

## ABSTRACT

The Morality and Marriage of Taste and Imagination in Nathaniel Hawthorne's Fiction

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Throughout his writing, Nathaniel Hawthorne is interested in the power of art to bring about positive ethical change. In his tales, he questions the ability of aesthetic taste (as it was understood by Scottish Common Sense philosophy) to morally reward the discerning critic. In contrast with the Scots, he posits a creative, Romantic imagination in *The Scarlet Letter* as the means for moral development—suggesting that *artistry* rather than *art* brings about real ethical change. Later on, in *The Marble Faun*, his last completed novel, Hawthorne synthesizes the goals of Common Sense taste with the method of Romantic imagination, encouraging his readers to become artists themselves. He also creates Hilda the copyist as a symbol of this marriage and as an example of the moral benefits of imaginative taste. Ultimately, for Hawthorne, viewers must—like Hilda—exercise their imaginations along with the artist in order to draw moral benefits from works of art.

The Morality and Marriage of Taste and Imagination in Nathaniel Hawthorne's Fiction

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A Thesis

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Talking of a taste for painting and sculpture, [Hiram] Powers observed that it was something very different and quite apart from the moral sense, and that it was often, perhaps generally, possessed by unprincipled men of ability and cultivation. I have had this perception myself.

—Hawthorne, *French and Italian Notebooks*

[T]he imagination is not a talent of some men but is the health of every man.

—Emerson, “Poetry and Imagination”

When Nathaniel Hawthorne allies himself with Powers in the above notebook entry, confessing his doubt that aesthetic taste could be blended with the moral sense, he sets himself against a dominant school of nineteenth-century aesthetics and ethics—Scottish Realism. The movement, beginning in the middle of the eighteenth century, was highly influential in American universities like Hawthorne’s own Bowdoin College and was so dedicated to principles of common sense that it soon came to be known simply as Common Sense philosophy. The father of the movement Thomas Reid defined *taste* as “[t]hat power of the mind by which we are capable of discerning and relishing the beauties of Nature, and whatever is excellent in the fine arts” (713).<sup>1</sup> Reid roundly praised this faculty of discernment and appreciation, saying that when one develops taste, “intellectual and moral powers begin to open, and, if cherished by favourable circumstances, advance gradually in strength, till they arrive at that degree of perfection, to which human nature, in its present state, is limited” (765).

In his fiction, Hawthorne consistently rejects this premise that Common Sense taste can lead to moral perfection. Instead, he posits the creative imagination as a

wellspring of not only art, but, as Emerson saw it, of intellectual, moral, and spiritual health. Drawing from Coleridge, Hawthorne presents the imagination in his fiction as a human echo of God's "eternal act of creation" that "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates" sensations and memories "in order to re-create" them in art (*Biographia*, I: 304). In Hawthorne's Romances, this practice of actively reconstructing memories after an ideal, beautiful form improves artists' morals by bringing them closer to God and placing them in line with providence. In a way Hawthorne anticipates Hans Urs von Balthasar's comment that "the interpretation of the beautiful must spiral upwards, towards the divinely-wrought event. If we cling to what is below, we will possess the beautiful only in its aesthetic 'fallenness'" (58). For Hawthorne it is the imagination's dynamic shifts between activity and passivity (rather than taste's static passivity) that produces this spiritual and moral spiral upwards, and so the Romantic imagination, rather than Common Sense taste, enjoys a privileged spot in his hierarchy of mental faculties.

Despite this emphasis on the creation of art, Hawthorne refused to see art as wholly self-serving, something capable of producing moral gains for the imaginative artist alone. Unlike his ghostly ancestors from "The Custom-House" who view his career as a "writer of story-books" with disgust, asking, "What kind of a business in life,—what mode of glorifying God, or being serviceable to mankind in his day and generation,—may that be?" Hawthorne eventually sees in the appreciation of art a means of sparking the creative imagination (I: 10). Instead of wholly abandoning aesthetic taste, Hawthorne recreates it in his theory of romance, adding to the Common Sense understanding of the term an imaginative depth that makes the faculty of taste both creatively demanding and morally efficacious.

The following pages chart Hawthorne's movement towards this marriage of taste and imagination, organizing his career as a writer into something of a Hegelian dialectic. In the first chapter, I offer a sketch of eighteenth-century Common Sense theories on the ethical benefits of taste and describe Hawthorne's exposure to these ideas, before demonstrating his rejection of taste in several of his early tales. In the second chapter, I examine *The Scarlet Letter*, arguing that, in his characterization of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale, Hawthorne moves towards a more Romantic aesthetic. Hawthorne's Romanticism functions as an antithesis of Common Sense theory by valuing artistic imagination as the privileged means for moral development and deriding taste as an element of fancy, one of the mind's lesser faculties. In the third and final chapter, I examine *The Marble Faun*, arguing that here Hawthorne comes to a synthesis of Common Sense and Romantic thought, using Romantic methodology to meet Common Sense goals and embodying this combination of discourses in the character of Hilda.

One premise behind this study is that Hawthorne did not compose his fiction in a vacuum, but wrote under the guidance of and sometimes in reaction to the web of ideas that made up the intellectual atmosphere of his New England. Likewise, this thesis has been largely shaped by the intellectual atmosphere of Baylor University, and I owe a debt of gratitude to several of my professors and colleagues in the Graduate School for their suggestions, guidance, and support. I also owe a debt of gratitude to the librarians of Baylor and Indiana Wesleyan University, to Dr. Marj Elder, the wise professor and witty friend who first introduced me to Hawthorne, and to my wife Danielle Luttrull, who patiently read, listened to, and endured this study in its many forms.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Impotence of Taste in the Tales

In his 1991 biography, Edwin Haviland Miller claims that Nathaniel Hawthorne “was not bookish” and goes on to gently chide “modern commentators [who] seek literary and intellectual influences in his writings” (56). Miller finds proof against Hawthorne’s often assumed status as a scholar in the fact that he owned few books and sometimes belittled his learning in his letters, chiefly in his admission to Longfellow that he had “turned over a good many books, but in so desultory a way that it cannot be called study” and did not result in “the fruits of study” (XV: 252).

Miller’s claim may seem persuasive, endorsed as it is by Hawthorne himself; however, one could argue that he takes Hawthorne’s modesty too seriously. In his letters and prefaces, Hawthorne repeatedly criticizes himself as a scholar, artist, and storyteller. He may have been ironic in his self-defacement, or he may have judged himself too harshly in light of the meteoric rise of some of his peers. As Michael J. Colacurcio asks of the self-deprecating tone in the above letter, “[W]hat else does the ‘obscurest man of letters in America’ say to the former classmate who has gone on to become The Professor of Modern Languages in Harvard University?” (73) Besides placing too much faith in Hawthorne’s self-appraisal, Miller also ignores the reams of books Hawthorne checked out from the Salem Athenaeum<sup>1</sup> along with the scores of literary, historical, and philosophical references that pervade tales like “A Virtuoso’s Collection” or “The Hall of Fantasy.” All things considered, it seems that Hawthorne either most horrendously dropped names in his romances and over-taxed his library card in an attempt to impress



future scholars, or that he did indeed, contrary to Miller and his own admission, acquire various “literary and intellectual influences.”

