

Narrative Strategies in *The Marble Faun*

David S. Ramsey

With a twitching nose
A dog reads a telegram
On a wet tree trunk. —Richard Wright

Fond gardeners cherish their lovely flowers
no less because they were grown in manure.
—Peter Gay, *Freud for Historians*

Taking a central tenet from Transcendentalist philosophy, the microscopic-macroscopic affinity between the “All in One, and the One in All,” one might infer that from either the minutest analysis of a single text, or the most general perusal of a writer’s entire corpus, we can arrive at an identifiable literary theory. Given the myopia of the former approach, however, and the often prohibitively large output with which we would have to deal in the latter, it seems more appropriate to negotiate between these extremes. This study begins by gleaning widely from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s work to abstract a literary theory and then focuses on his last completed novel, *The Marble Faun* (1860), to illustrate this theory’s application. Some might object that this novel is Hawthorne’s worst and that the attempt to propound a literary theory from a failure is itself doomed to failure. I would like to suggest, rather, that perhaps because of its “failings” (some of which are intentional and metafictional), because the narrative’s seams (and thus the procedures used in constructing it) are more readily apprehensible, this novel becomes an appropriate text to pursue such an investigation. As Joel Pfister has demonstrated in his analysis of this novel’s gendered discourses, “Hawthorne *undercuts* the authority of the narration by calling attention to its artifice,” and “Hawthorne *wants* his readers to catch his narrator in the act and to focus on narrative sleights of hand” (179 original emphasis). More importantly, *The Marble Faun* offers one of the most comprehensive and problematic discussions of aesthetic issues that Hawthorne ever presented.

Where writers such as Poe and James have left stand-alone expository works in which they expound their philosophies of composition, from Hawthorne we have

no such non-fiction documents. In order to understand his protocol of fiction, then, we may turn to the texts we do have (albeit in the fictive realm of tales, sketches, and novels), glean from them passages in which he discusses the writer's task, and construct from them a cogent, unified theory.¹ A couple of problems immediately come to mind in pursuing such a project: (1) the distinctions among persona, narrator, and biographical writer, and (2) the Procrustean danger of perhaps forcing an extensive canon into a descriptive sutra that presupposes its prescriptive operation in the writing process. Some might agree with Emerson that "Consistency is the hobgoblins of little minds" and that the quest to find a unified philosophy of composition in Hawthorne is at best an *ignis fatuus*. But we do indeed find throughout the works a unity of themes—the dialectic between head and heart, the twilight zone of romance between day and night, reality and imagination—and such a consistency presents a strong case for locating the author's convictions in the narratives. Further justification for conflating the historical Hawthorne with the narrative voice is found in the similarities between fiction and biography, such as the itinerant novelist's plan in "The Seven Vagabonds" with Hawthorne's original intention for *The Storyteller*, and by referring to para-fictive and non-fictive documents, such as the prefaces and letters.

One of Hawthorne's most revealing statements on the technique of writing occurs in "Passages From a Relinquished Work":

I had immensely underrated the difficulties of my idle trade; now I recognized that it demanded nothing short of my whole powers, cultivated to the utmost No talent or attainment could come amiss; every thing, indeed, was requisite; wide observation, varied knowledge, deep thoughts, and sparkling ones; pathos and levity, and a mixture of both, like sunshine in a rain-drop; lofty imagination, veiling itself in the garb of common life; and the practised art which alone could render these gifts, and more than these, available. (10: 416)²

A rather striking observation in this passage is the quintessentially Hawthornesque juxtaposition of opposites—"deep thoughts and sparkling ones; pathos and levity"—and their resolution into a "mixture of both." Another (and somewhat analogous dialectically) is the dictum to express abstract and elevated thought in terms that are concrete and mundane. It is just such a technique that Richard Fogle

discusses in *Hawthorne's Fiction: The Light and The Dark*, a work that follows Melville's famous observation on the dual nature of Hawthorne's vision. Positing the light as Hawthorne's "clarity of design" and the dark as his "tragic vision," Fogle observes that with Hawthorne "abstract meaning is compressed into one flashing concrete image" (9). What obtains from this union is a symbolic language that is both allegorical and possessed of an autonomous vitality: in "The Minister's Black Veil," for example, the veil is an emblem of sin and a dramatic vehicle that impels the plot. Roy Male similarly notes that "Hawthorne's characteristic method is to use a simile or metaphor on one page and make it part of the literal action elsewhere" (89). One instance of this is in *The Scarlet Letter*, where Chillingworth is first described as digging into Dimmesdale's heart "like a sexton delving into a grave," and then later presented as having found herbs growing on a grave.

