

## The Marble Faun

*N.Hawthorne*

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Italy held a dual fascination to Northerners during the 18th and 19th century when modern tourism developed. On one hand it was the land of the former Roman empire, whose physical presence in the forms of ruins predominantly in Rome itself, constituted a very palpable connection with its pervading mental presence in Western culture. It was also at that time when there was a growing awareness that those physical remains should be protected and not to be used as mere building quarries. On the other hand Italy itself was a very exotic country, as testified by all the paintings shown in art galleries all over Europe done by Northern artists showing a sunny but primitive culture of rustic peasants with a little touch of the Orient. It was to this country Hawthorne toured with his wife at the end of their four year residence in Europe during which he served as a consul in Liverpool. He documented his travel in his Notebooks<sup>1</sup>, and they served as the basis for the fictional presentation that constitutes this book. As fiction the tale fails, the author seems overwhelmed by the experience, which if not exactly traumatic was at least very taxing.

The story can be summarized as follows. We are introduced to four young people, three of them being American artists residing in Rome, and the fourth a young Tuscan count who strikes the Americans with his elemental joyful nature seemingly free of any of the conundrums that harry the citizens of a modern civilization. In fact he is more of a faun than a human being and this is brought home in the introductory lines when he is compared to an old Grecian marble sculpture of a faun to be seen in a Roman sculpture gallery visited by the party. A perfect likeness in fact, save for the furry ears, which in the case of Donatello, as so is the name of the Tuscan young man, are hidden by the curls of his abundant hair and not to be revealed to his intrigued companions. The Americans consist of a man and two women. The sculptor Kenyon and the painters Hilda and Miriam who have as members of the artist colony of expatriates in Rome befriended each other. Hilda is a sincere New England maiden whose artistic ambitions after her arrival reduced to that of becoming an accomplished copyist of masters such as Raphael. She lives up in a tower indulging the local pigeons, or should we say doves, to be fed by her hand through her open window. Miriam has a mysterious past providing rich soil for various contradictory rumors to grow and thrive. Kenyon has a crush on Hilda, while Donatello follows the beautiful Miriam around as if he were a dog, and is more or less treated with the customary forbearance with which one usually indulge such pets. So far so good, but then comes the crucial element of the plot that seems more than necessarily contrived. During a visit to the Catacombs of the old city, Miriam is temporarily lost in the darkness. She reappears having met an old beggar haunting the underworld. It is surmised, keeping with the Gothic tone of the novel, that he has lived there since the initial persecution

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<sup>1</sup> He wrote many of those and as far as I know they were unpublished and not meant for publication either, but passages thereof may be downloaded thanks to the Gutenberg project

of the Christians. He leaves his dark bodes and pursues Miriam back in the streets of Rome, she suffers him to follow her around, even to the extent of exploiting the situation by intermittently using him as a model, but resents his continued presence. It is rumored that he is a figure from her past. Sometime later during an evening festival he pesters her and Donatello following her pleading gaze throws the impostor down a precipitous wall at whose foot he meets his death on the street below. The whole thing is accidentally observed by Hilda who sensing the accomplicity of her friend in the murder is struck with horror and revulsion and flees the scene. The next morning while visiting a church a newly deceased monk is on display lying on his humble lit de parade and to their horror Miriam and Donatello realize that this is the victim of their joint crime. The crime that makes a bond, for better or for worse, between the two. The whole thing about the beggar and the monk is very confusing and can charitably be construed as an attempt to create a dreamlike atmosphere, but most likely only an inept and contrived construction that the author has not sufficiently thought out. After that the four friends disperse. Donatello for the first time in his life knows sorrow, that deepens his personality and he becomes less of a Faun than a man. He splits from Miriam, who rejected by Hilda, goes underground. Hilda, who in her innocence, for the first time has become aware of evil through her friend is devastated and sinks into a deep depression and goes through a crisis in which she finds solace in the institutions of the Catholic Church most notably through confession. However, the priest finds her parasiting on the fatih unless she converts, something she has a hard time to fathom. In the meantime the sculptor Kenyon seeks out Donatello in his Tuscan home, where he lives alone with some elderly servants, being the last of his numerous family whose genealogy, we are told, reaches back thousands of years. Donatello is in a pensive mood, no longer the carefree frolicking Faun of before. There is much brooding and a tower plays once again an important role, this time for the solitary meditations of Donatello. The American sculptor is intrigued and gregariously engaged as Americans already at that time tended to be. He manages to arrange a reunification of Miriam and Donatello at the end of a journey through the Italian countryside which takes the form of a pilgrimage of sorts with Donatello praying at each shrine they pass by and doing homage in each church they visit. Mission accomplished Kenyon returns to Rome where Hilda has weathered the summer and he becomes witness to her confession being aghast at her deepening flirtation with a superstitious faith. All the standard stratagems of contrived coincidence of a classical novel. Then Hilda disappears mysteriously after she at the last moment remembers a promise of favor she made a long time ago to Miriam (a promise most readers probably have forgotten as well). In the end they are all united at a carnival in the divine city, although Kenyon does not in the end get his Hilda and it is unclear whether the lovers Donatello and Miriam will endure as such. The reader is by this time dying to have all the loose threads neatly tied up as in a detective story, but Hawthorne willfully frustrates that desire, claiming that in real life this never happens, thus trying to deepen the pretense of the story being true, whether by design or ineptness I cannot tell, although I lean towards the latter as obviously the author was never really engaged in the story as such.