One of these influences—Scottish Common Sense philosophy—shows up repeatedly in Hawthorne’s fiction, and several of his earliest tales borrow from and criticize some of the Scots’ basic tenants: especially their views on the moral benefits of aesthetic taste. Hawthorne was probably first exposed to the Common Sense school in 1824 when he took a course in moral philosophy at Bowdoin College from the young professor Thomas C. Upham. Upham eventually wrote one of the most widely used textbooks on psychology in nineteenth-century America and probably introduced Hawthorne to Dugald Stewart’s *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind* (Alkana 35). Upham’s influence seems to linger a few years after Hawthorne left Bowdoin when, during the summer of 1827, he further explored the works of Stewart and his predecessors, reading Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Thomas Brown’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, Archibald Alison’s *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste*, Lord Kames’s *Elements of Criticism*, and Francis Hutcheson’s *Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (Kesselring 19). As Rita K. Gollin and John L. Idol have demonstrated, this trend in the young Hawthorne’s reading represents one of the first steps in his life-long interest in understanding the fine arts (15). Indeed, the book list is especially apt for such a task, containing some of the earliest extended discussions and full-length works on aesthetics in the English language.

It is important to remember, however, that these early works on aesthetics were often coupled with moral theories. They did not endorse beauty or sublimity for purely didactic purposes, but the authors did often focus on the moral benefits of taste,

suggesting that a schooling in the beauty of art or nature naturally makes one more tactful, upright, and ultimately kind to one's neighbors. The theme is so pronounced in Kames's *Elements of Criticism* that Benjamin Franklin, though he read very little of the book, was able to praise Kames in a letter, writing, "I am convinced of your position, new as it was to me, that a good taste in the arts contributes to an improvement of morals" (241). Similarly, Archibald Alison ends his *Essays on Taste* by asking educators to encourage their students' "instinctive taste for the beauty and sublimity of Nature," for such an appreciation helps "awaken those latent feelings of benevolence and of sympathy from which all the moral or intellectual greatness of man finally arises" (433). For these thinkers, a taste for beauty and sublimity is not only an instrument of pleasure, though pleasure remains one of its principal purposes, but taste also becomes a tool for expanding the audience's morals.

This belief in taste's moral impact finds its origins in Francis Hutcheson's explanation of the moral sense. Unlike his philosophical opponents Hobbes and Mandeville, Hutcheson believes that humans act virtuously for emotive rather than rational reasons. He takes this line of argument, in part, to explain and defend altruism. Instead of suggesting with Hobbes that ethics arise from the social contract and our desire for personal safety and prosperity, Hutcheson argues that our understanding of morality comes from a divinely-engineered moral perception that causes humans to delight in virtue and abhor evil independent of any good or bad that the actions might incur for them personally. Hutcheson defines this concept of the moral sense most clearly in his *Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, writing:

We are not to imagine, that this *moral Sense*, more than the other Senses, supposes any *innate Ideas*, or *Knowledge*, or *practical Proposition*: We

mean by it only a *Determination of our Minds to receive amiable or disagreeable Ideas of Actions, when they shall occur to our Observation*, [...]; even as we are pleas'd with a *regular Form* or an *harmonious Composition*. (124)

For Hutcheson, the moral sense is like aesthetic taste; we delight in charity like we delight in the *Mona Lisa*. There are no practical reasons to delight in the act or the painting, but there are qualities about them that excite our complex, internal senses and cause us to enjoy them. We understand morals, then, through the way we feel—not the way we think.

In his recent study *Trouble with Strangers*, Terry Eagleton calls Hutcheson's "so-called moral sense [...] a confession of philosophical defeat" because it rejects reason for emotion (22). To be fair to Hutcheson, reason still plays a role in his emotive ethics, and it is the philosopher's job to isolate the qualities that excite our moral sense, examine a specific act for those qualities, and then deduce the relative moral worth of the act. Hutcheson pushes this system of deduction to its limits in the first edition of his *Inquiry* by creating mathematical templates to demonstrate why our moral sense ascribes different weight to different events, judging torture, for instance, more harshly than bribery (267).<sup>2</sup> To mitigate Eagleton's criticism of Hutcheson's ethics, we might say that reason is displaced rather than rejected by the Common Sense philosopher. For if morality is based on feeling, then reason no longer acts as the primary means for determining right from wrong; it is used only secondarily to evaluate these feelings. Instead, to the Common Sense philosopher, our chief means for ethical development is the enlargement of our natural ability to feel or sympathize.

Perhaps the chief means for increasing this ability to sympathize is aesthetic taste, which Hutcheson's followers valued as an ethical tool for two reasons. First, they

believed that art is able to heighten the moral sense by enhancing the viewer or reader's aesthetic sense. As Archibald Alison suggests, "[T]he emotions of taste are blended with MORAL sentiment" (427). And so when we fully appreciate a painting, the artwork's "fineness, delicacy, gentleness, majesty, solemnity, &c. [...] awaken corresponding emotions in our bosoms, and give exercise to some of the most virtuous feelings of our nature" (429). This rather superficial, analogical connection between art and morality probably suggests to most modern readers what Hutcheson calls "the *occult Quality* of a *moral Sense*" because of its shadowy speculations (245). Lord Kames offers a slightly more nuanced explanation of this blending of the senses, however, claiming that developing sensitivity to beauty "heightens our sensibility of pain and pleasure," because it puts us more in touch with our physical senses (13). This increased general awareness develops the moral sense by making us more attuned to the pain and pleasure of others and thereby increasing "our sympathy, which is the capital branch of every social passion" (13).

Along with this faith in the correlation of the senses, Hutcheson's followers believed that taste heightens the moral sense through the didacticism of art. According to Kames, good art exposes the viewer or reader to great acts, which, when filtered through the imagination, allows her to sympathize with others more readily because of her desire to imitate the heroes and to avoid the behavior of the villains. Kames writes that depictions of great acts excite "*the sympathetic emotion of virtue*" (72), which "prompts us to imitate what we admire" (75). The eager student of ethics might prod herself into a virtuous life, then, by developing a taste for art that excites her sympathetic emotion and encourages her to perform generous acts. Kames, with a healthy dose of Enlightenment

optimism, claims as much, writing, “Proper means [...] being ever at hand to raise this sympathetic emotion, its frequent reiteration may, in a good measure, supply the want of a more complete exercise. *Thus, by proper discipline, every person may acquire a settled habit of virtue*” (75 my emphasis). Later, perhaps hoping to help his readers create an aesthetic regimen capable of moving them into moral perfection, Kames puts the genres of fine art into a hierarchy according to their ability to provoke this virtue of sympathy. He ranks tragic drama first, historical painting second, and fiction third (117).

