

# Americans in Europe: The Case of The Marble Faun

By

Yukitoshi Hayashi\*

## 1

Out of the main four novels written by Nathaniel Hawthorne, the stages of three novels are all set in New England. The stage of The Marble Faun, the last of the four novels, however, is set in Italy, mainly in Rome.

Hawthorne had never been abroad until he went to England with his family, where he served as U.S. consul in Liverpool from 1853 to 1857. When he made his first visit to Europe, he was nearly fifty years old. He traveled around Europe – England, France and Italy – and returned to the U.S. in 1860.

The Marble Faun was written during his stay in Europe and was first published in England under the title of Transformation. When it was published in the U.S. soon after that, it was titled The Marble Faun: Or, the Romance of Monte Beni. These titles, which are connected with Donatello, the Count of Monte Beni, however, do not seem to represent the whole novel, because it does not seem that either Donatello or the marble statue of a Faun plays a central part of the novel.

It is true, as many critics argue, that this novel is centered upon what is called the Fortunate Fall or the man's original sin. Donatello's murder with Miriam as its accomplice and his human growth seem to be parallel with the fall of Adam and Eve and the loss of the Garden of Eden.

In spite of such direct theological analogy, The Marble Faun is abundant in realistic and picturesque descriptions of Rome and Tuscan Hills. It might well avail many tourists visiting Rome in those days.

Kenyon and Hilda, American artists staying in Rome, guide readers around Rome and other places. What interests me most in this novel is Americans in Europe, how Americans feel in Europe and what they think of it. It seems that the two American characters could reflect Hawthorne's ideas about Europe. Therefore, it could be possible to understand how Hawthorne felt in Europe and what he thought of it. That's partly because this is the only novel whose setting is Europe, not New England, that Hawthorne wrote based on his experiences in Europe. Therefore I focus on three characters, Hilda, Kenyon and Miriam; the former two might be considered as representative Americans, the latter one as a representative European.

## 2

How are Italy, especially Rome, and America described in the eyes of Americans in this novel? In the preface of the novel, Hawthorne describes the advantage of Italy as the stage of a romance compared with America as follows:

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\*釧路高専一般教科

Italy, as the site of his[the author] Romance, was chiefly valuable to him as affording 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. 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 common-place 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 events of our individual lives. Romance and poetry, like ivy, lichens, and wall-flowers, need Ruin to make them grow. (3)

It reminds us of the similar descriptions by James, although those of James are more lengthy and exhaustive (34-5). Hawthorne is lamenting that his native country is lacking in cultural tradition based on a long history, which allows “a sort of poetic or fairy precinct” which he believes is characteristic of “Romance.” Italy, or Europe, is represented by old temples and shrines, ancient ruins, that is, the accumulation of the past. Hawthorne says as follows:

We glance hastily at these things – at this bright sky, and those blue, distant mountains, and at the ruins, Etruscan, Roman, Christian, venerable with a threefold antiquity, and at the company of world-famous statues in the saloon – in the hope of putting the reader into that state of feeling which is experienced oftenest at Rome. It is a vague sense of ponderous remembrances; a perception of such weight and density in a by-gone life, of which this spot was the center, that the present moment is pressed down or crowded out, and our individual affairs and interests are but half as real, here, as elsewhere. (6)

The biggest difference between America and Italy or Rome is the “weight and density” of history. Hawthorne often used the history of New England not only in *The Scarlet Letter* but also in many other tales and sketches. It makes one feel how important the historical past was to Hawthorne as he writes a “romance.”

At the Fountain of Trevi, one of the most popular fountains in Rome, practical, democratic and patriotic Americans are referred to:

“What would be done with this water-power,” suggested an artist[Kenyon], “if we had it in one of our American cities? Would they employ it to turn the machinery of a cotton-mill, I wonder!”