So it is not, or at least not primarily, as a story you read it but as a document on Hawthorne's thinking and musings and philosophical asides while on foreign soils. On one

hand it is a story about expatriation, of living abroad and what it really means. To live abroad is according to Hawthorne like living in a phantasy land. It is an existence of imagination more than that of reality. To return home is like returning back to reality and thus reassuming your real life again. I can very well sympathize with the emotions expressed by the author, and in fact I am even more entitled to them than he was. When he went abroad in 1853 appointed by his friend the president Franklin Pierce<sup>2</sup> he was almost fifty had a wife and family and a literary career and in fact had passed through most of the milestones of a life lived, while I was at the very beginning with life all ahead of me. Furthermore he only stayed away for a period of four years, a paltry interval indeed at that mature age, while I stayed for the double which at that young age is almost a life time by itself. He warns that if you stay away for too long, home will no longer be home, but has changed and you will no longer truly be home anywhere and thus life becomes as shadowy as your own imagination and will have no real solid substance. Apprehensions I also articulated in more or less the same way.

We are also giving a glimpse of Italian country side in the 1850's. Kenyon and Donatello are besieged by beggars, mostly children looking for alms. At one time Kenyon can count to up to forty who swarm around them as hungry grasshoppers. He claims that they do it not so much of necessity as curiosity and distraction, and as usual we all need to rationalize the uncomfortable fact that there are beggars living at the edge of life. As to Rome itself and its remnants the author remarks that there is indeed a chasm of time that separates us from them, and in fact I would like to add that no family, no matter how ancient, can truly trace its lineage back to Classical times, back to the tenth century or so that is one thing, but not further, any claims to the contrary are but mythological. The arid Italian climate is to be blamed, he claims, a ruin be it ever so dilapidated, never shows the kind of mossy antiquity we associate with far more recent ones in northern climates. The old age of Italy oppresses him. Buildings fashioned out of stone are thereby endowed with an unwarranted eternal aspect which is not in keeping with the ephemeral intentions that gave them birth. He suggests that there should be a law that every fifty years or so impels people to burn their towns and start afresh in order to escape the heavy burden of the past. This is a true American who speaks, an American committed to progress and to the obliteration of anything that stands in its way. Just as no man can rightfully claim immortality, culture and tradition can as little demand an unchecked run.

The people of the novel are either artists or simple people blending into the ambience (exempting the intermittent priest). This is clearly the social circle in which he moved. This is a circle which he obviously finds very congenial and depicts approvingly with just a little bit of sarcasm, more kind than stinging. Artists are united by a common sense of beauty and purpose, and their conversations never lack interesting and fertile topics in which to grow. He has a keen and sincere interest in art, especially visual art, which was more common in the 19th century, I suspect, that either before or after. A well-educated man or woman at the time was among many other things expected to be competent at drawing. There was enough visual images available, be it in churches and galleries, for the ambulant observer to have a rich field in which to browse. On the other hand there is

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<sup>2</sup> Whose father was a Benjamin, but not to be confused with Benjamin Peirce the Harvard mathematician and father of the philosopher C.S. Peirce who was a generation younger.

