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Simone Turco

The Marble Faun

Art, Nature, and Morals
Between Classicism and Aestheticism





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To my wife

Nothing is more unaccount-
able than the spell that often
lurks in a spoken word.

N. Hawthorne, *The Marble
Faun*

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Introduction

The Marble Faun is the story of a murder, its motive, and its consequences. It is also an unconcluded story, whose outcome and basic drive are intentionally left in the dark. It can be placed in the category of those mystery tales that make up the framework of Nathaniel Hawthorne's work in general. Notwithstanding, the novel was unequally received in comparison with previous works and has been variedly judged by critics. It has often been defined as vague in terms of narrative aims and formal consistency. In this regard, Susan S. Williams commented: "Readers of this work have long found many . . . points of assault, focusing on its diffuse execution, overly conventionalized characters, formal incoherence, and general 'defeat' of romance."¹ When the novel came off the press, Edwin Whipple wrote in his review: "Few can be satisfied with the concluding chapters, for the reason that nothing is really concluded."² Concerning such an open-endedness, Henry James himself observed that "the story straggles and wanders, is dropped and taken up again, and towards the close lapses into an almost fatal vagueness."³

Negative appraisals have also been many among more recent reviewers, such as Richard H. Brodhead and Rita K. Gollin.⁴ Both Brodhead and Gollin believe that, overall, the romance is the product of the author's difficulty in systematizing

¹ Susan S. Williams, "Manufacturing Intellectual Equipment: The Tauchnitz Edition of *The Marble Faun*," in *Reading Books. Essays on the Material Text and Literature in America*, ed. Michele Moylan and Lane Stiles (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 117.

² Edwin Whipple, "The Marble Faun," *Atlantic Monthly* 5 (1860): 622.

³ Henry James, *Hawthorne* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1880), 143.

⁴ Richard H. Brodhead, *The School of Hawthorne* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 67-80, and Rita K. Gollin, "Hawthorne and the Anxiety of Aesthetic Response," *Centennial Review* 28/29 (1984-85): 94-104.

the aesthetic problem within the frame of his artistic experience. For this reason, it would represent an unsatisfactory, if not awkward, product compared to previous works, and certainly not corresponding to the goals at which the author would have aimed. As Williams summarized: “More recent critics, taking the work’s formal failings for granted, have worked to explain *why* they have occurred, pointing to the constraints Hawthorne felt as a self-consciously ‘high art’ writer, his profound ambivalence about his aesthetic sensibilities, his regrets and anxieties about his past works, and the personal pain surrounding the illness of his daughter.”⁵

The statement about Hawthorne’s ambivalence or ambiguity toward aesthetics is truthful: such an ambivalence is a crucial aspect that is evident in the whole narrative. Likewise, the vagueness attributed to the novel is certainly present. Apart from generally accepting such a view, mainstream criticism still tends to study the novel in strictly American terms, especially in reference to the impending Civil War; or it greatly highlights gender-related themes; or it more specifically focuses on an erotic aspect that is certainly there but by no means exhausts the complexity of the whole.⁶ Such lines of research, definitely valuable in their own way, at times fail, however, to capture the overall subversive value of the novel and to put it in a productive relation with the broader context of nineteenth-century aesthetic debate and its unifying influxes. Very little, for example, has recently been said concerning the role that Classical myth plays in the novel and Hawthorne’s reception of it. Nor has the theme of sin, so typical of Hawthorne, been related to the new outlook on aesthetic pleasure that he gains through his European experience and that is apparent in the text. Similarly, very

⁵ Williams, “Manufacturing,” 117.

⁶ For instance: Zachary Williams, “Slowing Down the War: The Sauntering Gaze of Hawthorne’s Peaceable Man,” *Nathaniel Hawthorne Review* 45, no. 2 (2019): 152-170; Ryan Stuart Lowe, “Free Love Among the Ruins,” *Nathaniel Hawthorne Review* 43, no. 1 [Transatlanticism and *The Blithedale Romance*] (Spring 2017): 62-86; David Greven, “Hawthorne and Influence: Reframing Tradition,” *Nathaniel Hawthorne Review* 42, no. 1 [Hawthorne and Influence] (Spring 2016): 1-15.

little efforts have been devoted to studying the transformation of Hawthorne's artistic sensitivity, whose direct result is the novel itself. For this reason, it will be noted that ampler reference is made, in this book, to works of older criticism that keep to the fore of the analysis what I believe is the real 'gist' of *The Marble Faun*, that is, the role of art in relation to morality.