What we find in Hawthorne's work, then, is a certain aesthetic unity, one which derives largely from the theoretical influences of *Aids to Reflection* and *Biographia Literaria*, documented as among Hawthorne's borrowings from the Salem Athenaeum.³ Like Coleridge, Hawthorne conceived of art "as a means and not an end" (Jacobson 5), and quite influential upon Hawthorne's conception of art as an idealization that shapes reality into "universal truth" (Foster 244) is Coleridge's metaphysic of "Organic Vitalism," which seeks to "create a world above nature by using its knowledge to postulate the essential creative process of nature" (Kimbrough 285). As the imagination echoes "the eternal art of creation in the infinite I AM" and "struggles to idealize and to unify" (Coleridge 1: 304), so the "multeity" which fuses the "many into one" is best captured in Hawthorne's symbolic representations. The focus and density that such symbols as the ministers' veil, the May-pole, the carbuncle, the birthmark, the stone face, and the scarlet letter provide, offer at once "the clarity of allegory, with the complexity and intensity of life" (Fogle, *Fiction* 13). The most famous of these symbols is, of course, the scarlet letter, drawn from actual Puritan practices that Hawthorne had read about. But while the scarlet "A" begins as a stigma of adultery and initiates the plot as a simple allegory, it evolves into a cluster of new meanings, "able" and "angel" among them, and effectively rewrites the narrative.

The ideal symbol of the Romantic aesthetic involves "a fusion of meaning and form" (Fogle, *Imagery* 9), and this protocol is echoed at the end of Hawthorne's short story "The Antique Ring," when the character Edward confesses "'You know that I can never separate the idea from the symbol in which it manifests itself'" (11:

352). For Hawthorne, this fusion is best found in the “neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other.” In this, his most famous discussion of the romance writer’s craft (from the preface to *The Scarlet Letter*), Hawthorne offers as a metaphor for this “neutral territory” the effect of moonlight upon common objects, which “are so spiritualized by the unusual light, that they seem to lose their actual substance, and become things of intellect” (1: 35–36). As Terence Martin observes, Hawthorne had to establish the conditions under which his work was to be received, or, to put it another way, “Hawthorne needed a fiction to create fiction” (“Method” 8). We need to consider as well the publishing conditions and the literary marketplace when attempting to understand a writer’s principles of composition. Just as Poe’s “aesthetic brevity” may be seen as practical self-promotion from a writer of tales, but not of novels, so an understanding of Hawthorne’s “divided art” needs to move beyond biography and personal artistic precepts and should consider “the conflicted literary marketplace he was trying to enter” (Bell, “Introduction” 7, 18–19).

Hawthorne’s philosophy of composition is most saliently revealed in his distinguishing among literary genres. Although discussion of the semantic intention behind calling one thing a “Tale,” another a “Romance,” and referring to another as an “Allegory” might seem to dwell only in slippery abstraction, there is—at least in Hawthorne—a vital difference between these and their counterparts of a more realistic fiction. In the “Preface” to *The House of the Seven Gables*, for example, Hawthorne claims for the romance “a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material” which is not appropriate for the novel. Even further, while the novel writer aims “at a very minute fidelity” in representing the “ordinary course of man’s experience,” the romance writer “may so manage his atmospherical medium as to bring out or mellow the lights and deepen and enrich the shadows of the picture” (2: 1). What often results from this license is allegory, and the writer must be careful of oversimplifying his subjects to the point that they seem mere types rather than characters with whom the reader can sympathize. Poe famously criticized Hawthorne’s love of allegory. Calling *Pilgrim’s Progress* (one of Hawthorne’s favorite works) a “Ludicrously over-rated book,” he charged Hawthorne as well with “mannerism” and of writing in “dreamy innuendo.” Henry James similarly accused Hawthorne of “a want of reality and an abuse of the fanciful element—of a certain superficial symbolism,” and T. S. Eliot also criticized Hawthorne’s allegorical propensities as

a “lazy substitute for profundity” (qtd. in Cohen, 25, 128, 160). Indeed, Hawthorne himself berated his “inveterate love of allegory,” which he thought was apt to render his characters like “people in the clouds, and to steal away the human warmth out of his conceptions” (10: 91–92). The danger that Hawthorne saw in this narrative strategy, then, concerned the separation of the author and his work from the “magnetic chain of humanity,” an independence that often results in what Mellicent Bell has called a “spiritual self-centeredness” (*Hawthorne’s View* 5). This excessively autonomous self can be found in both the shorter and the longer fiction: the “Unpardonable Sin” that Ethan Brand commits obtains from this dislocation, as does Miles Coverdale’s aloof perspective as character in and narrator of *The Blithedale Romance*. Only through love can the artist or visionary redeem himself and his art or project, and so the would-be social reformer Holgrave is joined with Phoebe in *The Blithedale Romance*, and the artist Kenyon with Hilda in *The Marble Faun*. Readers usually want happy endings, and happy endings often involve the beginning of a new couple, but in Hawthorne’s texts this frequently requires the abandonment of an idealized artistic self. Thus even though the “Actual” (dramatically embodied in a love object) threatens the artistic imagination, it yet provides a “necessary antidote to the abstractness and coldness of the aesthetic consciousness” (Levy 45). Indeed, even the (dark/light) duality of Hawthorne’s fiction has been similarly read as a gendered, happy coupling: in 1845, the literary editor Evert A. Duyckinck suggested that ““The perfectness of his style, the completeness of form, the unity of his subject and of all his subjects are masculine: the light play of fancy, the sentiment, are feminine”” (qtd. in Bell “Introduction” 14). At a time when American women writers ruled the roost, “feminine” fiction sold more copies and a male writer ignored it at his peril.

