Hawthorne and the Real

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Thus, between two countries, we have none at all, or only that little space of either, in which we finally lay down our discontented bones. It is wise, therefore, to come back betimes—or never.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Marble Faun* (1860)

Hawthorne’s career . . . had few perceptible points of contact with what is called the world, with public events, with the manners of his time, even with the life of his neighbours.

Henry James, *Nathaniel Hawthorne* (1879)

Henry James’s judgment of Hawthorne’s provincialism is taken too often for the truth. Although Hawthorne cultivated his isolation, even helped mythologize his dreamy detachment from the world, he was both a man of the world and the author of fiction that focuses with special intensity on the conflict among peoples from different worlds. Today we are interested in the history of our current global situation and the transnational forces that challenge the nation state and other traditional sociopolitical organizations. In order to understand these phenomena, we would do well to study Hawthorne’s fiction, which represents an older world transformed by the new forces of modernization, first announced by the industrial revolution in England and made more urgent and dangerous in the expansionist frenzy of Jacksonian America. What makes Hawthorne especially worthy of reconsideration in today’s debates
over globalization is his conflation of the new U.S. nation with its transnational others and of the allegorical transposition of the misty European past into the democratic (and usually U.S.) present. Hawthorne usually does this work in a politically conservative manner, and it is just his ability to “Americanize” international and transnational issues in this manner that makes him relevant to our present situation.

Hawthorne appears to prefer the premodern era and its relative stability, and his characteristic narrative strategy of retreating to some moonlit, fantastic region also involves his return to a forgotten or misremembered past. His historical romances quite precisely manipulate our tendency to forget the past by rendering it remote and fantastic, thus irrelevant to our contemporary concerns, an effect heightened by a modernization process focused quite narrowly on present accomplishments and future possibilities. But Hawthorne wrote his historical romances often to dramatize just this modern inclination to romanticize the past for the sake of ignoring its continuing effects in the present. Even before Richard Chase famously identified the curious combination of romance and realism in Hawthorne’s fiction as a distinctive formal characteristic of American literature, Hawthorne was interpreted as a writer whose historical consciousness depends upon the tension and conflict between realistic and romantic uses of the past (Chase 1957, 67–79). Understanding as he does how powerfully human beings are inclined to delude themselves, especially where the past is concerned, Hawthorne finds literature an especially powerful, perhaps unique, means of working through our fantasies of the past toward more precise and useful interpretations of history.

Hawthorne thus renders illusory the debate between the Ancients and the Moderns, insofar as the concerns of the present are usually traceable to a forgotten historical past still operating secretly within our everyday lives. This is “The Skeleton in the Closet” Harry Levin chooses as his title for the chapter on Hawthorne in The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville (1958), and that skeleton is the memento mori buried in our unconscious that Hawthorne seeks to revive, if only to help us understand the consequences of repressing and forgetting it. Levin considers this journey into the unconscious to be a “cosmic adventure in introspection, as much as in exploration,” and thus one means by which Hawthorne can be redeemed from Henry James’s judgment of his “provincialism” (Levin 1958, 100). To be sure, this interior voyage tends to substitute personal for political history, psychobiography for ideology, often in ways meant to be read allegorically from one domain to the other, but often for that very reason ambiguous in its broader national and transnational significance.

Yet if we remain attentive to the allegorical character of the psychological
journey in Hawthorne’s fiction, then we can understand this adventure as a series of related border crossings between the conscious and the unconscious, the present and the past, the individual and the citizen, the nation and the alien. Difficult as Hawthorne sometimes makes it for the reader to follow these allegorical links, he also teaches us an important lesson often lost in more recent discussions of transnationality: to go beyond the “nation” is not merely to connect with other nations, but to consider the great variety of different social formations and personal identities excluded by a particular nation and nationalism in general. In the case of the United States in the nineteenth century, these exclusions are quite various, often interrelated, and surprisingly well represented in Hawthorne’s fiction. Taken together, the extranational social and personal alternatives in Hawthorne often serve a utopian function, what Sacvan Bercovitch has termed “the ideological marks of the unthinkable (un-American, anti- or nonliberal)” and thus pose “the ideological prospects for dissent, the grounds for a resistant subjectivity that is potentially . . . the source of radical insight and social change” (Bercovitch 1991, 153).

Pearl’s mysterious marriage into a European aristocratic class “unknown to English heraldry,” yet made possible in large part by Roger Chillingworth’s bequest to her of “a very considerable amount of property, both here and in England,” exemplifies this sort of transnational utopianism in ways that are both radically ambiguous and in certain respects allegorically clear and distinct (I 262, 261). Some new “aristocracy” may possibly grow out of the tragic narrative of original sin told emblematically in The Scarlet Letter and realize thereby the millennial promise of “New England” in America. In Hawthorne’s Calvinist version of American romanticism, the lesson to be learned is not too difficult to understand: the United States must realize the liberal individualism seventeenth-century New England Puritanism failed to produce, even though its theology promised such moral self-reliance. For whatever reasons, historical or theological, Puritanism did not liberate its followers from the feudal hierarchies and spiritual dependencies of Europe. Hester’s insistent display of her original sin in the figure of the scarlet letter, even when the elders no longer require it, reminds us that she is a prophetess of democratic individualism, including full responsibility for her human weaknesses as the sign of a new beginning and humanity.