“The good people would pull down those rampant marble deities,” said Kenyon; “and possibly they would give me a commission to carve the one-and-thirty (is that the number?) sister-States, each pouring a silver stream from a separate can into one vast basin, which should represent the grand reservoir of national prosperity.” (146)

Americans suggested by Kenyon here represent American practicalism and materialism, which Hawthorne seems to criticize all the time. Such criticism goes farther to the following remarks, which can be said to be a criticism of modern civilization in general:

It is iron rule in our days, to require an object and a purpose in life. It makes us all parts of a complicated scheme of progress, which can only result in our arrival at a colder and drearier

region than we were born in. It insists upon everybody's adding somewhat (a mite, perhaps, but earned by incessant effort) to an accumulated pile of usefulness, of which the only use will be, to burthen our posterity with even heavier thoughts and more inordinate labor than our own. No life now wanders like an unfettered stream; there is a mill-wheel for the tiniest rivulet to turn. We go all wrong, by too strenuous a resolution to go all right. (239)

This criticism which seems to be shared between the narrator and an American character (Kenyon) in this novel might indicate Hawthorne's position; he is both favorable and critical to the present situation of his home country. In this respect, Hilda is different from Kenyon and the narrator though she is American. Kenyon seems to live in the nineteenth century America and to think from the nineteenth century point of view, but Hilda seems to live in the past or rather to transcend the times. As is to be described in the next chapter, Hilda might represent a kind of American spirit.

3

Miriam is a close friend of Kenyon and Hilda. However, Miriam and Hilda are very different from each other. Miriam's character is explained in one part as a result of the character typical of an artist, and in another part as a result of Roman atmosphere:

Thus, little would remain to be accounted for, except the deportment of Miriam herself; her reserve, her brooding melancholy, her petulance, and moody passion. If generously interpreted, even these morbid symptoms might have sufficient cause in the stimulating and exhausting influences of an imaginative art, exercised by a delicate young woman, in the nervous and unwholesome atmosphere of Rome. (36)

This kind of description of Rome is conspicuous when being compared with Hilda, who is an American artist and lives in a lofty tower of the Virgin's shrine. She is a Puritan and has a very strict idea about sin. In Miriam's comments, pure and innocent Hilda is contrasted with earthly Rome:

"What a hermitage you have found for yourself, dear Hilda!" she [Miriam] exclaimed. "You breathe sweet air, above all the evil scents of Rome; and even so, in your maiden elevation, you dwell above our vanities and passions, our moral dust and mud, with the doves and the angels for your nearest neighbors...." (53)

The difference in ways of thinking between Miriam and Hilda could be seen in several scenes. For example, about the Lacus Curtius, Miriam and Hilda show conflicting views of the mythical hero who plunged into the mysterious hole to save Rome. When she was asked by Hilda where the hole was, Miriam replies and says, suggesting her pessimism:

"Wait, and it will open for you," replied her friend [Miriam]. – "The chasm was merely one of the orifices of that pit of blackness that lies between us, everywhere. The firmest substance of human happiness is but a thin crust spread over it, with just reality enough to bear up the illusive stage-scenery amid which we tread. It needs no earthquake to open the chasm. A footstep, a little heavier than ordinary, will serve; and we must step very daintily, not to break through the crust, at any moment. By-and-by, we inevitably sink! It was a foolish piece of heroism in Curtius to

precipitate himself there, in advance; For all Rome, you see, has been swallowed up in that gulf, in spite of him. ... All piled upon poor Curtius, who thought to have saved them all! I am loth to smile at the self-conceit of that gallant horseman, but cannot well avoid it.” (161-2)

Hilda argues against her such pessimistic view:

“It grieves me to hear you speak thus, Miriam,” said Hilda, whose natural and cheerful piety was shocked by her friend’s gloomy view of human destinies. “It seems to me that there is no chasm, nor any hideous emptiness under our feet, except what the evil within us digs. If there be such a chasm, let us bridge it over with good thoughts and deeds, and we shall tread safely to the other side. It was the guilt of Rome, no doubt, that caused this gulf to open; and Curtius filled it up with his heroic self-sacrifice, and patriotism, which was the best virtue that the old Romans knew. Every wrong thing makes the gulf deeper; every night one helps to fill it up. As the evil of Rome was far more than its good, the whole commonwealth finally sank into it, indeed, but of no original necessity.” (162)

Hilda believes in good, self-sacrifice and patriotism, believes that good overcomes evil, with one exception of the case of ancient Rome.