Allegory is useful for a writer who “thought ultimately in terms of abstraction” (Turner 135), and this explains the interdependence and complementary nature of Hawthorne’s characters as a sort of *psychomachia* of representative types or faculties. In “The Snow Image,” for example, we are presented with the conflicting viewpoints of the imagination and reason as the children and their father attempt to identify their new-found playmate as, respectively, some supernatural creature or a lost girl. This conflict is resolved in the mother, Mrs. Lindsay, whose character “had a strain of poetry in it,” and is able to see in the unknown girl “some invisible angel” even as she rejects the idea as “foolish” (11: 7, 20). This “neutral” ground is not always so explicitly provided, however. In “Roger Malvin’s Burial,” between Reuben’s “supernatural” perception and Dorcas’ “real world” optic lies a “third point of

view,” which only “emerges in the reader’s mind as he attempts to make sense of the [other] two” (Burns 275). This balancing of narrative equivocation brings up a key element in Hawthorne’s fictional technique. Because “the Actual and the Imaginary can meet only in a theory or habit of perception” and because Hawthorne insisted upon the importance of both within his fiction, he turned to allegory to resolve this “indecisiveness”—for it is “the nature of allegory . . . to beg the question of absolute reality” (Feidelson 7–8). But here again we must remember that Hawthorne is aiming at some Ur-reality and ultimate truth beneath the pasteboard mask of what is simply perceived. The inclusion of Aesop into “The Hall of Fantasy” with the likes of Homer, Shakespeare, and Milton suggests that the didactic is a literary merit, and “that allegory [is] the highest use of imagination” (Foster 245). Although Hawthorne occasionally censured what he called his “blasted allegories,” it would be a critical error for the reader to accept him at his word and similarly dismiss as an artistic flaw the influence of a tradition so prevalent in his work. Moreover, putative preference or intention and actual practice are two different things, and in discussing Hawthorne’s philosophy of composition one must distinguish between what he says is his protocol and what the fiction itself belies—again the problem of prescription versus description. In 1860, Hawthorne wrote to his friend and publisher James T. Fields: “my own individual taste is for quite another class of works than those which I myself am able to write.” And he goes on to declare what writing should be: “solid and substantial . . . and just as real as if some giant had hewn a great lump out of the earth and put it under a glass case, with all its inhabitants going about their daily business” (18: 229). What he accuses himself of, then, is a lack of verisimilitude, a charge which echoes the “Preface” to *Twice-told Tales*. Here, he confesses that “Instead of passion, there is sentiment,” that his attempts at humor and pathos are ineffectual, and that unless it is read “in the clear, brown, twilight atmosphere in which it was written . . . , it is apt to look exceedingly like a volume of blank pages” (9: 5).

Although some of this self-effacement can no doubt be dismissed as rhetorical posturing (humility best becomes an “idler”), it nonetheless provides the reader with a sense of what the author was aiming at and instructions for arriving there. Indeed, within Hawthorne’s fiction proper are many authorial intrusions, from simple moralizing (from “The Birthmark”: “had Aylmer reached a profounder wisdom, he need not have flung away the happiness”) and question inviting (from “Young Goodman Brown”: “Had Goodman Brown fallen asleep in the forest, and only dreamed of

a witch meeting?") to such prefatory appendages as contextualize "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" and *The Scarlet Letter*. This penchant for filling in what we may consider Iserian gaps, after the work of Wolfgang Iser on the phenomenology of reading, suggests that Hawthorne's aesthetic of the ambiguous twilight is at times at odds with his textual determinacy. At this paradoxical juncture, the present study turns to a close examination of *The Marble Faun*. For readers unfamiliar with this last of Hawthorne's completed novels, a brief summary may be useful.

Set in contemporary, mid-nineteenth-century Italy, *The Marble Faun* focuses on the grand tour experience of young American expatriate artists and is as much a travel narrative of Hawthorne's own experiences in the galleries of Rome and other cities and the Italian countryside as it is a novel. Indeed, whole passages are lifted from Hawthorne's *Italian Notebooks*, and it often reads more like a tour brochure than fiction. The four principal characters are two, young Anglo-American artists, the pragmatist Kenyon and his love-interest, the angelically naïve Hilda; the young, passionate, "dark lady" Miriam, an artist of mysterious origins whose nature is cut from the same cloth as Hester Prynne's; and the young naïf-primitive Donatello, an Italian count who serves at times as a tour guide to the three, seeks and wins the affections of Miriam, and defends her honor even to the point of murder. The central conflict is precipitated by Donatello's murdering a malevolent Capuchin monk who stalks Miriam with a secret of her past, and the novel investigates the *felix culpa* theme as a crime and punishment psychological drama in which the naïve come to know evil.

To understand any author's philosophy of composition, it is useful to begin with the premise that how one writes is dependent upon how one reads or expects one's readers to read. The "Preface" to *The Marble Faun* addresses a "Gentle, Kind, Benevolent, Indulgent, and most Beloved and Honoured Reader," and although the narrator has never "personally encountered" such a reader, he yet maintains "a sturdy faith in his actual existence" (4: 1–2). Leaving aside the unintentionally ironic male assumption (as Hawthorne's readers would have been mostly women), the preface establishes the parameters of fiction and prescribes the methodologies that the reader is to use in reading the ensuing narrative. The most central element of all is the dialectic between fact and fantasy, from which obtains the "poetic or fairy precinct." Echoing as it does all of Hawthorne's previous prefaces and introductions, this dialectic or ambiguity remains the most vital and central element in

understanding his literary theory.