Bercovitch complicates this liberal individualism, which is certainly compatible with American transcendentalism and the general ethos of Jacksonian America, by insisting upon its utopian dimensions: “That liberal both/and includes an alternative either/or: the concept of an un-American place of freedom, Europe; the possibility of an American
nonliberal future, some still undetermined ‘surer ground of mutual happiness’ whose structures will contravene those of actual individualism” (Bercovitch 1991, 152). But the abstraction of liberal individualism from its historical and geopolitical possibility in nineteenth-century America is Hawthorne’s way of contributing to what today we recognize as cultural colonialism, whereby the promise of the American self-reliant individual would become the model for the rest of the world and “America” would transcend its national destiny by achieving the spiritual or religious empire that is implicit in Hawthorne’s imaginative transumption of Hester’s otherwise restricted destiny at the edge of the North American wilderness. Not surprisingly, literature is the utopian space in which such imaginative projection best occurs, so that Hawthorne’s romantic regionalism is a trick that serves expansionist political and cultural purposes.

The Custom-House’s upper floor in Hawthorne’s famous preface to The Scarlet Letter is the locus classicus of this aesthetic, transnational space. More explicitly liminal than either the study where Hawthorne wrote Mosses from an Old Manse or the other marginal spaces he claimed for himself as author, the Custom-House marks precisely the national border as the model for other boundaries, such as those dividing past from present, civilization from wilderness, divine from human, spiritual from material. Yet such precise distinctions belong to the official and commercial work on the ground floor of the Custom-House, where the identification of products according to their national origins is crucial for the imposition of duties and tariffs and the general regulation of what is permissible and forbidden within the republic. It is not surprising that Hawthorne represents the lives of the workers on this level as full of ennui and lacking in real sociability and conversation, epitomized by the octogenarian Inspector, General Miller, “the patriarch” (16), whose preternatural youth and health grotesquely represent “the rare perfection of his animal nature” at complete odds with humanity: “He possessed no power of thought, no depth of feeling, no troublesome sensibilities; nothing, in short, but a few commonplace instincts, which . . . did duty . . . in lieu of a heart” (117). In typical romantic fashion, Hawthorne quickly transforms this figure of sheer animality, “so earthly and sensuous,” into a mere illusion: “so shallow, so delusive, so impalpable, such an absolute nonentity” in all human respects that matter (18). Hawthorne’s great fear is that his work in the Custom-House will transform his more serious vocation as an imaginative writer into some version of the labor of commodification and classification that has rendered the Inspector so inhuman.

In contrast, the upper floor is structured like an unconscious of both the nation and the author who will attempt to represent it, a ratio established
by parallelism with the Inspector’s patriarchal representation of the U.S. government on the lower floor: “The patriarch, not only of this little squad of officials, but, I am bold to say, of the respectable body of tide-waiters all over the United States—was a certain permanent Inspector” (I 16). Hawthorne names this Inspector General Miller, whose official relationship to these “tide-waiters,” servants of the state, parallels the author’s relationship with his audience, on the understanding that the writer and his readers will transcend the dehumanized conditions of all those toiling on the ground floor. Lauren Berlant has written that “The Custom-House” “can be read as a study in the genealogy of national identity, as it discloses the variety of historical forms that descend on America, in 1850,” including the baser impulses of Jacksonian America on the ground floor and the more utopian desires discoverable on the upper floor (Berlant 1991, 165). This “neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and Imaginary may meet” is obviously intended to represent the more flexible meanings of literature in place of the fixed duties and values imposed on the commercial objects passing through the ground floor of the Custom-House (I 36).

Both Bercovitch and Berlant argue that Hawthorne’s “neutral territory” is the aesthetic space where he attempts to reinvent the U.S. national symbolism (Bercovitch 1991, 115–16; Berlant 1991, 182), but it is also an explicitly, albeit very abstract, transnational space. Whereas the patriarchal Inspector, General Miller, combines military, economic, and legal authorities to “police” the border of the United States, Nathaniel Hawthorne creates what Berlant terms a deliberately “unstable” territory, wherein strictly national concerns are reconnected with colonial history. As he bids farewell to his public service in the Custom-House and commits himself anew to literary work, Hawthorne states directly: “I am a citizen of somewhere else” (I 44). His use of “citizen” in this particular context may not attract much attention beyond the rhetoric of the two competing nationalisms Hawthorne has included in his preface: Jacksonian America’s commercialism and the utopian democracy Hawthorne’s romance promises to revive. But Hawthorne’s definition of the “citizen” is complicated when we recall his extended metaphor of political execution by “the guillotine” to represent both his predecessor, Survey Pue’s, and his own removals from their political offices (41). In one sense, Hawthorne is a “citizen of somewhere else” when he leaves the material world of the Custom-House to enter the realm of his imagination, but it is also a consequence of just such an imaginative act that he links his own citizenship with that of the citoyen declared by the French Revolution.