Hawthorne certainly read deeply into these Common Sense philosophers, but had he not, he still would have been exposed to their thoughts from living and moving within creative circles. For, as the eighteenth century wore on and as the next century began, Hutcheson’s ideas and the ethical and aesthetic theories they spawned gradually drifted out of philosophy and into fiction, following the evolution of the novel all the way from Sterne to Dickens (Eagleton 81-2).<sup>3</sup> George Eliot, for instance, presents her own mixture of aesthetics and moral sense theory in “The Natural History of German Life,” where she claims, “The greatest benefit we owe to the artist whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies. [...] A picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is a part from themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment” (110). Eliot is more reserved than Kames, less eager to claim that art can lead every person to a life of complete, habitual virtue. But, in line with Kames, she suggests that great art should move viewers in the direction of virtue by exciting and heightening their internal moral senses.

Considering the broad influence of Hutcheson and his school, we should not be surprised to find Hawthorne fascinated with the moral potential of aesthetic taste that comes across so strongly in their thought. And indeed, the theme runs all the way from some of his early tales of the 1830s to *The Marble Faun*, his final published novel. Throughout his tales and romances, Hawthorne creates fictional works of art with explicit moral purposes and characters that strive to develop a taste for that art. In contrast to the optimistic endorsement of Kames and even the more measured hope of Eliot, however, art often has a difficult time provoking moral growth in Hawthorne's fictional universe. This is perhaps most evident in his tales, in which taste, as the Common Sense school defines it, repeatedly fails to produce a moral effect and in which Hawthorne begins to suggest that an energetic, creative imagination is necessary to make the appreciation of art morally beneficial.

Hawthorne's first major criticism of taste comes in "Prophetic Pictures," in which an unnamed artist paints two portraits and draws a sketch of the main characters Walter and Elinor Ludlow to warn them of an impending danger. The couple, however, ignores the warnings, and the tale ends with Walter attempting to murder his wife in a fit of fatalistic insanity. Hawthorne begins the tale with a generous description of the artist, giving us a list of his accomplishments in letters and rhetoric and his skills as a portrait artist. Hawthorne describes him as an eccentric virtuoso from Europe, who came to colonial America to sharpen his skills on the frontier. Walter explains that his paintings mirror their subjects perfectly and that "he paints not merely a man's features, but his mind and heart. He catches the secret sentiments and passions, and throws them upon the canvas, like sunshine—or perhaps, in the portraits of dark-souled men, like a gleam of

infernal fire” (IX: 167). The painter understands not only human form and the craft of his art, but he goes further, probing his subjects’ souls and somehow fixing these deeper truths into his paintings. He could be the incarnation of the “great artist” Eliot calls for in her essay. Indeed, he could be Hawthorne’s ideal artist, who, as Marjorie Elder has demonstrated, is a transcendental symbolist, concerned with “the high Reality shadowed in the things of earth” (67).

Throughout the story we get faint intimations of a moral sense in Elinor’s recurring worries about Walter. Before the story’s action begins, Elinor is unsettled from looking into Walter’s face, and when we first see her alone, she tries to convince herself that the frightening look she saw on Walter was mere happenstance. “I know by my own experience,” she tells herself, “how frightful a look may be. But it was all fancy. I thought nothing of it at the time—I have seen nothing of it since—I did but dream it” (IX: 167). When the painter finishes the portrait of Walter, however, the same frightening look is on the canvas, leaving Elinor with mixed feelings of melancholy and terror (IX: 174). And when the painter discreetly shows her a sketch he made, foreshadowing the end of the tale, “[a] thrill [runs] through Elinor’s frame” (IX: 176), suggesting that the art confirms the instinctive feeling of moral dread that Walter’s face originally elicited. What is more, the portrait’s permanence, a quality noted repeatedly in the tale, does not allow Elinor to escape her disturbed moral sense or pass it off as “all fancy.” Even when she covers the paintings with a large cloth, they visibly disturb her, and everyone who visits her is convinced “that the massive folds of the silk must never be withdrawn, nor the portraits mentioned in her presence” (XI: 177).

Along with these references to the moral sense, Hawthorne shows both of the Ludlows developing a taste for the portraits. When first seeing them, from a distance, Walter and Elinor are able to superficially enjoy them. Walter, in his characteristic bombast, says that the couple will be “fixed in sunshine forever” where “[n]o dark passions can gather on [their] faces!” (IX: 173), and even Elinor momentarily relaxes, thinking that the artist did not discover Walter’s disturbing secret. As she gets closer to the paintings, however, Elinor quickly recognizes the portraits’ import and sinks into the “quiet grief” that she sustains for nearly the rest of the tale (IX: 182). Her encounter with the art partially resembles Archibald Alison’s description of taste. She experiences a simple emotion of melancholy upon viewing the paintings that leads to a train of associations and more complex emotions. Her only deviation from Alison’s understanding of taste is her utter lack of delight.

Walter, on the other hand, takes longer to fully appreciate the art. He has more trouble seeing past the impressive verisimilitude of the portraits into their deeper meaning. His only criticism of the portraits, initially, is that Elinor is depicted as too sad. He spends the rest of the story, however, trying to develop an appreciation for the paintings and finally, near the end, he seems to succeed. He pays close attention to his portrait, “communing with it, as with his own heart,” and he allows it to lead his imaginative impulses, “abandoning himself to the spell of [the painting’s] evil influence” (IX: 181). By the end of the story, Walter’s extreme submission to the art resembles the practiced passivity that characterizes, as we shall see later, Alison’s ideal viewer, but his submission reaps dangerous moral fruit.



Hawthorne does not deny the existence of a moral sense. Nor does he deny the paintings the ability to heighten the moral sense or his characters the ability to understand the art and develop a taste for it. Hawthorne does, however, question the power of this newly developed taste to effect actual change. Elinor and Walter had an ideal opportunity to grow from their experience with art—they owned paintings of themselves for some time, which a shockingly perceptive artist painted to reveal profound truths about their inner selves. Surely the experience of forming a taste for this great art would, as Kames might argue, excite their sympathetic emotions of virtue, propelling them from deep broodings within their moral senses into actions based upon those impulses. But, in Hawthorne's tale, the exact opposite happens. As the couple gains a deeper appreciation of the art, they sink into inaction and despair. Walter's pronouncement just before he moves to stab Elinor is decidedly passive. "Our fate is upon us!" he shouts, as if someone else were directing his knife (XI: 181). Similarly, Elinor, who received the more explicit warning of the sketch, remains passive throughout the tale, not questioning or leaving Walter and swooning into his arms when he decides to kill her.

To bring about real change, Hawthorne seems to suggest, art and the moral sense must overcome a much more powerful, ominous force that we might call fate or the id or, along with Melville, "that great power of blackness [that] derives its force from its appeals to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin" (243). This is the "deep moral" Hawthorne offers at the end of the tale, writing, "Could the result of one, or all our deeds, be shadowed forth and set before us—some would call it Fate, and hurry onward—others be swept along by their passionate desires—and none be turned aside by the PROPHEIC PICTURES" (XI: 182).

Perhaps part of the problem with the ethically disengaged art of “Prophetic Pictures” is the artist himself, who, despite his dazzling technical skill, is often read as another one of Hawthorne’s monomaniacal, mad-scientist types, in the order of Rappacini, Aylmer, and Chillingworth.<sup>4</sup> There are, of course, several places in the text to support such a reading. The painter is repeatedly described as if he were partially a wizard or dark magician. The “old women of Boston” spin stories about the magical qualities of his sketches, and he praises his art for having similar magical powers in an extended reverie near the end of the tale (IX: 172, 179). Also, the painter makes the mistake, always costly in Hawthorne’s tales, of “cherish[ing] a solitary ambition” (IX: 180). Throughout the story, he becomes more and more obsessed with his work until he is “insulated from the mass of human kind,” retaining “no aim—no pleasure—no sympathies—but what were ultimately connected with his art” (IX: 178).