As Hawthorne's realm of the romance lies between the Actual and the Imaginary, so in a reader-response aesthetic the location of meaning resides in a "neutral territory" between the reader and the writer. What Hawthorne refers to as the "Actual" is the phenomenological and verifiable reality that the reader brings to bear in reading the text through the lens of his or her experience, and the "Imaginary" is that license which the author takes with the world-as-word and presents to the reader as text. In *The Implied Reader*, Wolfgang Iser presents a reader-response theory that can be fruitfully applied to understand the nature of Hawthorne's work and his compositional technique:

[T]he literary work has two poles, which we might call the artistic and the esthetic: the artistic refers to the text created by the author, and the esthetic to the realization accomplished by the reader. From this polarity it follows that the literary work cannot be completely identical with the text, or with the realization of the text, but in fact must lie halfway between the two. (274)⁴

A "kaleidoscope of perceptions, preintentions, [and] recollections," reading involves a "process of anticipation and retrospection": everything that one reads previews what is to come, and what *does* come revises and qualifies what came before. Even more importantly, this "dynamism" is attained "only through inevitable omissions" or "gaps left by the text itself" (279–80), narrative interstices which must be filled by the reader in order to elicit the text's meaning. Similarly, in Hawthorne, the reader is required to bridge the distance between the Actual and the Imaginary, the poles between which lie the realm of romance and the proper perspective with which one is to read it. In the "Preface" to *The Marble Faun*, Hawthorne projects this dialectic between the Actual and the Imaginary onto the geography of Europe: Hawthorne's stay in Italy provided the "poetic or fairy precinct" from which obtained the raw materials, but it required the Author's later stay in England with the "dreary sands of Redcar" and "the gray German Ocean" to bring them into relief and shape them into a novel (4: 3).⁵ Projecting this dialectic not upon geography but upon the interior landscape, one might metaphorically suggest that the reader becomes, as it were, the *corpus callosum* through which the two realms infuse and permeate one another.

The relationship between writer and reader is best explained in the chapter "The Emptiness of Picture-Galleries," where the narrator declares that "A picture . . .

requires of the spectator a surrender of himself” and that “There is always the necessity of helping out the painter’s art with your own resources of sensibility and imagination” (4: 435). This protocol of roles is in turn picked up by the characters, who offer a similar psychology of aesthetics. In discussing the resemblance of their friend Count Donatello to the Faun of Praxiteles and the changes that one perceives in a statue or painting when one studies it long enough, Kenyon observes that “It is the spectator’s mood that transfigures the Transfiguration itself. I defy any painter to move and elevate me without my own consent and assistance” (4: 17). Similarly, when the four principle characters peruse a portfolio of hastily drawn sketches which “several connoisseurs” attribute to Raphael and da Vinci, the narrator observes that such rough drawings exude the “aroma and fragrance of new thought” and poetic inspiration for the very reason that they are homely and “rudely scratched”: “The charm lay partly in their very imperfection; for this is suggestive, and sets the imagination at work; whereas, the finished picture, if a good one, leaves the spectator nothing to do” (4: 137–38). Even more crucial is Hilda’s formulation in a later scene, in which she extends the rubric to embrace the linguistic arts as well as the plastic: “Nobody, I think, ought to read poetry, or look at pictures or statues, who cannot find a great deal more in them than the poet or artist has actually expressed. Their highest merit is suggestiveness” (4: 379). Given this congruence of the characters’ and the narrator’s phenomenology of aesthetic response, Mellicent Bell is probably right in her observation that the artists of Hawthorne’s romances “are direct developments of the narrator-artist Oberon, of the sketches, and still act as authorial witnesses” (*Hawthorne’s View* 151).

One of the more common techniques that Hawthorne employs to involve the reader is direct address. In fact, the very first sentence of *The Marble Faun* proper utilizes such an appeal: “Four individuals, in whose fortunes we should be glad to interest the reader, happened to be standing in one of the saloons of the sculpture-gallery, in the Capitol, at Rome” (4: 5, 6). The narrator then proceeds with a descriptive panorama of the Etruscan, Roman, and Christian ruins “in the hope of putting the reader into that state of feeling which is experienced oftenest at Rome.” Similarly, after describing the “portrait of a beautiful woman” and giving Donatello’s exclamation that it is Miriam’s own self, the narrator states: “we forbore to speak descriptively of Miriam’s beauty earlier in our narrative, because we foresaw this occasion to bring it perhaps more forcibly before the reader” (4: 48–49). Although such “road signs” instruct us how to react, they also inhibit suspension of disbelief: obviating