Kenyon explains the reason why Hilda admires the Guido’s picture which shows the Archangel tramping on Satan after a fierce battle, that is, what the narrator calls, “the triumph of Goodness over the Evil Principle” (183):

“No wonder; for there is hardly another so beautiful in the world. What an expression of heavenly severity in the Archangel’s face! There is a degree of pain, trouble, and disgust at being brought in contact with sin, even for the purpose of quelling and punishing it; and yet a celestial tranquility pervades his whole being.” (183)

However, Miriam criticizes the picture because of the Archangel’s quiet appearance in spite of a fierce battle:

“How fair he looks, with his unruffled wings, with his unhacked sword, and clad in his bright armour, and that exquisitely fitting sky-blue tunic, cut in the latest Paradisaical mode. What a dainty air of the first celestial society! With what half-scornful delicacy he sets his prettily sandalled foot on the head of his prostrate foe! But, is it thus that Virtue looks, the moment after its death-struggle with Evil? No, no! I could have told Guido better. A full third of the Archangel’s feathers should have been torn from his wings; the rest all ruffled, till they looked like Satan’s own! His sword should be streaming with blood, and perhaps broken half-way to the hilt; his armour crushed, his robes rent, his breast gory; a bleeding gash on his brow, cutting right across the stern scowl of battle! He should press his foot hard down upon the old Serpent, as if his very soul depended upon it, feeling him squirm mightily, and doubting whether the fight were half-over yet, and how the victory might turn! And, with all this fierceness, this grimness, this unutterable horror, there should still be something high, tender, and holy, in Michael’s eyes, and around his mouth. But the battle never was such child’s play as Guido’s dapper Archangel seems to have found it!” (184)

It seems that Hilda thinks of the conflict between good and evil from quite an ideal or theological point of view. That's because she has never experienced evil. It was not until she witnessed the model's murder by Donatello and Miriam that she first came to know that there really is sin on the earth. However, she cannot acknowledge it as true nor accept Miriam as her friend as before. Miriam, on the other hand, looks upon evil as part of our real life. You could say that the conflict between good and evil is just under way in Miriam's mind. When Miriam visited Hilda's tower soon after the crime of murder, Hilda said:

"If I were one of God's angels, with a nature incapable of stain, and garments that never could be spotted, I would keep ever at your side, and try to lead you upward. But I am a poor, lonely girl, whom God has set here in an evil world, and given her only a white robe, and bid her wear it back to Him, as white as when she put it on. Your powerful magnetism would be too much for me. The pure, white atmosphere, in which I try to discern what things are good and true, would be discoloured. And, therefore, Miriam, before it is too late, I mean to put faith in this awful heart-quake, which warns me henceforth to avoid you!" (208)

This is a kind of statement of the end of their relationship. This scene helps to create a very cruel image of Hilda. Miriam answered:

"I always said, Hilda, that you were merciless; for I had a perception of it, even while you loved me best. You have no sin, nor any conception of what it is; and therefore you are so terribly severe! As an angel, you are not amiss; but, as a human creature, and a woman among earthly men and women, you need a sin to soften you!" (209)

Furthermore Hilda replies, describing an idea typical of Hawthorne's works about sin as follows:

"...Ah, now I understand how the sins of generations past have created an atmosphere of sin for those that follow! While there is a single guilty person in the universe, each innocent one must feel his innocence tortured by the guilt. Your deed, Miriam, has darkened the whole sky!" (212)

It can be said that there is a particular contrast between Miriam and Hilda. It seems to result from the fact that the former comes from Europe and that the latter comes from America. The difference between the two women is most dependent on their morality or the way of thinking about sin.