The interpretation I offer, following Patricia Marks's suggestion dating to nearly thirty years ago and seldom reprised afterward,⁷ is that vagueness and ambiguity are not just distinctive of *The Marble Faun*, but that their effect is largely desired. This perspective should not come as a surprise: the novel amounts to an eccentric achievement among Hawthorne's works. It is set outside New England; it is the product of a 'broadened' life experience, open to the exterior; and it is entirely focused in on a city whose symbolic value prevails over the characters' traits.

Rome acquires an essential value in the narrative. The city's 'spirit' is pervasive and shapes the story's actors, conditioning their choices and expectations. What Rome has represented throughout the centuries provides the necessary material to explain the actions of the four characters, three of whom being artists, who move about in it as in a dream.

City, art, and dream are three of the vehicles through which the plot is developed; they are contexts in which Hawthorne expresses the typical ideal and narrative characteristics of his work: sin, guilt, atonement, the antithesis between individual free will and collective responsibility. The novel's cornerstone is constituted by the difficult or failed convergence of two equally powerful instances: morality and art, represented by the symbolic fluctuation between the static nature of marble and its plasmability, between the capturing of life by means of art and, implicitly, the deadening process carried out by Time with its destructive and consuming power.

⁷ Patricia Marks, "Romance and the 'Beer-Sodden English Beefeaters': Hawthorne's 'Postscript' to *The Marble Faun*," Nathaniel Hawthorne Review 18, no. 1 (1992): 12-14.

Therefore, the ones displayed in the novel are both aesthetic and ethical concerns that, in the author's eyes, had a universal emblematic value. To express them, Hawthorne uses the faun, an element of the title upon which the plot is constructed and a bearer of irrationality and ambivalence. The juxtapositions to which the figure of the faun has historically been subject—as well as the reception of it—reveal why so many different qualities and natures have been attributed to the ancient gods of the woodland, and later of the farmland and of the 'civilized' world.

This liminal being, who is petrified in Praxitelean marble, serves in the novel to compose the allegory of an ideal battle between law and order on the one side and absolute freedom on the other. If experienced fully (if 'consummated'), this freedom leads to dissolution. Despite being inclined to a system that provides for a definite moral frame (an inclination expressed by means of his narrator), Hawthorne cannot ignore that the problem has much wider implications than it may seem, and that the solution proposed in the 'crime, condemnation, punishment' triad does not end the moral dilemma around which the novel revolves.

Donatello, the Count of Monte Beni, a resurging faun who discovers his own feral nature, commits a murder out of his sense of justice; or perhaps he does so out of jealousy. In the first case, his action, though understandable from a human viewpoint, would not accord with the conventions that society has set to govern collective existence, nor does it conform to morality as religiously conceived. In the second case, his action would result from regression to a wild, beastly level; or, anti-thetically, it would amount to a retrieval of the ancient, presocial, entirely individualistic freedom, without laws or regulations, which was typical of the Golden Age. The faun, a figure of Apollonian and destructive radiance but also of Dionysian gaiety, fluctuates between being human and animal, and between childhood and maturity.

On definitions, methodology, and structure

‘Classicism’ and ‘Aestheticism,’ the founding elements of the title, are to be intended at various levels. Especially in the case of aestheticism, these definitions have been used to describe artistic and literary movements historically defined and set in a kind of opposition between the Late Romantic age and the second half of the nineteenth century. It is to be remembered, however, that these are merely ways of describing cultural trends. While it is true that a definite movement named, at one point, Aestheticism did exist in Victorian England, it should not be viewed as necessarily contrasting with Classicism, which did not become a univocal movement in its own right and even, to some extent, infiltrated and shaped the Aesthetic Movement itself. The latter, in turn, was one of the many kinds of aestheticisms that developed in the context of the reflection on the role of art and evolved into Decadence and post-Decadence.