the text as fiction seems to tell our reason what we should be feeling emotionally. At times, however, this metafictional apparatus is more subtly impressed into the narrative substance itself. An example of this is the segue from the scene at Rome to the castle at Monte Beni, which focuses on the newly-arrived Kenyon: “Thither we must now accompany him, and endeavour to make our story flow onward, like a streamlet, past a gray tower that rises on the hillside, overlooking a spacious valley, which is set in the grand frame-work of the Apennines” (4: 213). By the time we finish reading this sentence, we have forgotten that it began as a metaphor for the art of story-telling, and register it as setting. Even on such a minute scale, then, we find a conflation between the Actual (the text as real-life document) and the Imaginary (the narrative as fiction) creating the neutral territory that Hawthorne claimed to require for the scene of his romances. This detailed treatment, manifest in rhetorical tropes, is also applied to characterization. An intriguing instance of *apophasis* (coming, as it does, with an admission that it will jeopardize our sympathy with the characters) occurs in the historic reverie upon the pavements and flagstones of Rome:⁶ “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 stepped on yonder stone, nor how Horace was want to stroll near by.” Given the narrator’s observation on the “density” (historical substance) that these “ghosts” from antiquity possess to make “the actual people of to-day” seem even “more ghostlike” and “thinner” (4: 159–60) and hence threaten verisimilitude, why does Hawthorne conjure them forth? The answer, presumably, is that while mimetic violation may be held against a novelist, it was expected of a romancer: just as it may solidify the historic ghost into a tangible reality, so it can transform the present into a mist-like fiction, locating the characters in a “fairy precinct” between the two.

Hawthorne is at his best, however, when he allows the material of the novel to direct the reader, and one device of this more delicate and refined approach is the use of what we may consider narrative “props.” In one scene, after Kenyon takes his leave of Hilda, he looks up at her dove-cote from the street below and wishes “to bring her close to his heart.” One of the doves, as if on cue and sensitive to this longing, flies suddenly downward, brushes “his upturned face with its wings,” and returns to his angelic mistress (4: 372). A similar technique involves the characters’ reactions to some action or expression that is not described by the narrator—implied or omitted “stage directions” which must be supplied by the reader if he is to make sense of these reactions. In a different scene, focusing on a different couple-to-be,

the narrator describes the “natural smile” that erupts over Miriam’s face even as she justifies the sullen expression of a self-portrait she shows to Donatello in her studio. Donatello comments: “Let it shine upon the picture! There; it has vanished already!” (4: 49). Between his imperative to capture the smile and his observation that it is already gone lies her change of expression, and this dynamic exists only in the mind’s eye as we imagine or “see” the scene as a continuous flow comprised of discontinuous fragments, much like the frames of a film. Often, then, the reader must supply what isn’t stated, and even as the narrator apologizes for his *apophases*, he more frequently calls attention to a kind of *para-apophasis* as an apology for his narrative.

Confessing that to cite real-life nineteenth-century American and European artists and sculptors with whom the main (fictional) characters go on a moonlit walk would be a pleasant task but also one “not easily manageable, and far too perilous,” the narrator concludes that such allusions would strike “where they were not aimed.” Later, he similarly admits that “Unless words were gems, that would flame with many-coloured lights upon the page, and throw thence a tremulous glimmer into the reader’s eyes, it were vain to attempt a description of a princely chapel” (4: 133–34, 345). What functions do these obviations and confessions serve? Most immediately, they declare the impossibility of adequately rendering things into words, signified into signifier, and the failure of language to capture a protean reality that is too slippery to be forced into pen and ink. This very declaration, however, compels the reader to imagine that which is beyond the provided description, compels him or her to fill the void between people and things as phenomena, and language as a noumenal echo. More challengingly, they implicitly question language *qua* language, and this philosophical inquiry is one that is woven into the plot.

In the very beginning of the novel, the resemblance is made between the young Italian Count Donatello and Praxiteles’ famous statue of a faun. Much later, after this resemblance is understood to be more than coincidence but the enduring presence of racial/ethnic traits (with Southern Europeans understood to be lower on the human totem pole than Northern Europeans and thereby more ethnic and natural; and with Donatello, as a count, to have preserved in his blood a pure and natural noblesse), Anglo-American Kenyon requests Donatello to call the animals of the forest. Donatello (naïve, primitive, and proud of it) happily complies, and his voice becomes a sound “of a murmurous character, soft, attractive, persuasive, friendly.” Kenyon postulates that this “might have been the original voice and utterance of

natural man, before the sophistication of the human intellect formed what we now call language.” Sensitive to the pathos, but forbearing “to analyze it, lest . . . it should perish in his grasp” (4: 248), Kenyon responds to a language which is pre-rational and atavistic. Indeed, his musings echo the narrative musings in the first chapter, where the narrator suggests that the Faun of Praxiteles may represent “a poet’s reminiscence of a period when man’s affinity with Nature was more strict” (4: 11). Similarly, when Kenyon and Donatello look from the tower of Monte Beni upon the “grand hieroglyphics” of the surrounding landscape, Kenyon is uncharacteristically mute and unable to preach: “Only begin to read it, and you will find it interpreting itself without the aid of words” (4: 258). Allowing the material to speak for itself, however, is often not typical of Hawthorne’s style.

Despite Hawthorne’s and his characters’ protestations that the most achieved art is subtle and “suggestive,” we find in this work rather frequent authorial intrusion and interpretation—leaving the reader at times little to do but swallow the supplied moral whole. When Hilda catches the simultaneous reflections of herself and the portrait of Beatrice Cenci in the mirror, she is horrified at the similarity of expression and hides her face in her hands: “Am I, too, stained with guilt?” Rather than letting the question stand (and compel the reader to provide the answer), Hawthorne immediately answers: “Not so, thank Heaven!” (4: 205). Less intrusive but no less didactic are those scenes in which the characters themselves become the hermeneutists. Just as Hawthorne, the persona, projects himself into the narrative as a character (such as in the “Postscript”), so the characters step out of their fiction to function as commentators. Immediately after Hilda’s tower is described above the roof tops of Rome, Miriam says to Hilda that “in your maiden elevation, you dwell above our vanities and passions.” Later, when she visits Kenyon’s studio, she extracts a moral from the material and art of sculpture: “As these busts in the block of marble, . . . so does our individual fate exist in the limestone of Time” (4: 53, 116).