The painter slowly loses contact with society as he is drawn into the shadowy vortex of his own art, and all the world seems to him a painting. The painter’s confusion of physical and aesthetic realities is foreshadowed in his first description, where Hawthorne tells us that he “looked somewhat like a portrait himself” (IX: 171), and it is highlighted when, upon visiting Walter and Elinor, he confuses the couple with his paintings, asking the butler, “The Portraits! Are they within?” (IX: 180) Near the end of the tale, the painter has trouble distinguishing between his art and nature, losing the strict eighteenth-century distinction between what Edmund Burke would call real and imitative or what Hutcheson would call absolute and relative (47; 14).

In some ways, the painter is reminiscent of Ethan Brand, who “became a fiend” once he “lost his hold of the magnetic chain of humanity” (XI: 99). The admitted source

for the painter—“an anecdote of [Gilbert] Stuart, related in Dunlap’s History of the Arts of Design”—certainly seems to have something of Brand’s apathy towards the suffering of others (XI: 166). In the source, when a concerned patron asks about one of Stuart’s portraits, worried that he sees traces of insanity in the painting of his brother, Stuart simply replies, “I have painted your brother as I saw him” (Dunlap 187). After explaining that the brother from the painting went mad and killed himself shortly after the portrait was made, Dunlap describes the skill of the portrait artist in particularly cold terms, calling Stuart a “mechanic” who “makes a map of a man” (187). Surely, there is something of the cold mechanic about the painter from “Prophetic Pictures.” On a level, he is entranced with his own powers and is interested in testing their limits in the laboratory of the human heart. But, unlike Stuart and Brand, who coldly observe as others suffer, the painter seems genuinely concerned for Elinor, making sure she sees his sketch, sympathizing with her, offering comforting advice and well wishes, and finally physically intervening to prevent her murder.

In the end, the story is not about an artist abusing his powers, as most critics seem to suggest. Neither is it primarily about the dramatic power of art, despite the echoes of gothic conventions throughout the tale and the Ludlows’ ultimate conformity to the character of their paintings. Instead, the tale is about the inability of a passive appreciation of art to encourage real moral change. For, rather than helping the Ludlows find a “settled habit of virtue” (Kames 75), their taste for the prophetic pictures leads them into despair and a dangerous passivity that is guided too much by the artist’s vision.

Hawthorne was by no means alone in his suspicion that taste, as defined by the Common Sense school, could not deliver on its promise to produce moral growth.

William Allen, Hawthorne's college president at Bowdoin, also saw problems with taste, noting that it "may sometimes exist, combined with all the meanness of vice" and cautioning that the student who "devotes himself wholly to the gratification of a literary taste [...] incurs deep guilt" (35, 25). Unlike Allen, however, who used his criticism to emphasize "the importance of moral discipline and religious instruction in a Seminary of learning" like his very own Bowdoin College (25), Hawthorne is slow to endorse didacticism. Indeed, the passive acceptance of didactic art seems to be the primary bane to moral growth in "Prophetic Pictures."

"Fancy's Showbox," another of Hawthorne's early tales, furthers this criticism of passive taste. The tale begins with a metaphysical dilemma—should we feel guilty for sins which we planned but never committed?—and then offers an anecdote supposedly to answer the question. Mr. Smith, the everyman protagonist of this parable, is a good man "who had long been regarded as a pattern of moral excellence" (IX: 220). Because of his clear conscience, Smith does not mind spending time alone. He is able to enjoy his integrity, the unity of his outward and inward projections of self, and does not allow distractions "to stand between him and his own soul" (IX: 221). Smith's faith in this unified identity is quickly challenged, however, when three Bunyanesque personifications of his mind Fancy, Memory, and Conscience walk into his study. Fancy shows Smith a series of pictures in which younger versions of himself commit various heinous acts. He sees himself scorn his childhood sweetheart after taking her virginity, murder his best friend over a minor argument, and steal from two poverty-stricken orphans. In each case, Memory explains to Smith that, though he had never perpetrated

the act, he had carefully considered it. And after each of Memory's explanations, Conscience stabs him in the heart, leaving Smith in moral anguish.

The tale is reminiscent of "Prophetic Pictures." Like the Ludlows' portraits, the pictures in Fancy's showbox are painted by a mysterious "artist of wondrous power, and terrible acquaintance with the secret soul" (IX: 225). Perhaps the most significant similarity between the two tales, though, is the effect of the pictures on their audiences. Like the Ludlows, Smith is driven by the convicting pictures in Fancy's showbox into passivity and despair. Though, as Hawthorne explains, "one truly penitential tear would have washed away each hateful picture" (IX: 225), the paintings shock Smith into utter inaction. And in our last glimpse of the protagonist, he sits in the "rich gloom" of his study, nursing his heart, which "seemed to fester with the venom of [Conscience's] dagger" (IX: 225). Again, Hawthorne exposes a character to art that portrays part of his nature, and again the character realizes the significance of the art, but to no avail. Instead of moving Smith into a more rigorous morality, in which he repents of his devious thoughts and resolves to think more charitably, Smith's passive acceptance of the pictures moves him into hopeless despair.

Besides challenging the Common Sense platitude that viewing and understanding art leads to moral improvement, "Fancy's Showbox" also seems to criticize the school's conceptions of the imagination. For thinkers like Archibald Alison and Dugald Stewart, the imagination is both a tool for understanding art and an indispensable faculty for moral development. They believe that art is best understood (and, therefore, can have its greatest moral impact) when it excites the imagination into a train of imagery. Alison explains this assertion in his *Essays on Taste*, arguing that it is possible to read Virgil's

*Georgics* with “perfect indifference,” but that it is preferable for our reading of the poem to “awaken [...] innumerable trains of imagery” (20). For, “[t]hat state of mind, every man must have felt, is most favorable to the emotions of taste [i.e. delight]” (20). The audience must be imaginative, then, to reap the complete psychological benefits of art.

Hawthorne does not seem to disagree with Alison’s claims about the importance of imaginatively appreciating works of art. In *The Marble Faun* (as we shall see later), he gives a strong endorsement for imaginative reading, tries to enforce it in his romance, and even goes so far as to lecture the reader for failing to approach the text with enough imagination. Hawthorne and Alison seem to disagree, however, on how exactly to define the imagination. Alison characterizes the imagination as a train of thoughts that the artwork initiates. This series of images is not a result of the audience’s will, but is rather a passive manipulation of their memories by the associations the work calls to mind. As Alison writes, “In such trains of imagery, no labor of thought or habits of attention are required; they rise spontaneously in the mind, upon the prospect of any object to which they bear the slightest resemblance, and they lead it almost insensibly along, in a kind of bewitching revery [sic.], through all its store of pleasing or interesting conceptions” (26).