Here is a conversation between Miriam and Kenyon, which shows a particular difference of their moral sense. At this point, Kenyon seems to have the same view of sin as Hilda. It is as follows:

"Is he not beautiful?" said Miriam, watching the sculptor's eye as it dwelt admiringly on Donatello. "So changed, yet still, in a deeper sense, so much the same! He has travelled in a circle, as all things heavenly and earthly do, and now comes back to his original self, with an inestimable treasure of improvement won from an experience of pain. How wonderful is this! I tremble at my own thoughts, yet must needs probe them to their depth. Was the crime – in which he and I were wedded – was it a blessing in that strange disguise? Was it a means of education, bringing a simple and imperfect nature to a point of feeling and intelligence, which it could have reached under no other discipline?"

"You stir up deep and perilous matter, Miriam," replied Kenyon. "I dare not follow you into the



unfathomable abysses, which you are tending.”

“Yet there is a pleasure in them! I delight to brood on the verge of this great mystery,” returned she. “The story of the Fall of Man! Is it not repeated in our Romance of Monte Beni? And may we follow the analogy yet farther? Was that the very sin – into which Adam precipitated himself and all his race – was it the destined means by which, over a long pathway of toil and sorrow, we are to attain a higher, brighter, and profounder happiness, than our lost birthright gave? Will not this idea account for the permitted existence of sin, as no other theory can?”

“It is too dangerous, Miriam! I cannot follow you!” repeated the sculptor. “Mortal man has no right to tread on the ground where you now set your feet!” (434-5)

What Miriam insists is what is called the Fortunate Fall, which is generally considered as the main theme of this novel.

Kenyon, then, tells almost the same idea to Hilda although he is deeply shocked as Miriam tells it to him. Kenyon seems to tend to be influenced by others. Of course Hilda is quite embarrassed. Her reactions are the same as or more acute than those of Kenyon when he listens to Miriam:

“Here comes my perplexity,” continued Kenyon. “Sin has educated Donatello, and elevated him. Is Sin, then – which we deem such a dreadful blackness in the Universe – is it, like Sorrow, merely an element of human education, through which we struggle to a higher and purer state than we could otherwise have attained. Did Adam fall, that we might ultimately rise to a far loftier Paradise than his?”

“Oh, hush!” cried Hilda, shrinking from him with an expression of horror which wounded the poor, speculative sculptor to the soul. “This is terrible; and I could weep for you, if you indeed believe it. Do not you perceive what a mockery your creed makes, not only of all religious sentiment, but of moral law, and how it annuls and obliterates whatever precepts of Heaven are written deepest within us? You have shocked me beyond words!” (460)

What can be seen here is the contrast between an innocent American girl and a sinful European woman, and one has, as her background, pure and innocent paradise America and the other has sinful, corrupt Europe. Waggoner also admits that there is such a contrast in the novel: “To be sure, Hawthorne anticipates James in developing the Europe versus America theme: Rome is the past, experience, culture, and corruption, in contrast with America’s present, ideals, morality, and innocence: Miriam versus Hilda(223).”

#### 4

Hilda takes to the confessional, not being able to bear the burden of her friends’ sin. However, she decisively rejects the auditor’s request to convert to Catholicism. Kenyon is once inspired with Miriam’s idea about the Fortunate Fall, but he withdraws it as soon as it is rejected by Hilda. Both young Americans finally decide to go back home.