Hawthorne’s identification with the French Revolution is clearly ironic,
insofar as he links citizenship with the Terror and thus follows the conservative interpretation of how the French revolt against monarchy was a democratic failure. This sober warning about the dangers of populist revolutions, provoked by widespread anxieties in the U.S. regarding the socialist uprisings of 1848 in Europe, takes another transnational turn as Hawthorne compares himself with “Irving’s Headless Horseman,” a version of “my figurative self” (I 43). Hawthorne’s allusion is complex, because by means of it he identifies with American literature’s first internationally recognized author, Washington Irving, with the spectral figure of the Headless Horseman, and with the hapless figure Ichabod Crane, to whom this ghost appears in Irving’s famous “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.” Drawing on old Dutch and German folklore, Irving renders fantastic the rush of modern democracy in Brom Bones’s “Headless Horseman,” even as he represents the schoolteacher Ichabod Crane, “whose mind is haunted by ghost tales reaching back to Puritan times,” as defeated both in his suit for Katrina Van Tassel and his effort to preserve the quiet pastoral world of the Hudson River valley from modernization (David Reynolds 1988, 447).

Insofar as he feels alienated from his literary and imaginative powers in the Custom-House, Hawthorne identifies with Irving’s defeated Ichabod Crane; both undergo symbolic castration, embodied in Hawthorne’s extended metaphor of decapitation and in that “pumpkin” head left behind by Bram Bones to remind Ichabod who has won the game in Irving’s story. By association, then, the U.S. “Terror” may result in part from the trivialization of those imaginative powers Hawthorne claims by association with his greatest American precursor, Washington Irving, and their mutual recovery of the historical past, including Puritan America and its European heritage. Perry Miller has argued that “none of Irving’s admirers” in the 1820s recognized his reliance, verging on plagiarism, on such old German tales as “Peter Klaus” and “Bürger’s Der wilde Jäger” in “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” but the great popularity of Irving’s style in The Sketch Book was based in large part on Irving’s success in invoking venerable European legends and folklore in U.S. settings (Miller 1961, 377).

The charm of Irving’s ghosts and goblins assumes a terrifying moral seriousness in Hawthorne’s interpretation. The U.S. nation risks repeating the sins of its European and colonial past, unless it discovers some means of confronting and overcoming these repressed moral problems. At the conclusion of “The Custom-House,” Hawthorne embodies in his “autobiographical . . . person” these ghostly warnings and poses as “a gentleman who writes from beyond the grave,” right down to his parody of supernatural communications from beyond the mortal realm: “Peace be with all the
world! My blessing on my friends! My forgiveness to my enemies! For I am in the realm of quiet!” (I 44). Hawthorne uses spirit-rapping, mysterious veiled ladies, and other gothic effects in his fiction as metaphors for the aesthetic imagination, unless they are not exposed as frauds. Literature, especially the romance, allows the dead to live again in ways that reverse quite precisely the living death Hawthorne describes as the condition of General Miller and his “tide-waiters” on the ground floor. Like Dickinson’s poetic speaker able to claim “I Heard a Fly Buzz when I Died,” Hawthorne’s author is capable of crossing boundaries conventionally imagined to be absolute: between life and death, present and past, democratic citizenship and aristocratic title (Dickinson 1960, 223–24).

Berlant equates the authorial body with “Hawthorne’s representation of this new ‘state,’” both a metaphor for his ontological condition and for the democratic nation, but this body can claim to be “a citizen of somewhere else” precisely because it offers a model of transnational, cosmopolitan identity (Berlant 1991,185). Far from being the provincial figure doomed to a life of drudgery maintaining proper national and regional borders in the Salem Custom-House, Hawthorne’s “decapitated Surveyor” functions as any good ghost to connect the past with the present and the unconscious with consciousness, which in this specific case links Pue’s service in “his Majesty’s Customs . . . in the Province of Massachusetts Bay” with Hawthorne’s service to the U.S. federal government and the state of Massachusetts (I 30). Both Pue’s and Hawthorne’s missing “heads” turn out to be the texts for which they are responsible. Recalling a story “in a newspaper of recent times . . . of the digging up of [Pue’s] remains in the little grave-yard of St. Peter’s Church,” Hawthorne notes that “nothing . . . was left of my respected predecessor, save an imperfect skeleton, and some fragments of apparel, and a wig of majestic frizzle; which, unlike the head that it once adorned, was in very satisfactory preservation.” It is in the papers Pue leaves behind, including the icon of Hester’s embroidered letter, where Hawthorne “found more traces of Mr. Pue’s mental part, and the internal operations of his head, than the frizzled wig had contained of the venerable skull itself” (I 30). Indeed, the famous scene of authorial investiture wherein Hawthorne places Hester’s letter on his own breast and experiences “a sensation not altogether physical, yet almost so, as of burning heat” seems to confirm that the physical and mental “realities” for which Hawthorne appeals belong to the language of the historical romance, rather than to any natural, biochemical body (I 32).

“The Custom-House” reincarnates the national as an authorial body in the rhetorical language of literature, which Hawthorne claims has the special qualities of transgressing otherwise inviolable boundaries and thus
enabling both author and reader to become “citizens of somewhere else.” In this sense, literature becomes the proper “custom-house” through which cultural and psychological goods circulate far more ambiguously and complexly than ordinary imports and exports do, and for this very reason literature (and the other fine arts, including painting and sculpture) enables readers to identify themselves with a nation (or other bounded community) by establishing relations with other histories and places. For Hawthorne, “American literature” will have to be simultaneously national and transnational, regional only to the extent it is cosmopolitan, historical only insofar as it is romantic. Literature’s transnational purpose in connecting contemporary readers with different “nations,” such as England, Germany, and Italy, is complemented by its *transmigratory* function, which enables the reader to experience spirits of history and ghosts of the past to be imaginatively reincarnated in the characters of a literary fiction, whose temporality is the present.