In contrast with Coleridge’s Romantic definition of the imagination, as “at once both active and passive” like a water-insect who travels by both fighting and surrendering to the current (I: 124), Alison believes the imagination to be wholly passive, more like a piece of driftwood than the water-insect. External stimuli lead the imaginative mind “almost insensibly” from one image to the next, giving it no control over these images. The imaginative train arises automatically, as if by magic. Alison further stresses this automatic quality of the imagination, when he argues that imagination is strongest in

inactive minds because philosophy and other “habits or employments of mind which demand attention [...] tend to diminish the sensibility of mankind to the emotions of sublimity or beauty” (29).

Dugald Stewart offers a different conception of the imagination. Terence Martin calls it “a minority view” within the larger realm of Common Sense thought because of Stewart’s “desire to allow for what we might call imaginative intelligence” (123). Unlike Alison, Stewart connects the imagination to morality rather than aesthetics, writing, “What we commonly call sensibility, depends, in a great measure, on the power of imagination” (II: 452). It is our imagination, Stewart claims, that allows us to conceive of the suffering of others. For, rather than merely noting a beggar’s poverty, an imaginative person will imagine other parts of the beggar’s life—his relationship with his family, his difficulty finding work, his shame when asking for alms. It is as if the mind of the imaginative subject were painting a series of pictures of the beggar’s life.

According to Stewart,

As [the imaginative subject] proceeds in the painting, his sensibility increases, and he weeps, not for what he sees, but for what he imagines. It will be said, that it was his sensibility which originally roused his imagination; and the observation is undoubtedly true; but it is equally evident, on the other hand, that the warmth of his imagination increases and prolongs his sensibility. (II: 452)

Interestingly enough, it is the particularly active work of the imagination—the “painting”—that according to Stewart, rouses and heightens the moral sense. The actively imaginative subject begins a benevolent cycle, then, in which the moral sense heightens the imagination, which further heightens the moral sense.<sup>5</sup>

Though Stewart endorses a creative imagination for benevolent ends, he posits a more restrained imagination for the appreciation of art. Like Alison in his discussions of

taste, Stewart shrinks from the imagination's active capabilities, favoring the terms "invention and [...] new combination" over terms like *creation* (V: 387). Also, Stewart downplays the inventive role of the mind in appreciating art, writing that "this inventive faculty is the least important ingredient in [taste's] composition. All that is essentially necessary is a capacity of seizing, and comprehending, and presenting in a lively manner to one's own mind, whatever combinations are formed by the imagination of others" (V: 387). According to Stewart, then, the reader or viewer of art uses her imagination primarily to comprehend art. Rather than (as Hawthorne will suggest later in his career) taking an active role in creating the artwork along with the artist—going through the same imaginative process and recreating the same ideal vision—Stewart's audience uses their imaginations to understand what the work of art means as the author or painter intends it. This is still a more charitable view of the imagination than that of some of Stewart's colleagues, such as Thomas Reid or Thomas Brown, who largely ignore the concept of imagination and often use the term to signify a fanciful evasion of facts. Unlike many in his tradition, Stewart sees criticism and art as complementary rather than contradictory (Hipple 95).

For Hawthorne, however, Stewart does not go far enough with his imagination of combination and comprehension. Though Mr. Smith seems to fit in with Alison or Stewart's imaginative audience as he allows himself to be led "almost insensibly along, in a kind of bewitching" barrage of damning pictures (Alison 26), it is noteworthy that Hawthorne has Fancy rather than Imagination do the leading, fancy being the imagination's subaltern in most nineteenth-century theories of the mind. Also instead of portraying Fancy as an artist, Hawthorne dresses her in "the garb and aspect of an



itinerant showman, with a box of pictures on her back” (IX: 221). Fancy totes the pictures about and shows them to Smith in rapid-fire succession. She is the allegorical epitome of taste, combining disparate elements of memory together into a fragmented narrative of Smith’s life. The creative faculty, the frightening artist who actually painted Fancy’s pictures, is strangely absent from the tale, as Smith confirms with his frantic questions about who the artist is. Hawthorne carefully constructs his tale to drive home the point that *taste*, as it is commonly defined, is a result of our fancy, not our imagination. If Smith were to employ a more active imagination to appreciate the paintings—figuratively painting the social effects of his uncharitable thoughts in his mind—he may have ended up feeling true remorse and penitence rather than the sharp pangs of self-absorbed despair that consume him at the end of the tale.

After telling Smith’s story, Hawthorne pulls the rug out from under his metaphysical dilemma, saying that, despite Smith’s troubles, we should not feel guilty for sins that exist only in thought. Rather, according to Hawthorne, projected sins should remind us that “[m]an must not disclaim his brotherhood, even with the guiltiest, since, though his hand be clean, his heart has surely been polluted by the flitting phantoms of iniquity” (IX: 226 ). Hawthorne prescribes an ideal outcome for dealing with projected sins with his calls to penitence and brotherhood with the guiltiest. He does not, however, model a method for arriving at true penitence and community. Instead, he leaves his readers to consider Mr. Smith, who with his bleak conclusion is but a disturbing example of the dangers of anemic introspection and passive taste.

Hawthorne revisits this critique of taste in “Edward Randolph’s Portrait.” The tale, which was first published in 1838 (a year after “Prophetic Pictures” and “Fancy’s

Showbox”), seems to have found its genesis in a conversation between Hawthorne and his then fiancée Sophia Peabody. As Sophia records in her journal: “[Hawthorne] said he had imagined a story of which the principal incident is my cleaning that picture of Fernandez. To be the means, in any way, of calling forth one of his divine creations, is no small happiness is it?” (qtd. in Julian Hawthorne 185) In the tale, Sophia transforms into Alice Vane, a young, educated patriot in 1765 Boston, and the picture of Fernandez becomes a blackened portrait of the former government official Edward Randolph, who was demonized by colonial historians for revoking the Charter of Massachusetts Bay. Alice cleans the portrait to warn her uncle Thomas Hutchinson, who is also the lieutenant governor of Massachusetts, from garrisoning British troops in Boston.

The portrait momentarily shocks Hutchinson but ultimately confirms his conviction that he must bring in troops to quell the growing rebellion. As Kumiko Mukai suggests, Hutchinson’s interpretation of the picture becomes a defining moment in his life, a missed opportunity to “review his deeds and reform society” that leads to “a catastrophic fate” (57). Like Walter Ludlow and Mr. Smith, Hutchinson ends his tale in a despairing isolation, exiled from his homeland and claiming to choke on “the blood of the Boston Massacre” (IX: 268). Like the earlier tales, then, we might read “Edward Randolph’s Portrait” as a case study of taste’s inability to improve moral judgment.

Still, the story has several differences from the earlier tales. For one, the stakes are higher. As Hawthorne suggests throughout the story, Hutchinson’s decision represents the *peripeteia* of British colonial rule in America. The well-being of a colony and the fate of an empire, rather than mere domestic relationships or personal well-being, depend on this lieutenant governor making the right decision. Also, though Hutchinson’s

choice is more politically crucial than the choices in the other tales, the lines between right and wrong are not as clear for him as they were (or should have been) for Walter Ludlow or Mr. Smith. There are no easily definable moral grounds to inform his decision, and it may be because of this increased ambiguity that “Edward Randolph’s Portrait” tempers its criticism of poor taste with a positive model of the imagination. For the tale presents two types of artistic appreciation, pitting Hutchinson’s literalness and empiricism against Alice Vane’s more creative interpretation.