The young American couple returns to America in the same way as they came to Europe. Although they experienced European evil and the Fortunate Fall, they were not affected by them. Nor did they lose their belief. This reminds us of Hilda’s words already cited: “But I am a poor, lonely girl, whom God has set here in an evil world, and given her only a white robe, and bid her wear it back to Him, as white as when she put it on.” If we apply this remark to this story as a whole, their home country America

would be heaven and Rome “an evil world” or hell. Kōji Ōi insists that there is a myth in American consciousness that America is an innocent paradise far from the evil of European civilization, and he tries to show that it is a pure fabrication. He says, “It is possible to say that his[Hawthorne] aim was..., in a way, to search for what an American really is in a non-American situation(206).” His conclusion is that Kenyon and Hilda were typical Americans, who believe the American myth and long for Arcadia and the Golden Age, and that, unlike Donatello, they failed in “emotional education” even after their experience of European evil(222). Innocent Americans go back to their innocent paradise America, which is not really paradise. As referred before, it is alluded by Kenyon and the narrator. There is a great chasm between reality and the ideal. The American ideal can be traced originally to the ideal of Puritans, especially the Pilgrim Fathers, who came across the Atlantic to the New World for freedom of faith, or directly to the ideal of independence from Britain in 1775. Both are based on the idea that Europe is evil and America is the paradise. On the other hand, the reality in the nineteenth century was affected by materialism and practicalism, though this situation must have been seen in Europe as well as in America. Kenyon seems to be aware of such gap, which makes him different from Hilda, though both are Americans.

Kenyon and Hilda return to America without being affected by European evil. Contrary there is a case of an American who is ruined in Europe. Daisy Miller in “Daisy Miller: A Study” by Henry James dies of Roman fever in Rome as she goes out with an Italian man in spite of advice given by other Americans living in Rome. According to Winterbourne, who is a young American man living in Geneva, defends Daisy by saying that her demeanors are “innocent” and “very unsophisticated” and that she is “a pretty American flirt”(247). Mrs. Costello, Winterbourne’s aunt, and Mrs. Walker, Winterbourne’s acquaintance in Geneva, who are both sophisticated and Europeanized Americans, are both critical of Daisy. Such Americans in Rome refuse Daisy’s visit for fear that people in Rome believe that she is a typical American girl:

They ceased to invite her[Daisy], and they intimated that they desired to express to observant Europeans the great truth that, though Miss Daisy Miller was a young American Lady, her behaviour was not representative – was regarded by her compatriots as abnormal...(287)

Hilda and Daisy seem quite different from each other. The former is an idealized American girl who inherited Puritan spirit. The latter is an unsophisticated American girl who is independent of European manners. But both are “innocent” American girls who won’t give up their purely American manners. Hilda flees from Europe before being affected by European evil. On the other hand, Daisy is killed by the same evil since she persists in being American while she stays in Europe and keep in close contact with Europeans. In any case, Americans, especially when they are typical Americans, are not able to keep living in Europe without being Europeanized. Otherwise, they cannot but flee from Europe or be ruined. Kenyon and Hilda promise to get married and decide to go back home. The young couple gives up their artistic pursuit in Europe. Hawthorne also goes back home with his family soon after finishing this novel. As Waggoner says, it seems that “Kenyon and Hilda are Nathaniel and Sofia(213-4). They also might have been in the same state of mind after their eight-year stay in Europe:

So Kenyon won the gentle Hilda’s shy affection, and her consent to be his bride. Another hand must henceforth trim the lamp before the Virgin’s shrine; for Hilda was coming down from her old tower, to be herself enshrined and worshipped as a household Saint, in the light of her husband’s

fireside. And, now that life had so much human promise in it, they resolved to go back to their own land; because the years, after all, have a kind of emptiness, when we spend too many of them on a foreign shore. We defer the reality of life, in such cases, until a future moment, when we shall again breathe our native air; but, by-and-by, there are no future moments; or, if we do return, we find that the native air has lost its invigorating quality, and that life has shifted its reality to the spot where we have deemed ourselves only temporary residents. 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. (461)

Compared with James, who finally became naturalized as a British citizen, Hawthorne might have feared he would lose his sense as an American. As James regarded him as to be “intensely and vividly local”(2), he seems to have persisted in being an American writer. For him, Americans visiting Europe might have been just foreigners, temporary sojourners, who are destined to go back home soon, from the beginning. America, after all, must have been Paradise for him, even though it was not really so.

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