not yet the overabundance of images that haunt our present age which make them trivial and disposable; instead there still sticks to them a sense of magic and a preciousness which forces an attitude of veneration combined with careful scrutiny. The spectacle of a Hilda carefully copying paintings and in that way getting a much deeper understanding of them would be almost inconceivable today. Incidentally the author remarks that after her emotional crisis Hilda no longer enjoys her full capability as a copyist, something has been awakened in her that makes it impossible for her to be fully subservient to a master, a spark to create has been kindled, her inner life having become if not richer at least no longer amenable to unrestricted reception of external impulses. Hawthorne devotes a chapter to Miriam visiting Kenyon in his studio giving him occasion to elaborate on what it means to make a sculpture and the challenge of imbuing it with a life and a soul that transcend the inert marble of which it is fashioned, and which incidentally gives even a mediocre attempt an endurance it most likely does not deserve. The author notes that a sculpture's studio is rather dreary looking and more akin to a stonemason's dusty shop than to a romantic abode. Rather sarcastically Hawthorne notes that a modern sculptor is content with modeling in clay then the anonymous but skilled workman takes over hewing out of the inert marble a faithful copy. The unstated conclusion being that the skill and work involved really belongs to the lowly craftsman, while the sculptor, like the modern leader, only points in general direction articulating a vague vision to be interpreted. Kenyon has a lot of projects going on and Miriam seems not too impressed by them, so any opinion of hers has to be cajoled. There is one treasure, be it a guilty one, and that is given by the sculptured hands of Hilda, hands he has so committed to memory that he could reconstruct them in clay afterwards, mirroring at a more trivial scale, the feat of Hilda herself, having so well memorized a painting in private view and prohibited from copying at the spot, that she can create it on canvas in the privacy of her own abode. Later on he tries also to catch Donatello as a bust, looking for that special expression of innocence turned pensive and sorrow. He achieves it temporarily but fortuitously rather than by design only to have it pass. If Donatello as a primeval Faun was already caught in marble during ancient times, and is not the Faun of old lineage going back to Arcadian times? Kenyon was trying to catch him as a modern man that has tasted the forbidden fruit.

Art is at its best when not completed, the author thinks. A picture that is finished is inferior to one which is merely suggested. If it is good, it is a dead-end, leaving the imagination no work to be done, and if bad, far worse, confusing and leading the spectator astray. It is indeed the first sketch that has the real lustre, because in that we become privy to the inspiration which has just alighted and glows purely. What is added is toil, which may drive home the message more clearly, but which in the end merely adulterates.

Religion and religious feeling play an important role. The artist as a spectator views religious paintings as mere pictures interesting not for their contents, of all importance to the worshipper, but for its aesthetic aspects. On the other hand the systematic viewing of pictures in a gallery may be seen as a form of worship. Thus Hilda after a while finds this activity pointless and devoid of the salt it formerly captivated her with. Instead her appreciation of the effusively ornamented churches, she was brought up as a puritan to despise and abhor, takes on a new light. As Kenyon pointedly remarks; a stained glass window seen from the outside is all dark and dead, it is only from the inside it takes on

light and life. Outside the church there is no spirit to be had, only inside the same can you experience divinity. Obviously Hawthorne himself feels the pull of the Catholic Church and its institutions so remarkably adapted to the true needs of man. Puritanism is a harsh and intellectual attitude to religion, speaking only to cold reason, exacting and unforgiving, while the Catholic Church is far more indulgent, pampering to the weaknesses of men, without feeling the need to appeal to their strengths. Maybe the strongest institutions is after all the confession with the concomitant relief of absolution. More than anything else Hilda feels the need to unburden herself, she needs a friend she can trust. Miriam has defaulted on hers, and it is exactly that she needs to talk about. Kenyon is not available, and after all is he true enough for her to engage? But the church always provides the service regardless of your social situation. It is always there. Her outpouring and the consoling words of the confessor brings about a state of deep relief. Then of course the spell is somewhat broken when the confessor points out the unfairness of the situation, how she has taken advantage of an institution to which she has not pledged a commitment. She ought to convert, the confessor seeing as his duty to bring in yet another soul in the fold. But Hilda holds back, maybe her commitment to her Puritan upbringing is far too strong to make her yield on the spur of the moment, be the moment momentous.

The language of Hawthorne is elaborated and rich. Maybe too rich and elaborated, at least for modern sensibilities which demand simplicity. Yet it provides some of the pleasures of reading him and reminds us that there is another American tradition than the one that mainly meets us now with its vulgarity. The colonial history of New England goes further back than any other Anglo-Saxon one in North America, and the Puritan culture is both quaint and serious, many would say offensive, yet as I want to emphasize not vulgar. Additionally he puts his at times overwrought language to good use, it is in particular effective in conveying visual scenes. In particular the ornateness of the language is particularly suited to bring forth the luxurious ornateness of a Catholic church building. Also in conveying landscape and mood its elaborateness is well adjusted to the challenge. One can sense the pleasure with which he goes about the task, especially when depicting interiors of churches. The splendor in addition to offending his Puritan sensibilities also fascinates him to the point of enrapture and indeed in his diary notes from Italy he tries to imagine how the English churches may have appeared before the whitewashing of a Cromwell.

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