The person most frequently called upon to perform this quasi-authorial function is Kenyon. Himself an inveterate allegorist and Anglo-American male (and thereby an appropriate mouthpiece for Hawthorne), he sees in Donatello’s climb to the owl tower an emblem of “the spiritual experience of many a sinful soul,” in the “serpentine” grape vine’s imprisonment of its supporting tree a symbol for the Temperance Movement, and in the cathedral windows an emblem that religious truth must be “viewed from the warm interior of Belief.” Kenyon is equally skilled at literary exegesis. After hearing Donatello recount the myth of his progenitors,

Kenyon interprets and reduces it into a simple moral: “Whether so intended, or not, he understood it as an apologue, typifying the soothing and genial effects of an habitual intercourse with Nature” (4: 253, 291–92, 306, 246). Given the narrator’s observation of the discrepancy between intention and reception, the reader is invited to question the provided summation of Kenyon as reader of the myth. Even further, as Kenyon is so often conflated with and assumes a quasi-authorial voice, the reader may be similarly cued—whether the narrator or Hawthorne “so intended, or not”—to remain as skeptical of the narrator’s explications as we are of Kenyon’s. The most important interpretation that Kenyon provides concerns Donatello’s fate, and, by extension, the very novel itself, of which he himself is part: “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.” But reality is far too complex to fit neatly into this simplistic conclusion, and after Hilda refuses to accept the provided moral, he offers another and tells her to “take your choice!”: “He perpetrated a great crime; and his remorse, gnawing into his soul, has awakened it; developing a thousand high capabilities moral and intellectual” (4: 459–60). Curiously, Kenyon acknowledges outright his position as hermeneutist and confesses that his at times voyeuristic presence and function is somewhat of a violation. Earlier in the novel, when after crime and estrangement Donatello and Miriam are reunited beneath the benediction of the Pope’s statue, Kenyon voices an uneasiness at his own presence: “It seems . . . intrusive, if not irreverent, for a third person to thrust himself between the two solely concerned in a crisis like the present. Yet . . . I may discern somewhat of a truth that is hidden from you both—may, at least, interpret or suggest some ideas” (4: 321). If we penetrate beneath the fictive levels of dialogue (or character) and narrative (or persona), this declaration may perhaps be read as Hawthorne’s self-revelation as author and his instructions as to how we should respond to his text. At once an apology and affirmation, it further echoes the dialecticism that informs the treatment and very substance of his work. What obtains is an allegorical technique that questions its methodologies even as it applies them.

Hawthorne’s “allegory is made into a testing ground for the constantly changing values of the modern world” (Becker 170), and no one view point can adequately address them. Because of this Argus-eyed vision and because his allegory is “so fluid and subjective,” Hyatt Waggoner humorously suggests that “If Bunyan had read Hawthorne, he might have put him in one of his own allegories and called

him Mr. Shaky-faith” (187). Indeed one of the more interesting Iserian interstices that one encounters in reading *The Marble Faun* involves the shifting narrative perspective. At one extreme, the narrator characterizes himself as simply an editor and “raconteur” who gathers and pieces together the story from the scanty material he is provided with.⁷ From this limited perspective, he admits, “Many words of deep significance” have been lost and “scattered to the winds,” and were he to insert his “own conjectural amendments” to cover these deficiencies, he might “perhaps give a purport utterly at variance with the true one.” Nonetheless, he declares that “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). Thus, the narrator both disqualifies himself as absolute authority and qualifies his text as fiction. But the very limitations that this posturing suggests are used by Hawthorne to advantage. When the guilt-driven Miriam shouts to Hilda to ““Pray for us,”” the narrator hides behind his ignorance to forestall condemnation upon Hilda for being insensitive to her friend’s call: “Whether Hilda heard and recognized the voice, we cannot tell” (4: 177). Quite a different perspective is taken when the narrator becomes not only an omniscient narrator, but a Freudian omniscient narrator, and peers into the minds and hearts of his characters to discover subconscious thoughts of which they themselves are unaware. When Kenyon responds to Miriam’s too-emotional appeal for his friendship with the presentiment that she would eventually resent this confidence, the narrator locates this feeling in the pre-conscious: “whether he were conscious of it or no, [it] resulted from a suspicion that had crept into his heart, and lay there in a dark corner” (4: 129). Depending upon the immediate needs of the fictive thread, then, Hawthorne’s narrator can become either a common observer or a psychoanalytic Paul Pry, with the reader suspended between the two extremes and left to negotiate between action and thought, between what is explicitly stated and what is merely implied. Like the romance that is being narrated, even the narrative perspective itself resides in a neutral territory of perception.