The use of ‘classicism’ and ‘aestheticism’ made in this book takes into account the broad sense that the terms have acquired, as well as the wide range of cultural manifestations they have originated. In fact, in a purely semantic sense, classicism can be defined as the following of Greco-Roman styles, themes, and values as reflected in and received by the literary and philosophical context of Western culture. In the same vein, aestheticism can be defined as the tendency to emphasize aesthetic values irrespective of their association with morality, ethics, or religion. Basically, the terms describe alternative or, more often, complementary ways of conceiving the individual’s relationship with oneself and with society’s values and standards. In such a sense, then, these are ‘mobile’ notions: for instance, there is a classicism in the Early Modern reception of Hellenic values, merging in turn with the development, in the same period, of an aesthetic taste increasingly independent from the underlying religious, moral, and didactic purposes of art, a trend that we may call a form of aestheticism. The same can be said concerning similar trends occurring in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Aestheticism ‘proper’ received many Classical themes previously mediated by Romanticism. It criticized the way such themes had been handled and, above all, it stood against the interpretation of art and aesthetics given between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries and inspired by Winckelmann’s and Kant’s theories. Aestheticism, even more than Romanticism, ‘received’ the characters of Classical culture of which eighteenth-century Classicism had been purged: those impulses that would later resurge in the Romantic era and would become mainstream themes in the Aesthetic Movement, that is, the liberation of instincts and the practice of naturalness in opposition to ‘real’ modern, industrial society with its estranging character.⁸ Incidentally, apart from being a substantial repository of the abovementioned trends and influxes, *The Marble Faun* is temporally set at the center of such a transformation of aesthetic values. Written by a post-romantic author heavily influenced by Greco-Roman myth and values filtered through Puritan eyes, *The Marble Faun* is published in 1860, at the beginning of the golden decade of what would later become the Aesthetic Movement, and it catalyzes different positions that are at times mutually contrasting, at other times closer to one another, but whose interaction is always productive.

Although usually not viewed in such a light (and here lies the novelty of such an interpretative approach), *The Marble Faun* seems to be forerunning, through Hawthorne’s figurative and narratorial style, part of the reflection on the superiority of art over morals and order, of form over substance, which would be especially rampant among English artists, writers, and intellectuals up to the 1890s. The novel handles the problem of aesthetics by means of the tools and experiences of its author, who honed his view of aesthetics after sojourning for some time in Britain and, later, in France and in Italy. Above all, the novel shows a fluctuation between two ways of looking at the world, which partly reflects the evolution of Hawthorne’s psychology

⁸ See for instance Wolfgang Iser, *The Aesthetic Moment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 60.

from an order-oriented inclination to a more aestheticized mentality.

The purpose of this book is, therefore, to investigate the creative spurs that originated *The Marble Faun*, underline its pivotal role in Hawthorne's shift from moralistic to more aesthetics-oriented positions, and show how the novel may be used as a key to understanding the cultural tensions generally underlying the aesthetic process, according to a pattern that moves from Classical principles and has a bearing on the notions of nature as instinct and of morals as order. To do so, the methods and tenets of comparative literature have been employed.

Comparative literature is here intended as the science of analytical comparison of the multifaceted framework of a text with other texts or subtexts, often linguistically and culturally different, which calls for the use of instruments offered by several other disciplines. For a comparative analysis to be carried out, a text's tangle must be analyzed by comparison with themes and 'currents' of thinking not necessarily related in consequential logic to the author or to the work itself. In this perspective, the critic is expected to put together for analysis elements that may be merely analogically related. The analysis should proceed along general lines, which entails, however, a punctual reference to modes of thinking and philosophies perhaps very distant from—or unknown to—the author, but which bear a possible, parallel resemblance to the author's work and conclusions in the context of a general *Zeitgeist* arguably shared by literary and philosophical experiences formally independent from one another.

In the present case, the reader will notice that semantic and microsemantic analyses of certain passages are counterpointed by philological or even philosophical considerations that are not based on whether the author was or was not aware of a given source, phenomenon, or idea. While not underrating the 'cause-and-effect' principle (typical of historicist analysis), the one adopted here is mainly a synchronic perspective.

Adopting the comparative method in analyzing *The Marble Faun* is possible by positing that the novel's text is much less

unitary than usual works by Hawthorne, since it seems the result of a series of cultural stimuli so alien from the author's usual themes, sources, and aims as to make it necessary for the critic to study it 'in comparison with itself' and with the foreign cultural traditions it conceals.⁹ To his typical themes and ways of handling narration, Hawthorne seems constantly and decidedly to oppose themes and tenets that seldom, if ever, correspond to his comfort zone. And yet he points them out and highlights them in what looks like an attempt to carry out a kind of self-criticism. Such tenets and principles are those of Classical culture, of paganism, of Dionysianism, of purely artistic pleasure, of antinomianism, which he contrasts, by means of some of his characters, with his pervasive moral and para-religious sentiment.