The cultural anthropologist Akhil Gupta, who has studied cases of Hindu reincarnation, has argued that “taking the ideas and beliefs of reincarnation seriously may raise fundamental questions about western cultural, social, and political theory . . . by forcing to the surface the hidden folk of religious underpinnings of secular social theory” (Gupta 2002, 4; original emphasis). Although western enlightenment reason treats the transmigration of souls as religious superstition, many western literary texts allow us to *reinhabit* past places and bodies either for the mere pleasure of nostalgia or to cope with unresolved historical traumas. This literary contribution to social practice tends to be conservative, insofar as it attempts to regulate a trauma that threatens social order, has for that reason been collectively repressed, and yet by virtue of such forgetting returns to “haunt” us. It is in this theoretical context, then, that I refer to Hawthorne’s use of the literary imagination to transmigrate across the borders of historical time as well as national space, and I propose that other considerations of how the transnational imaginary functions spatially include some treatment of how this transmigratory imaginary works temporally. Because the time-space continuum of the transmigratory and transnational work together, we should pay special attention in literary narratives to the primary sites of such interaction: “characters,” including that of the author.

At one level, we might understand such “transmigration” merely as a complex system of cultural allusion, whereby the English heritage of Hester’s and Dimmesdale’s Puritan Bay Colony continues to operate in the mid-nineteenth-century United States. Traditional interpretations of Hawthorne as a romantic intent on secularizing Puritan theology generally
follow this pattern, so that his allusions in *The Scarlet Letter* to Peter Ramus, Milton, and the traditions of European biblical exegesis should be considered important features of his transnational consciousness. Recognizing such worldly reading as typical of many transcendentalists’ claims to cosmopolitanism, I also want to suggest that Hawthorne’s aesthetic of transmigration has a more complex significance for his work of constructing himself as an American author with transnational ambitions (Rowe 2003, 80–81). Hawthorne often invokes earlier historical periods and their communities to remind us that some of their social and psychological problems still haunt us. Recalling in “The Custom-House” his own ancestors’ responsibility for the trial and execution of witches in colonial Salem, Hawthorne offers the reader a compensatory narrative in *The Scarlet Letter* that both attempts to explain the Puritans’ intolerance and to overcome such prejudices with his own aesthetic claims to moral honesty and self-reliance. Even as he acknowledges his descent from the first Hathorne in America, that “soldier, legislator, judge,” who was remembered by the Quakers as a “bitter persecutor,” and his son, who “inherited the persecuting spirit, and made himself so conspicuous in the martyrdom of the witches, that their blood may fairly be said to have left a stain upon him,” Hawthorne identifies with Hester, whose crime is not witchcraft or even adultery, but finally her stubborn refusal to violate the sanctity of a human heart (19).

Literary transmigration thus enables Hawthorne to claim a different ancestry by means of his historical imagination: one that aligns him with the persecuted and thus frees him from his genealogical ties with his “blood-stained” family history. Indeed, Hawthorne enacts a strategic transvestism when he dons Hester’s scarlet letter in the upper chamber of the Custom-House, anticipating the radical gesture Judith Butler has identified in more recent and explicit acts of gender transgression: “[As] figurative productions, these [gender] identifications constitute impossible desires that figure the body, active principles of incorporation, modes of structuring and signifying the enactment of the lived body in social spaces” (Butler 1990a, 334). In the space and time of Hawthorne’s romance, identifications of all sorts are seen as consequences of individual choices made in response to social laws and conventions. By becoming Hester and feeling in his own body the “burning heat” of both her sin and her sex—his act is ineluctably erotic, especially because he uses the fetish “A” instead of Hester’s visual or textual image—Hawthorne dons her radical, creative power as a “prophetess,” in the same way as he has imbued her with his imaginative power as an author. Indeed, transmigration always works dialectically between past and present, thereby positing an imaginable or
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utopian future. Just as Hester will transform her potential for overt social revolution into the subtler, psychological transformation she helps Dimmesdale achieve on his own and in the “family” tableau they constitute with Pearl, however tenuously and briefly, so Hawthorne will change his appeal in “The Custom-House” for a political revolution in Jacksonian America into his narrative version of what I term “aesthetic dissent”: “the romantic idealist assumption that rigorous reflection on the processes of thought and representation constitutes in itself a critique of social reality and effects a transformation of the naive realism that confuses truth with social convention” (Rowe 1997, 1).

The rhetorical process through which Hawthorne disengages himself from the commercial values of Jacksonian America and his family ancestry to which he traces such social degradation is necessarily complicated, because it involves an aesthetic sleight-of-hand by which the literary author (Hawthorne), the marginalized and abused woman (Hester), and the bastard child (Pearl) are transformed into leaders of a spiritual and moral revival of an otherwise corrupt U.S. democracy. The redemptive narrative of The Scarlet Letter opens the two prisons from which both Hawthorne and Hester emerge at the introduction of their stories—“The Custom-House” and “The Prison-Door”—to the wide, wide world in which Pearl is both citizen and titled lady in the open-ended “Conclusion.” The apparently solid, brick edifice of the federal Custom-House is displaced by the narrative organization of Hawthorne’s romance, which may claim the attention and interest of both readers in the U.S. and elsewhere, especially in the English-speaking world, as it has certainly done in the century and a half since its publication.