Granted the dependence of the text upon the reader to realize its potential, different readers will, of course, bring different experiences and perceptions to bear in decoding it (Iser 280). This Hawthorne realized, and he does accordingly present several debates in which conflicting readings of the world and its representations in art are offered. One of these involves the “many stories about Miriam’s origin and previous life,” which the narrator simply catalogues—“heiress of a great Jewish banker,” a

“German princess,” “the offspring of a Southern American planter,” “the lady of an English nobleman”—and leaves it (until the “Postscript”) to “the reader to designate them either under the probable or the romantic head” (4: 22–23). The characters themselves also enter these debates, but while they attempt to find resolution and to supply a single meaning and moral, they are unable to do so, and so the narrator frequently steps in to resolve them.

On looking from the battlements of Monte Beni, Kenyon and Donatello look up at the shifting clouds and “tumbling vapours” that the thunderstorm has brought, and they project their would-be lovers upon them. Kenyon’s “very heart” is moved by what he perceives to be a reclining feminine figure (Hilda—the reference which the reader is implicitly directed to supply), while Donatello explicitly declares the figure and face to be that of his love-interest, Miriam. The narrator then steps in to effectively erase the tablatore and leave the mists yet undecipherable: “the two gazers thus found their own reminiscences and presentiments floating among the clouds” (4: 266). It is interesting to notice the words and ideas employed—“reminiscences and presentiments”—for this is rather similar to the concepts and terms that Iser employs to describe the process of reading as an act which negotiates between the past and future and elides them into a present and ever-shifting meaning. Hawthorne’s art “pulls us into a constant awareness of artistic processes so that the *act* of picturing rather than the picture itself becomes dominant” (Clarke 133, original emphasis), and this act is reader-dependent. On their pilgrimage among the “hills and valleys” of the Tuscan countryside, Kenyon and Donatello stop into a cathedral and offer antithetical interpretations of the Christ figure in the stained-glass windows. Kenyon declares, “‘It is divine Love,’” but his companion insists otherwise: “‘To my eyes,’ said Donatello stubbornly, ‘it is wrath, not Love! Each must interpret for himself’” (4: 306). Nonetheless, Hawthorne does suggest that there are certain parameters within which any interpretation must reside, and a point beyond which the reader-observer must not tread. When, for instance, a young Italian artist captures via a sketch Hilda in her “strange sorrow” as she stands before da Vinci’s *Joanna of Aragon*, he renders her with a blood-spot on her otherwise white robe. Insisting upon “the stainless purity of its subject,” he titles his later, finished portrait “‘Innocence, dying of a Blood-stain!’” The art dealer who purchases the piece, however, mocks the appellation and the supplied interpretation; re-titling it “‘The Signorina’s Vengeance,’” he supplies a new exegesis: “‘She has stabbed her lover, over night, and is repenting it betimes, the next morning.’” Through dramatic irony, the reader of course knows more than either

the artist or the dealer, but the narrator steps in to underscore a further point: “Thus coarsely does the world translate all finer griefs that meet its eye!” (4: 330–31). Although there may be conflicting readings, then, one must not actually rewrite a “text” to the extent of textual violence. It has a certain authority and integrity that should not be violated.

Given the indeterminate, interactive flexibility that Hawthorne’s “workshop method” suggests, the “Postscript” of *The Marble Faun* is perhaps best read as an apologia and a final confession that the requirements of narration have proven too great for the material endeavored. Indeed, the “demands for further elucidations” makes the “Author” (narrator) “sensible that he can have succeeded but imperfectly, at best, in throwing about this Romance the kind of atmosphere essential to the effect at which he aimed” (4: 463). But again, Hawthorne adds another level of confusion in this very elucidation. The “Postscript” begins innocently enough as a non-fiction document, a letter to the readers of the “new edition” from the “Author.” But soon this “Author” slips behind the veil of fiction when he admits “himself troubled with a curiosity similar to that which he has just deprecated on the part of his readers,” and he must therefore climb to the top of Saint Peter’s to interview the characters of the novel and “pry into several dark recesses of the story, with which they had heretofore imperfectly acquainted him.” Almost comically, projecting the onus of narrative deficiencies onto the characters themselves does resolve the most central questions that remain unanswered for the reader. Even so, the preceding and final chapter of the story proper anticipates these unanswered questions and attempts to stymie the very probing bewilderment that necessitates the “Postscript”:

The gentle reader, we trust, would not thank us for one of those minute elucidations, which are 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 the web apart, with the idle purpose of discovering how its threads have been knit together. (4: 455)

This passage becomes most curious when we remember that Hawthorne himself

“tears” at the narrative tapestry and obviates how it has been “knit together” through the metafictional apparatus that he weaves into the story. What are we to make, then, of his defense that “any narrative of human action and adventure . . . is certain to be a fragile handiwork, more easily rent than mended” (4: 455)?

As Hawthorne’s material and technique are best understood in terms of the neutral territory, so are his observations that discuss this technique: the “Postscript,” like his numerous prefaces, is a para-fictional document that straddles real life and the story world. When in the “Preface” he claims to “make [his] most reverent bow, and retire behind the curtain” (4: 2), we should remember that he is still there, and apt to peek from behind it. This perforation of the fictive veil works both ways, a point that Emerson complained of when he said that Hawthorne “invites his readers too much into his study, [and] opens the process before them. As if the confectioner should say to his customers, ‘Now, let us make a cake’” (qtd. in Martin 51). Although Hawthorne similarly objects that “to impale the story with its moral” is like “sticking a pin through a butterfly—thus at once depriving it of life” (2: 2), we have seen that such protocol of obviation is a vital element in his compositional technique and releases his fiction into a new life—suspended between the Actual and the Imaginary.