Throughout the tale, Hutchinson is thoroughly rational and expects others to act with the same strict reason when considering historical precedents. He is reminiscent of Kames and the distinction in *Elements of Criticism* between rightfully influential works of art or history that are able to conjure an “ideal presence” (108) with its “accurate description of an important event” (110) and lesser works that present “a curt narrative of feigned incidents” (115). Kames explains that the latter type of art or history is “never relished” because “[a]ny slight pleasure it affords, is more than counterbalanced by the disgust it inspires for want of truth” (115).

Kames’s aversion to art and history that are unable to conjure an ideal presence is matched by Hutchinson’s disgust for the fables of popular Puritan history. As Hutchinson explains at the beginning of the tale to his niece and the Captain of Castle William (a strong adherent of Boston’s folk histories), the popular stories “are folly, to one who has proved, as I have, how little of historic truth lies at the bottom” (IX: 262). Later, Hutchinson applies this commonsensical view of history to Edward Randolph, whose blackened portrait he contemplates at the beginning of the tale. Though the Captain dwells on Randolph’s reputation from popular New England history as “the

destroyer of our liberties!” (IX: 262), Hutchinson dismisses Randolph’s legacy as the unreasonable opinions of biased colonial historians like Cotton Mather. In his *History of Massachusetts*, the historical Hutchinson placed the blame traditionally given to Randolph on unnamed forces that “determined a quo warranto should go against the charter, and that Randolph should be the messenger of death” (304). In keeping with the spirit of this history, Hawthorne’s fictional Hutchinson remains gracious to Randolph throughout the tale, suggesting that the often-slandered official had only performed his duty as an officer of the crown.

Alice Vane acts as an alternative to her uncle’s strict adherence to fact and the Captain’s apparent faith in the folk histories. Alice grants that the stories about Edward Randolph may be feigned, but rather than wholly dismissing these stories once she learns that they are untrue, she prudently asks her uncle, “[M]ay not such fables have a moral?” (IX: 262) The moral that Alice sees behind the fable of Edward Randolph seems to center on Boston’s continuing violent reaction to his legacy. If Hutchinson follows Randolph in militantly supporting the crown, Alice seems to judge, not only will he incur the people’s curse, as Randolph did, but he will also incite further rebellion instead of quelling it. Alice is able to read the folk histories with sympathetic imagination, considering their effect on others who believe them and might act upon them. So, while Hutchinson believes that the current revolutionaries are led by a mere “temporary spirit of mischief” (IX: 265), Alice realizes that the situation is more dire. And though she resembles the painter from “Prophetic Pictures” in her intense and near-magical skill that she uses to clean the portrait, Alice maintains her grasp on the actual. She never falls into the illusion that her newly-restored painting creates a new reality or even reflects an

empirical reality, but instead she stresses the ethereal truth behind the stories, firmly warning her uncle to heed her creative counsel.

When Alice unveils the restored portrait of Randolph just before Hutchinson signs over Fort William to the British, the painting stirs Hutchinson's moral sense and moves him to intense introspection. He is "fascinated by the contemplation" of the portrait (IX: 268), noting its near-supernatural qualities and telling himself, "[I]f the spirit of Edward Randolph were to appear among us from the place of torment, he could not wear more of the terrors of hell upon his face!" (IX: 267) The portrait obviously moves Hutchinson, causing him to momentarily rethink his call for British reinforcements. After a short while, however, Hutchinson regains his equilibrium, reasoning that Alice, like Mather and company, endorses a feigned history. "Girl!" he demands of his niece, "have you brought hither your painter's art—your Italian spirit of intrigue—your tricks of stage-effect—and think to influence the councils of rulers and the affairs of nations, by such shallow contrivances?" (IX: 268) In the end, Hutchinson signs the fort over, despite his instinctive misgivings, because he is so sickened by the reach of the disingenuous Bostonian history that seems to infect even his favorite niece. As Colacurcio writes, Hutchinson's "historical failure is clearly a failure of the imagination" (414). For unlike Alice, he refuses to see truth in the people's fables, causing himself to inadvertently fuel the people's revolution and incur the people's curse.

As one of the "Legends of the Province-House," "Edward Randolph's Portrait" is framed by the narrator's description of the "old tradition-monger" who first tells the story to him (IX: 257). Within this frame the narrator, like Hutchinson, is excessively commonsensical, claiming the tale is "as correct a version of the fact" as he could gather

and apologetically notes the “tinge of romance” mingled with the facts (IX: 258). After the tale our empirical narrator presses the storyteller for facts and resolves to find the actual portrait from the tale, which he considers “not unnecessary proof of the authenticity of the facts here set down” (IX: 269). Like Hutchinson, our narrator is wary of passing along a partially feigned history.

The story’s frame also contains the old storyteller, who, like Alice Vane, takes a more imaginative approach to history, passing on legends that he knows are legends but also knowing that “such fables may have a moral.” The storyteller and Alice Vane bring a distinctive mixture of creative instinct and self-conscious criticism to their appreciation of art and may be the clearest models of beneficial, imaginative taste in Hawthorne’s tales—prototypes of Hilda, another copyist based on Sophia, who comes later in *The Marble Faun*. Notably, rather than being passive recipients of art, both of these characters are artists in their own right. And, in the end, it is impossible to distinguish the fruit of their efforts (be it an historical tale or a frightening portrait) from the original works. That is, their imaginative reading or restoration of the artwork partakes in the work’s creation.

In the mid 1840s, when Hawthorne writes his greatest aesthetic tales, he shifts his focus from the audience’s formation of taste to the artist’s creation of art. Tales like “Drowne’s Wooden Image” and “The Artist of the Beautiful” only peripherally discuss the effects of the art on the audience and instead emphasize theories on the origins of genius. Unlike the artists from “Prophetic Pictures” and “Edward Randolph’s Portrait,” who work off stage, and far from the artist in “Fancy’s Showbox,” who is absent altogether, Drowne and Owen Warland are the centerpieces of their tales, and the plot

closely chronicles their work towards genius, partially demystifying the dark magic of the artistic process. There are still hints of the marvelous in the broken umbrella on Drowne's masthead and in the "magnetism, or what you will" that fuels Owen's butterfly (X: 473). But by modeling the means by which the artists arrive at their completed works, Hawthorne moves closer to grounding the artistic process in reality.