Yet Hawthorne’s transmigrational narrative in The Scarlet Letter remains obliquely and abstractly cosmopolitan, so it is difficult to assess the extent to which his transnational ambitions in the romance contribute to or challenge the work of U.S. cultural colonialism. Berlant refers to Hawthorne’s “critical National Symbolic of ‘The Custom-House’” as an alternative to the burgeoning capitalism of Jacksonian America, but Sacvan Bercovitch concludes that the radical ambiguity of The Scarlet Letter represents an American ideology in which consensus is “founded upon the potential for dissent” and cultural forms are “designed to consecrate the uncontained self” (Berlant 1991, 188; Bercovitch 1991, 159). If we follow Berlant’s more optimistic interpretation, then we should interpret Pearl’s curious international destiny at the end to be an allegory of Hawthorne’s own special aristocracy as a successful romancer, whose own “letters” arrive “with armorial seals upon them,” as literary symbols do, but with “bearings unknown to English heraldry,” precisely because they are truly American
letters (262). In Bercovitch’s terms, Hawthorne’s aspiration to ruling-class authority through the profession of letters is based upon his imaginative play with political dissent within the perfectly recognizable conventions of American self-reliant individualism, which relies on myths of progressive development and the secular adaptation of Puritan Election and felix culpa.

_The Scarlet Letter_ leaves the international and imperial consequences of these interpretive choices in suspension, but Hawthorne appears to work out their logic in the more explicit transnational circumstances of _The Marble Faun_ (1860). Published in England as _Transformation_, Hawthorne’s Italian romance is another transmigrational narrative, in which the American author proposes to channel spirits of the past but now from explicitly foreign lands. In his preface to the romance, Hawthorne claims “Italy, as the site of his Romance,” primarily as “a sort of poetic or fairy precinct, where actualities would not be so terribly insisted upon, as they are, and must needs be, in America” (IV 3). This claim apparently absolves the author from “attempting a portraiture of Italian manners and character” or the folly as a “foreigner” of “endeavouring to idealize its traits”; it permits him to treat Italy as a metaphor for his own aesthetic playground, the flexible domain of the upper floor of the Custom-House where the author can pose as a “citizen of somewhere else” (3). _The Marble Faun_’s Italian setting is sufficiently concrete and historically specific, especially between 1858 and 1859 when Hawthorne was composing the romance, to suggest that his imaginative transumption of Italy is a form of cultural colonialism that is also perfectly compatible with the aesthetic position he develops in “The Custom-House” preface (IV xxi–xxii). Hawthorne’s composition of _The Marble Faun_ in Florence and Rome takes place in the midst of the formation of the modern Italian nation, its struggle against the French military occupation of Rome (1849–1870) and Austrian colonization, especially in Piedmont and Lombardy, and its internal fight with the secular empire of the Catholic Church in the Papal States (including its governance of Rome until 1870).

In his _Italian Notebooks_, Hawthorne makes consistently superficial observations about the great political events taking place around him. The Italian nationalists Cavour, Garibaldi, and Mazzini are not even mentioned, whereas Hawthorne makes only brief references to Napoleon III and to the papacy. He takes comfort and even finds a certain charm in the French troops occupying Rome (XIV 63–64), whom he sometimes criticizes for excessive military exercises “to keep the imperial city in awe” (XIV 144), but generally praises as “young, fresh, good-looking men, in excellent trim as to uniform and equipments” and concludes “I was not sorry to see
the Gauls still pouring into Rome” (XIV 232). Hawthorne makes most of these favorable observations about the French military in 1858, when Italian republicans still considered the French their bitter enemies and colonial occupiers of their homeland. However oblivious Hawthorne appears to be about these admittedly confusing political events in 1858–1860, he was certainly aware of the deep enmity of Italian nationalists toward the French between 1848 and 1859. Hawthorne and his family had been touring Marseilles in January 1858 when the news arrived from Paris that “Felice Orsini and three other Italian revolutionary conspirators had hurled powerful bombs at the imperial carriage as Napoleon [III] and the empress arrived at the Opéra” (XIV 729).

What seems remarkable in Hawthorne’s otherwise touristic impressions is the pleasure he takes in the cosmopolitan atmosphere in Rome and Italy, even when it is an effect of the political violence reshaping modern Europe. As the family prepares to depart Italy aboard a steamer in the harbor of Leghorn in 1859, only to be “detained by order of the French government, to take on board dispatches,” Hawthorne observes first “a disembarkation of French soldiers in a train of boats” and then on his own ship “a number of Sardinian officers, in green uniform, came on board, and a pale and picturesque-looking Italian, and other worthies of less note,—English, American, and of all races,—among them a Turk with a little boy in Christian dress; also a Greek gentleman with his young bride” (XIV 527–28). Such political events as French military reinforcements arriving at Leghorn in May 1859—part of 100,000 sent to Italy in 1859—and Sardinian officers boarding a steamer bound for France five months after Cavour, prime minister of the Kingdom of Sardinia (1852–1859), ratified a formal treaty of alliance with Napoleon III in France’s war against Austria (January 1859), are rendered strangely picturesque by Hawthorne.