Notes

- ¹ Critics have eagerly offered their own readings of Hawthorne’s philosophy of composition on the writer’s behalf, particularly during the heyday of New Criticism. See Bell, *Hawthorne’s View*; Burns; Fogle, *Hawthorne’s Fiction and Hawthorne’s Imagery*; Foster; Jacobson; Kimbrough; Levy; Martin, “Method;” and Turner. Unabashedly ahistorical and dated as many of these works are, they offer useful close readings of how Hawthorne represented and discussed the writer’s craft in his work.
- ² All references to Hawthorne’s works are to *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*.
- ³ For Hawthorne’s reading, see Kesselring.
- ⁴ It should be noted that Iser’s phenomenology of reading applies to all texts—fiction and nonfiction alike. I am extending his analysis to the realm of metaphor.
- ⁵ This alliance of England and Germany is all the more telling when we remember that Coleridgean thought (which plays a prominent role in Hawthorne’s aesthetics) derives from German philosophy. A more crucial and sustained geographic duality concerns not Italy and Germany, but Hawthorne’s “divided loyalties” between the Old World and New.

While celebrating “the democratic benefits won in the split with England,” Hawthorne yet regretted “the loss of cultural and aesthetic values accompanying that split.” See Newberry; the quote is from p. 21.

⁶ *Apophysis* is a rhetorical trope in which one alludes to or even emphasizes something by denying that it will be mentioned.

⁷ Like the “The Custom-House” surveyor who discovers the scarlet letter and the accompanying parchment, the narrator of *The Marble Faun* becomes interested in the history of his characters by the “imperfect” bust of Donatello. The presence of a real-life artifact invites the imagination to provide it with context and meaning.

Works Cited

- Becker, John E. *Hawthorne's Historical Allegory*. Port Washington, NY: Kennikat P, 1971.
- Bell, Millicent. “Introduction.” *New Essays on Hawthorne's Major Tales*. Ed. Millicent Bell. New York: Cambridge UP, 1993. 1–35.
- . *Hawthorne's View of the Artist*. [Albany]: State U of New York, 1962.
- Burns, Shannon. “Hawthorne's Literary Theory in the Tales.” *The Nathaniel Hawthorne Journal* 7 (1977): 261–77.
- Clarke, Graham. “To Transform and Transfigure: The Aesthetic Play of Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun*.” In *Nathaniel Hawthorne: New Critical Essays*. Ed. A. Robert Lee. Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1982. 131–47.
- Cohen, B. Bernard, ed. *The Recognition of Nathaniel Hawthorne*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1969.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. Ed. Kathleen Coburn and Bart Winer, et al. 16 vols. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1969–2001.
- Crowley, Donald J., ed. *Hawthorne: The Critical Heritage*. New York: Barnes, 1970.
- Feidelson, Charles, Jr. *Symbolism and American Literature*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1953.
- Fogle, Richard Harter. *Hawthorne's Fiction: The Light and the Dark*. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1952.
- . *Hawthorne's Imagery: The “Proper Light and Shadow” in the Major Romances*. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1969.
- Foster, Charles Howell. “Hawthorne's Literary Theory.” *PMLA* 57 (1942): 241–54.
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*. Ed. William Charvat, et al. 23 vols. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1962–97.
- Iser, Wolfgang. *The Implied Reader*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1974.
- Jacobson, Richard J. *Hawthorne's Conception of the Creative Process*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1965.

- Kesselring, Marion L. *Hawthorne's Reading, 1828–1850: A Transcription and Identification of Titles Recorded in the Charge-Books of the Salem Athenaeum*. New York: The New York Public Library, 1949.
- Kimbrough, Robert. "'The Actual and the Imaginary': Hawthorne's Theory of Art in Theory and Practice." *Transactions of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters* 50 (1961): 277–93.
- Levy, Leo B. "'Lifelikeness' in Hawthorne's Fiction." *The Nathaniel Hawthorne Journal* 5 (1975): 141–45.
- Male, Roy R. "Hawthorne's Literal Figures." *Ruined Eden of the Present*. Ed. G. R. Thompson and Virgil L. Lokke. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue UP, 1981. 71–92.
- Martin, Terence. "The Method of Hawthorne's Tales." *Hawthorne Centenary Essays*. Ed. Roy Harvey Pearce. Ohio State UP, 1964. 7–30.
- . *Nathaniel Hawthorne*. Boston: Twayne, 1983.
- Newberry, Frederick. *Hawthorne's Divided Loyalties: England and America in His Works*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated UP, 1987.
- Pfister, Joel. *The Production of Personal Life: Class, Gender, and the Psychological in Hawthorne's Fiction*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1991.
- Turner, Arlin. "Hawthorne as Self-Critic." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 37 (1938): 132–38.
- Waggoner, Hyatt H. "Art and Belief." *Hawthorne Centenary Essays*. Ed. Roy Harvey Pearce. Ohio State UP, 1964. 167–95.