Along with (and perhaps because of) this shift in focus from audience to artist, Hawthorne downplays the melodrama of taste in these later tales so that, in "The Artist of the Beautiful," the Danforths patently misunderstand Owen's butterfly and, in "Drowne's Wooden Image," the townsfolk never move past their awe into any more complex emotion. Unlike the audiences of the earlier tales, who both understand and misunderstand the art (seeing the aesthetic and moral significance of the paintings but failing to respond to them correctly), these audiences seem to have an excuse for not drawing moral value from the art—they do not see even its aesthetic significance. Like Annie Danforth's "little monkey" of a baby (X: 474), they assume an innocent stupidity. In place of the dark specter of fatalism or original sin that guides Walter Ludlow, or even the blinding literalism that guides Thomas Hutchinson, Hawthorne offers sociological and biological reasons for the audience's failures of taste. In "Artist of the Beautiful," the blacksmith and watchmaker fail to appreciate the butterfly because their life-long occupations have made them so thoroughly practical. The Danforth baby, on the other hand, seems unable to appreciate the butterfly because of his pedigree, and when he destroys the artwork, Hawthorne describes him with his father's epithet as a "little Child of Strength" wearing his maternal grandfather's "sharp and shrewd expression" (X: 475).

The aesthetic tales of the 1840s may move past taste to artistic creation because, by then, Hawthorne too had moved past his interest in discrediting the Common Sense belief in the moral effects of taste. Looking forward to *The Scarlet Letter*, these tales point to a pliable but active imagination as the most privileged mental faculty. Rather than focusing on the moral insufficiency of Common Sense taste, in which the reader sympathizes with a concrete piece of art, Hawthorne focuses on a Romantic definition of the imagination, in which the artist experiences a more ethereal sympathy with ideal truths and divine inspiration (a sympathy that, as we shall see in the next chapter carries moral implications of its own). Just as Owen learns to disregard Annie's "secret scorn," trading her approval for "a far other butterfly" of the mind (X: 472, 475), Hawthorne temporarily seems to abandon his investigations into his audience's taste, retreating instead into the monastery of his own artistic imagination.



## CHAPTER THREE

### Imagination's Influence in *The Scarlet Letter*

Like many of his tales, Hawthorne's greatest novel *The Scarlet Letter* takes its name from a work of art within the story that carries obvious moral implications. Like the prophetic pictures, the paintings from Fancy's showbox, and Edward Randolph's portrait, the scarlet letter is created by an intensely perceptive artist to effect an obvious moral change. Though this is a familiar formula for Hawthorne by 1850, he now uses it to serve a new end. In both the biographical narrative from "The Custom-House" and in the famous discussion of aesthetics accompanying it, Hawthorne outlines a definition of the artistic imagination—perhaps the only mental faculty that Common Sense thought ignores<sup>1</sup>—as an intermediate power of the intellect, capable of taking passive sensations and actively grouping them into a coherent art form. In his subsequent characterizations of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale, Hawthorne dramatizes the difficulty of maintaining this dynamic imagination but also points to the spiritual and moral benefits that come from the imagination's aspirations towards the ideal. Ultimately, *The Scarlet Letter* endorses the *creation* rather than the *appreciation* of art, implying that it is primarily in the "neutral territory" of the artist's imagination that art proves morally beneficial (I: 36).

With its discussions of bureaucracy and delicately balanced aesthetics, "The Custom-House" may seem a curious introduction to the tale of secret sin and harrowing penitence that follows. Given this dissonance, we might be tempted to conclude, as Hawthorne suggests in his preface to the second edition of the novel, that his introduction

“might, perhaps, have been wholly omitted, without loss to the public, or detriment to the book” (I: 1). The opening sketch fits more comfortably alongside the narrative of the romance, however, when one considers Hawthorne’s concern about the social effects of art that we see running through several of his other tales. Against the backdrop of Hawthorne’s larger body of work, “The Custom-House” reads as an attempt to put the moral struggles of the novel into a dialogue with the novelist’s aesthetic interests.

With the introduction acting as a sort of bridge between the tale’s ethical dilemmas and Hawthorne’s artistic concerns, it seems fitting that Hawthorne, as a character in his own story, investigates the primary work of art from the tale, the scarlet letter itself, during the crux of his introduction. When he comes across “this certain affair of fine red cloth” hidden away in the attic above his office, Hawthorne explains that “[i]t had been wrought, as was easy to perceive, with wonderful skill of needlework” (I: 31). The scarlet letter is a masterpiece of colonial embroidery. Hester, it then follows, must be an artist. This suspicion is confirmed early in the novel when Hester’s harshest judges, the unforgiving women scattered throughout the crowd during the first scaffold scene, begrudgingly admit that she “hath good skill at the needle” (I: 54) and when shortly afterward the narrator praises the “delicate and imaginative skill” that went into embroidering the letter (I: 81). Like Owen Warland’s butterfly, whose physical matter is infused with a deeper spiritual meaning, the significance of Hester’s letter transcends even her technical prowess. Hawthorne explains that the stitching “gives evidence of a now forgotten art,” which is not merely fancy needlework, for it could not “be recovered even by the process of picking out the threads” (I: 31). Hawthorne confirms his suspicion that the letter is more than the sum of its parts when he puts it against his chest and

“experience[s] a sensation not altogether physical, yet almost so, as of burning heat; and as if the letter were not of red cloth, but red-hot iron” (I: 32).

Hawthorne’s visceral reaction to the letter evokes, once again, Scottish Common Sense thought. This artwork acts the same way Francis Hutcheson argues that all art functions. It bypasses Hawthorne’s intellect to heighten his instinctive, aesthetic sense. Hawthorne’s immediate experience with the letter is sublime, as Edmund Burke would define it, causing delight by inducing a distant, modified sort of pain (40). Though Hawthorne’s instinctive reaction to the letter clearly acts according to Burke’s famous definition of the sublime, his experience departs from Burke’s theory in a few key ways. First, the letter has few of the attributes associated with the sublime. It is delicate, small, and has faded into a pale red, which are all attributes associated with the beautiful (Burke 113, 177). Furthermore, the remaining gold thread in the letter faintly glitters, giving off small glints of light and lending the letter something of the “light and riant” quality that Burke thinks “so effectually deadens the whole taste of the sublime” (82).

Besides instilling a beautiful object with sublime authority, Hawthorne also departs from Alison, Kames, and Stewart’s understanding of taste, in which the subject passively allows the emotions of taste to run their course through her mind. Instead, the discovery of the scarlet letter marks a turning point in “The Custom-House,” in which Hawthorne (the character) moves from observing to creating.

Hawthorne begins the introductory sketch describing the intellectual stagnation of his office, the sleepy government workers populating the back rooms and the dreary mood pervading his post. The old patriarchal Inspector, who has “no soul, no heart, no mind; nothing [...] but instincts” (I: 18), can be read both as an incarnation of the office

(Hawthorne calls him the “fittest [...] Custom-House Officer” [I: 19]) and as a caricature of Common Sense principles. The Inspector does not reason; he acts only according to his feelings. He follows only the prodding of what we might call, to quote Thomas Reid’s definition of common sense, those “certain principles [...] which the constitution of [his] nature leads [him] to believe” (qtd. in Wolterstorff 85). After living for years according to the will of his instincts, the Inspector is physically and intellectually as healthy as an ox. He lives to eat, and structures his life around the base practicality of his animalistic emotions, his mind serving no higher purpose than the record of his meals. By following his instincts, the Inspector becomes self-serving and self-absorbed. Though he has buried three wives and twenty children, Hawthorne claims, “The chief tragic event of the old man’s life [...] was his mishap with a certain goose, which [...] at table, proved so inveterately tough that the carving-knife would make no impression on its carcass” (I: 19). When Hawthorne explains at the end of his description of the Inspector, “Most persons, owing to causes which I may not have space to hint at, suffer moral detriment from this peculiar mode of life” (I: 19), the reader might think of Walter Ludlow, Mr. Smith, or Thomas Hutchinson, each of whom suffers moral detriment for employing something of the Inspector’s instinctual, passive, and excessively practical mode of life.