Although Hawthorne claims in his preface to The Marble Faun to choose Italy as his setting for the “shadow,” “antiquity,” “mystery,” and “Ruin” necessary for “Romance and poetry . . . to . . . grow,” he admires the cosmopolitan atmosphere of modern Rome, in which French troops mingle with Papal Guards, Italian Carabinieri, English and American expatriates, and middle-eastern travelers. Yet Hawthorne also recoils from the political disorder, the economic confusion, and the cultural upheaval in Italy. Complaining about the minor chicanery of Roman vendors, poor public hygiene, and other tourists’ woes, he generalizes about the moral decadence of Italy as part of both its historical ruin and present political crisis. Although Pope Pius IX (r. 1846–1878) is the secular and religious ruler of Rome at the time, Hawthorne complains he is old, stout, “waddles,” and is “not particularly impressive” (XIV 150). Hawthorne prefers
the surviving artistic glory of imperial Rome and the Italian Renaissance, concentrating most of his observations in *The Italian Notebooks* on sculptures, paintings, and jewelry from these past eras. Such attitudes are quite typical of American travelers in Italy in the nineteenth century. From Hawthorne and William Wetmore Story to Henry James and Henry Adams, Rome’s ruin promised American glory as the neoclassical revival in American arts made graphically clear in so many American public buildings and monuments (Rowe 2002, 94–102). Hawthorne Americanizes nineteenth-century Italy by projecting onto it his own fantasy of the transnational ideal for the American citizen, drawing both on the aura of ancient imperial Rome in its global reach and at the same time emphasizing the American transumption of this “ruined” heritage. Hawthorne gives historical concreteness to this idea in *The Marble Faun* by modeling Kenyon, Hilda, and Miriam on various members of the expatriate community of American artists in Rome in the 1840s and 1850s, such as Hiram Powers (Kenyon), Harriet Hosmer (Hilda), and Maria Louisa Lander (Miriam) (Rowe 2002, 83–94). His allegorical narrative allows him to work through cathartically those aspects of modern cosmopolitanism that frighten him, purging them by way of the Italian character Donatello and the Anglo-Italian-Jewish character Miriam, and embody safely those qualities he finds acceptable in Kenyon and Hilda, who return at the end to America to be married. *The Marble Faun* is in certain respects Hawthorne’s most *American* romance, because it offers clear, albeit troubling answers to the questions regarding U.S. cultural colonialism raised by “The Custom-House” preface and “Conclusion” to *The Scarlet Letter*.

Miriam Schaefer condenses Hawthorne’s fears of cosmopolitan modernity, even as she represents his fascination with the sexual, psychological, political, and aesthetic powers with which she is variously associated. Like Hester in *The Scarlet Letter* and Zenobia in *The Blithedale Romance*, she embodies the threat of liberated femininity in the arts and politics, so that her associations with such historical figures as Margaret Fuller and the expatriate American sculptors Harriet Hosmer and Maria Louisa Lander allow Hawthorne to suggest her “unpardonable sin,” thus combining nineteenth-century women’s rights and the artistic freedom many women considered essential for such political emancipation. Hawthorne not only renders Miriam the dark other to the fair Hilda, but he also estranges and racializes Miriam, whose “English parentage, on the mother’s side” has “a vein, likewise, of Jewish blood, yet connected through her father, with one of those few princely families of southern Italy, which still retain a great wealth and influence” (IV 429–30). Jews were associated explicitly with a threatening cosmopolitanism in the nineteenth century, an antisemitic

Miriam is also vaguely associated with political intrigues in occupied Rome, such that when Hilda attempts to deliver the packet Miriam has addressed to “Signor Luca Barboni, at the Palazzo Cenci, third piano” (IV 68), she is imprisoned for two days in “the Convent of the Sacré Cœur, in the Trinità de’ Monti . . . in such kindly custody . . . I could willingly have dwelt there forever” (IV 466). Miriam’s confinement in a French Catholic convent in Rome reminds the reader that the French military defended the papal government of Rome against Italian nationalists until 1870, even though Napoleon III and Cavour joined forces to drive Austria out of northern Italy. Miriam’s unnamed “crime” is indeed associated frequently in the narrative with some offense against papal secular rule in Rome as well as its moral law, so that the reader gathers the general impression that Miriam is at least allegorically identifiable with the republican revolutions in Europe of 1848 and, more specifically, with the Italian Risorgimento.

Such associations are only reinforced by Miriam’s identification with Beatrice Cenci, especially in Guido Reni’s famous painting of her displayed at the time in the Palazzo Barberini in Rome, because this tragic figure from the Italian Renaissance was much celebrated in the nineteenth century as an icon of misguided feminine and proto-republican rebellion (Rowe 2002, 86; 1998, 43). Indeed, the address to which Miriam’s packet is to be delivered seems to condense “Barberini” into “Barbaro,” with the added connotation of “barbarian,” and then combine both with the fabled history of Francesco Cenci’s sexual violation of his daughter and her vengeful parricide. Nathalia Wright’s speculation that Hawthorne based Miriam on Henriette Deluzy-Desportes, the French governess implicated in 1847 in an affair with her employer, the Duc de Choiseul-Praslin, who “murdered his wife and a week later died of arsenic poisoning,” only adds to Hawthorne’s process of aesthetic mystification whereby “Miriam” condenses his fears of uncontrolled feminine sexuality, Jewish “contamination” of Euroamerican racial “purity,” and republican rebellions against established religious and aristocratic rule (IV xlii; Wright 1942, 5–14). By linking these modern threats with the ruthless rule of the aristocracy in the Italian Renaissance, Hawthorne not only enhances the aura of Italian “ruin” but warns his readers of the dangers of this historical repetition-compulsion, whereby both women’s rights and republican revolution will follow a venerable will-to-power and cycle of revenge. Recalling conservative responses to the French Revolution like Edmund Burke’s and his own
in “The Custom-House,” Hawthorne warns the reader of The Marble Faun about certain universal human inclinations to dominate others through force and the consequences of social anarchy. As Larry Reynolds has pointed out, Hawthorne shared the anxieties of many of his compatriots regarding the anti-monarchical, republican, sometimes socialist-inspired revolutions transforming Europe after 1848, and such concerns were frequently entangled with irrational fears of the international calls for women’s rights, such as those expressed at the Women’s Rights Convention held at Seneca Falls, New York in 1848 (Larry Reynolds 1988, 55).