Hence, the peculiarities of *The Marble Faun* account for the choice to focus on just one work by Hawthorne, something that quite a few critics would view as rare, if not strange, in today's academic context. Aside from the reasons given above, I strongly believe that the greater the number of stimuli and inferences to be analyzed, the more restricted should the 'space' of the investigation be. The quantity of 'Classical matter' that is present in the novel, and the many interpretations offered by its author's very handling of such matter, should urge any critic to be modest and recognize that *The Marble Faun*, with its density and multi-level structure, is more than enough for a single study that utilizes the comparative approach.

It will also be noticed that compared to other works of literary criticism, this book makes use of extensive quotations from the text. Although, in some contexts, there is a trend to limit quotations to the essential, in this case the density and entangled nature of the novel required that long passages be reported in order to show (literally so) connections, expressions, and

⁹ This method is amply described in one of the most important theoretical works on comparativism, Claudio Guillén's *Entre lo uno y lo diverso: introducción a la literatura comparada* (Barcelona: Editorial Critica, 1985), several times reprinted; but it was also suggested in René Wellek's *Literature and Ideas* (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia, 1948).

structures which would not have stood out by mere explanation or indirect reference.

The way of studying the connections of *The Marble Faun* with the Classical world, and the resurgence of disturbing aspects of Classical culture in modern times, follows the pattern set by Antonino Pagliaro's semantic method of text analysis (called 'semantic criticism'), by Gerald Monsman's work on Walter Pater and aesthetics in general, and by Stefano Evangelista's ongoing research on the hauntings and representations of the ancient gods within the Aesthetic Movement. On my part, I have attempted to add another tessera, perhaps a more 'unusual' one, to studies of literary aesthetics and reception that hold Classicism as their core value.

In harmony with the novel's complexity and structure, the present book is laid out in chapters divided into subsections, each of which develops a distinct analysis that relates to the main aesthetic theme. Here is a brief overview:

Chapter I, "Hawthorne's Rome," describes the context in which the novel was conceived as well as the aesthetic issues with which Hawthorne is confronted during his sojourn in Rome. It also analyzes through relevant entries of Hawthorne's journals the implications of such notions as 'nudity' and 'marble,' as the author's view of them changes with the passing of time.

Chapter II, "The Faun," introduces Hawthorne's view of myth and the relationship, of a Classical kind, between the notions of nature and culture. The concepts of Dionysian and Apollonian are analyzed in connection with the novel's Classical substratum, with references to Pater's different but analogous idea of mythic resurgence.

Chapter III, "Mystical Reveries and Luminous Phantasmagorias," highlights the connection between transformation (which also happens to be the title with which the book was published in Britain) and transfiguration. The religious and reveristic aspect underlying the aesthetic ideal is also underscored.

Chapter IV, “Vitalism and Loss,” shows how the relationship between vitality, represented by natural instincts (‘nature’ as intended in the title of this study), and death is catalyzed by a semantic medium, the compound “Sunshine,” which has several levels of interpretation and is linked to the loss of an ancient and preternatural faculty.

Chapter V, “Aporias of Art, Action, and Morals,” refers to the novel’s mythic and mythological subthemes to show a fluctuation between moralistic and libertarian positions, which reveals a transformation of Hawthorne’s ‘mental world’ but also points to a more general transformation in nineteenth-century culture in terms of freedom, guilt, and the aesthetic life. By choice, this is intended both as the last chapter of the book and as a conclusion, offering an overall interpretative horizon that completes the analysis of the various themes developed throughout.

Hawthorne and his *Marble Faun*

Through his novel, Hawthorne paints an immense tableau in which it is possible to see nineteenth-century tensions through ‘external’ eyes, not conditioned by a personal record mainly built in Europe, the cradle of such tensions. Italy becomes the ideal setting where the author gives life to a story having the traits of true antiquity:

Italy, as the site of his romance, was chiefly valuable to him as affording a sort of fairy precinct, where actualities would not be so terribly insisted upon as they are, and must needs be, in America. No author, without a trial, can conceive of the difficulty of writing a romance about a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a commonplace prosperity, in broad and simple daylight, as is happily the case with my dear native land. It will be very long, I trust, before romance-writers may find congenial and easily handled themes, either in the annals of our stalwart republic, or in any characteristic and probable