the ontological status of his characters and the nature of his reader's response to them. But the difficulties here do not derive from the writer's attempt to "fling [himself] back into another age" (SL, 37) or from his concern that the "beings of imagination will be compelled to show themselves in the same category as actually living mortals; a necessity that generally renders the paint and
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pasteboard of their composition too painfully discernible" (BR, 2). The reverse is true. Here the past imposes itself with the same insistence that the present had done at the Custom House. There the “petty and wearisome incidents” of “daily life” had “tarnished” the “mirror” of the writer’s “imagination” (SL, 34), making it impossible for him to give life to “dead corpses” (34) “imparted” to him by Surveyor Pue’s “ghostly hand” (33). But here it is the past that renders the present fragile and insubstantial that fills the mind and flows upon the page with such mass and density that it makes a ghost of the writer’s own voice. “Side by side with the massiveness of the Roman Past, all matters, that we handle or dream of, now-a-days, look evanescent and visionary alike” (MF, 6). So it is that the “four individuals . . . whose fortunes” are “to interest the reader” (5) seem inconsequential in Rome, for, like the “Demon of Weariness, who haunts great picture-galleries,” the city possesses the “magic that is the destruction of all other magic” (336).

The romancer, then, becomes the victim of that city that gives romance its name, as his art is overwhelmed and disenchanted by the objects that “fill the mind everywhere in Italy,” objects that possess a “malignant spell” (338) that “puts people in mind of their earthly necessities and incites them to defile therewith whatever temple, column, ruined palace or triumphal arch may be nearest at hand” (FIN, 480-81). In this context the creatures of the imagination lose their interest and significance. The characters whose fortunes are to interest the reader are introduced “standing in . . . the sculpture-gallery in the Capitol, at Rome” (5), a place Hawthorne describes in the Notebooks as having “always had a dreary and depressing effect on me” (FIN, 511) and their story is concluded (in a parallel chapter that bears the same title as the first) in the Pantheon which “stands almost at the central point of the labyrinthine intricacies of the modern city, and often presents itself before the bewildered stranger, when he is in search of other objects” (MF, 456). The setting, in short, overwhelms the story, the fragmented events of which “never explain themselves, either as regards their origin or their
tendency” (455). The text that is discontinuously woven from fragmentary sentences may have no magic in its web, and its reader, therefore, may be led to unravel it motivated only by the “idle purpose of discovering how its threads have been knit together” (455).