What, then, are we to conclude is the allegorical significance of Kenyon’s and Hilda’s engagement and return to America at the end of the romance? At the most literal level, Hawthorne’s happy ending cathartically purges his fears of modern cosmopolitanism and yet sublimates what he finds so charming in Italy in two American artists, who are also models for good citizenship, not unlike the figure of the author who emerges from “The Custom-House.” Miriam paints only herself and her sexual violence in the different Scriptural women she chooses for her subjects: Judith, Salomé, and Sisera. Even when she invites Donatello to pose for her, she paints herself, transmitting her threatening sexuality to him and rendering both monstrously transgendered (Rowe 2002, 98). Miriam relies on an aesthetic of unsublimated expression, a naive “realism” that takes for its subject the darkest impulses of the unconscious and thus of the anarchic drives of sex and murder. In these respects, she typifies the limitations Hawthorne found in women artists. As Lora Romero writes: “Even when Hawthorne spoke well of his female competitors, he referred to their work as though it were an unmediated transcription of their private lives” (Romero 1997, 103).

In contrast, Kenyon and Hilda develop an aesthetic of sublimation that locates and controls such dangerous powers of the unconscious in mediated works of art. Hilda’s decision to become a copyist of the old masters, rather than an original painter, prepares the reader for her eventual marriage to Kenyon. Hilda’s “copies were indeed marvellous,” because they express “that evanescent and ethereal life—that flitting fragrance, as it were, of the originals—which it is as difficult to catch and retain as it would be for a sculptor to get the very movement and varying colour of a living man into his marble bust” (IV 58). This passage clearly links Hilda’s “genius” for copying male artists’ paintings—“Guido, Domenichino, Raphael” are Hawthorne’s examples (58)—with Kenyon’s sculptural vocation long before they have developed a romantic relationship. Hawthorne’s sexual politics in regard to Hilda are typical of other conservative, male transcendentalists, such as Emerson in “Woman” (1855): “When women
engage in any art or trade, it is usually as a resource, not as a primary object” (Rowe 2003, 246). Becoming in effect Kenyon’s aesthetic “resource,” then, she will help him as once she played “the handmaid of Raphael, whom she loved with a virgin’s love”; both roles Hawthorne judges far worthier than her own art, “the counterpart, in picture, of so many feminine achievements in literature!” (IV 61).

Responding more diplomatically to American women sculptors in Rome than he did in 1855 in his unguarded complaint against the “d[amne]d mob of scribbling women,” who had “occupied” the “public taste . . . with their trash,” Hawthorne nonetheless judges both groups of women artists to pose a serious threat to his own artistic authority (Ticknor 1913, 141). Racializing Miriam—insofar as Hawthorne, like other nineteenth-century writers, treats Judaism as a “race” rather than a religion, he also renders her decidedly transnational and cosmopolitan, just as he returns Kenyon and Hilda to their native America. What they import through the literary custom-house of The Marble Faun is not only what Romero terms the patriarchal “protocols of gender and sexuality” Hawthorne considers crucial to a well-organized nation, but they bring along Kenyon’s aesthetic genius, ready to be adapted to the expansionist agenda of the young republic (Romero 1997, 105).

In chapter 13, “A Sculptor’s Studio,” Hawthorne dismisses as bad art the adaptation of the neoclassical style for the purpose of ennobling American politicians, as Horatio Greenough famously sculpted George Washington in classical pose and garb (IV 118). For Hawthorne, great sculpture expresses the “genius” of its subject, as he claims Kenyon’s bust of Milton spiritualizes the marble by virtue of Kenyon’s study of “all known representations of the poet,” including his “long perusal and deep love” of Milton’s writings (118). Kenyon’s own genius and study culminate in his Cleopatra, which Hawthorne modeled after William Wetmore Story’s Cleopatra (1858), and which Miriam declares “a great work,” in which Kenyon has succeeded in combining “all those seemingly discordant elements” to represent “the womanhood” of his subject (IV 127). Capitalizing on Story’s emphasis on the African features of his Cleopatra, Hawthorne stresses the foreignness of the sculpture in Kenyon’s studio:

The face was a miraculous success. The sculptor had not shunned to give the full Nubian lips, and other characteristics of the Egyptian physiognomy. His courage and integrity had been abundantly rewarded; for Cleopatra’s beauty shone out richer, warmer, more triumphantly, beyond comparison, than if, shrinking timidly from the truth, he had chosen the tame Grecian type. The expression was of profound, gloomy, heavily revolving thought; a glance into
her past life and present emergencies, while her spirit gathered itself up for some new struggle, or was getting sternly reconciled to impending doom. (IV 126–27)

In Hawthorne’s description, Cleopatra resembles Hester in *The Scarlet Letter*, both in Hester’s “impressiveness belonging to a marked brow and deep black eyes” (I 53) and the speculative and meditative qualities Hawthorne claims might have made her “the foundress of a religious sect” or “a prophetess” (I 165).

Whatever “Oriental” qualities Hawthorne attributes to Hester, however, she is never African. Hester displaces and condenses religious radicalism from Anne Hutchinson to Jonathan Edwards in the manner of what Bercovitch terms “an intermediary prophetess...a figura medietatis,” who will redeem the flawed Puritan legacy in a renewed democratic nationalism (Bercovitch 1975, 177). Kenyon’s *Cleopatra* incorporates feminist and abolitionist political activism in a similarly liberal and aesthetic gesture, mediating thereby U.S. nationalism on the eve of the Civil War with the transnational legacies of the European revolutions of 1848 and of the fight against slavery. In *The Marble Faun, Cleopatra* expresses Kenyon’s genius; in William Wetmore Story’s studio in Rome, *Cleopatra* represents to Hawthorne “a terribly dangerous woman, quiet enough for the moment, but very likely to spring upon you like a tigress” (XIV 177). What better media to keep women “quiet” than marble and romance?

Just as Hawthorne imaginatively embodies his own authorial powers in Hester Prynne, so Kenyon embodies his imagination in his *Cleopatra*. Miriam recognizes the genius of Kenyon’s work, but she mistakes it as an expression of womanhood: “What a woman is this!” Kenyon corrects her: “I kindled a great fire within my mind, and threw in the material—as Aaron threw the gold of the Israelites into the furnace—and, in the midst of heat, up rose Cleopatra, as you see her” (IV 127). In the witty dialogue of this chapter, Kenyon mocks himself by comparing himself with Moses’ brother, Aaron, who forged the gold of the Israelites into the false image of the Golden Calf they worshiped until Moses returned with the true scripture of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 32), but Kenyon also suggests that what the great artist produces is an icon of the divine—not of earthly feminine or masculine celebrity. Kenyon also uses an Old Testament story to remind Miriam he is conversant with her Jewish origins. *Cleopatra* thus refers neither to the historical Cleopatra nor to the contemporary struggles of nineteenth-century women for equality nor to the fight for the abolition of slavery—all interpretations Story’s *Cleopatra* would attract at the time of its first exhibition in London in 1862—but to the cre-
ative genius of the artist, that “liberating god” Emerson celebrated in “The Poet” (1844) (Rowe 2003, 201). Henry James could only admire Kenyon’s “admirable answer” to Miriam as “the artist’s only possible account of the origin of any work” (James 1903, 2: 86).

Sacvan Bercovitch interprets Hester Prynne as one of several characters in Hawthorne’s fiction who offers revolution only to “overcome such ‘vain imaginings’” by incorporating them into a “vision of continuity” (Bercovitch 1991, 80). Bercovitch compares Hester’s contribution to U.S. ideology with those allegorical feminine figures of national identity—Freedom, Liberty, Columbia, America—who increasingly organized the public space of nineteenth-century America. Bercovitch refers specifically to “the statue of ‘Liberty’ sculpted by Hiram Powers” begun “in Florence in 1848” and entitled on its completion America, which Hawthorne admired in Powers’s studio and “urged Franklin Pierce to purchase ... for the U.S. Capitol” (80). Hawthorne’s admiration for this statue of “a female figure, youthful, vigorous, beautiful, planting its foot lightly on a broken chain, and pointing upward,” wavers between his admiration for Powers’s departure from the sculptural conventions of “the cold allegoric sisterhood” and Hawthorne’s concern about making “a genuine woman out of an allegory” (XIV 436). If the feminine form in sculpture is not allegorical and especially when there is some nudity (America is “nude to the middle”), then Hawthorne complains, “Who is to wed this lovely virgin? who is to clasp and enjoy that beautiful form?—and are not satisfied to banish her into the realm of chilly thought” (436). Often dressed, decorated, or surrounded with signs of North American Indian, African, and European cultures together with the instruments of scientific progress, such allegorical women herald U.S. imperial expansion and global domination (Fryd 1992, 10–23). Hawthorne reminds us that our very ability to interpret these feminine allegories as representing neither womanhood nor the colonized cultures whose signs they bear but as “America” depended on the complex ideological work of our literary authors. If the sculpted versions are either too “cold” or too sexually graphic, then the literary allegories might succeed better in giving life to national ideals and controlling political and sexual threats from domestic and foreign sources. However distant the historical continuity between Hester’s seventeenth-century Bay Colony and Hawthorne’s nineteenth-century Massachusetts, they share common soil; revising the pre-national, colonial, Puritan past to suit the national, capitalist present was a difficult but by no means unreasonable literary task. Taming the threats of Europe’s mid-century, nationalist revolutions and the international claims of women’s rights and turning their related social problems into the aesthetic concerns and allegorical figures
of an American romance was indeed a miraculous transformation. As obscure, fantastic, and mysterious as *The Marble Faun* remains, this American romance makes its own contribution to the transnational ambitions of U.S. ideology at the beginning of the Civil War and prophetically anticipates how U.S. cultural work today incorporates the histories and cultures of other peoples for its own glory and their control.