After working for some time in what one critic calls the “moral desert” of the Salem Custom-House, Hawthorne starts to succumb to his surroundings (Ziff 339). Both literature and nature “and all the imaginative delight, wherewith it had been spiritualized, passed away out of [his] mind” (I: 26). This feeling of intellectual drudgery even follows Hawthorne home, for, as he writes, “It was not merely during the three hours and a half which Uncle Sam claimed as his share of my daily life, that this wretched numbness held

possession of me. It went with me on my sea-shore walks and rambles into the country” (I: 35). As he spends more time in his office, Hawthorne slowly begins to resemble the imaginatively numb Inspector, living according to his appetite and ignoring higher, spiritual realities.

After finding the scarlet letter, however, Hawthorne moves out of this stagnation and toward activity. “This incident,” he writes, “recalled my mind, in some degree, to its old track” (I: 33). Though his surroundings still frustrate his creative efforts, Hawthorne’s old track of imagination seems to consist of a combination of passive inspiration and active creation. Thus, he tells his reader that his proceeding tale is ostensibly based on a true story, using the surveyor’s manuscript as inspiration for the “main facts,” but then “dressing up the tale” with free creative license, “imagining the motives and modes of passion that influenced the characters” (I: 33). Hawthorne continues to alternate between active and passive modes of thought when he compares his imagination, while under the influence of the Custom-House, to a “tarnished mirror” (I: 34). He complains, “It would not reflect, or only with miserable dimness, the figures with which I did my best to people it” (I: 34). His imagination is like a mirror, an inert instrument capable only of reflecting the people who stand before it. But, then, the people that the mirror reflects are the inventions of Hawthorne’s own mind, examples of his imagination’s activity.

Like this tarnished mirror, Hawthorne’s imagination seems to constantly move back and forth from passive sensitivity to active creation, receiving inspiration from the scarlet letter and then inventing the environment surrounding it, creating characters in his “intellectual forge” and then allowing his mind to wander about with them and reflect

their actions (I: 34). His imaginative mind connects and animates images from history and memory, making a coherent biography from the fragments of a life he read in the Surveyor's manuscript, and then—like the tarnished mirror—Hawthorne imperfectly reflects those idealized images onto the page.

By the time Hawthorne wrote *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850, the imagination had already established deep roots in Anglo-American Romantic thought as a mental faculty that alternated between passivity and activity, drawing coherent images from varied perceptions. In *Biographia Literaria*, for instance, Coleridge compares imaginative thought to a person in the act of jumping. First the jumper launches himself into the air, and then he allows gravity to pull him down to the desired landing point (I: 124). In the same way, Coleridge suggests, the imaginative subject must actively resist the laws of association to create a coherent picture from an array of occurrences. Then, after actively forming the new image, the imaginative subject may passively reenter the chain of association. For Coleridge, the “intermediate faculty” of the imagination, “which is at once both active and passive” (I: 124), is necessary “to a superior degree” for poets, who must temper their abundance of imagination with “a superior voluntary controul over it” (I: 125). Poetic genius, then, does not only consist of having a particularly keen imagination; the artistic imagination must also be tempered with a strong governing will.

Emerson presents a theory strikingly similar to Coleridge's conception of the imagination in his essay “Intellect,” where he divides “Genius” into the faculties of “intellect receptive” and “intellect constructive” (422). The receptive intellect (much like Dugald Stewart's conception of the imagination as it is used in taste) associates sensory data with memories, calling past experiences to mind. It collects this inspiration for the

constructive intellect, which (much like Coleridge's poetic imagination) "produces thoughts, sentences, poems, plans, designs, systems" from the receptive intellect's array of data (422).<sup>2</sup>

Hawthorne's famous description of his parlor, later on in "The Custom-House," echoes the shifting, dual nature of this Romantic imagination. He describes his parlor as a "neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other" (I: 36).

Unlike instinctive taste, which understands and reacts to only the empirical facts of art and nature, and unlike pure superstition, which risks losing touch with empirical reality, the imagination transforms the mind into a middle ground that blends scientific fact with artistic creations. Like the symbol, which, according to Coleridge, "always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible" ("Statesman's" 30), Hawthorne's conception of the imagination tempers reality with artistry, fostering an environment in which the mind can move seamlessly between its own creations and the empirical surroundings from which those creations arise.

As the introduction nears its end, Hawthorne breaks ties with the Custom-House, his coworkers, and his hometown. He tells the reader that his time as Surveyor "lies like a dream behind me" (I: 44), and he unceremoniously buries the passive lifestyle symbolized by the Inspector, who, as Hawthorne tells us, "was overthrown and killed by a horse, some time ago; else he would certainly have lived forever" (I: 44). As he transitions into his greatest work, Hawthorne ends "The Custom-House" with a disavowal of all of Salem, claiming, "I am a citizen of somewhere else" (I: 44). Surely, this is not only a reference to his imminent move to the Berkshires, but can also be read

as his choice to leave the passivity and practicality of Salem for an imaginative mode of life that is at the same time neutral and dynamic and even other-worldly.

Like Hawthorne's projection of himself in the introduction, Hester Prynne eventually moves into a lifestyle of artistic imagination that blends the realms of actual reality with imaginative possibility. For much of the romance, however, Hester harbors a hostile fancy while her surroundings struggle to make her, like the Ludlows, Mr. Smith, and Thomas Hutchinson, a person of wholly passive taste. The first scaffold scene epitomizes this tension. Amid this public interrogation and sentencing, the Salem establishment makes its first attempt to educate a resistant Hester on the proper way to interpret the scarlet letter. Hawthorne makes a point of saying, near the beginning of the scene, that the government officials and clergy who judge Hester "were, doubtless, good men, just, and sage," but that "it would not have been easy to select the same number of wise and virtuous persons, who should be less capable of sitting in judgment on an erring woman's heart, and disentangling its mesh of good and evil" (I: 64). From the start, then, the reader understands that this stern tribunal is bound for failure. And, after reading a bit further, it seems they will fail to understand Hester largely because they lack a vital imagination that is capable not only of passively receiving sensations that connect to memories, but is also capable of an imaginative empathy that can recreate a situation as it would appear through another's eyes. Like Governor Bellingham, whom Hawthorne calls a "not ill fitted [...] representative of [his] community," the rest of Hester's judges may have "accomplish[ed] so much" in the realms of personal piety and abstract discernment "precisely because [they] imagined and hoped so little" in regards to matters of the human heart (I: 64).



Later on in the scaffold scene, and in the spirit of this general lack of imagination among Salem's elders, John Wilson delivers his sermon "on sin, in all its branches, but with continual reference to the ignominious letter" (I: 68). Wilson preaches for over an hour as Hester stands on the scaffold with her infant and her embroidered A, and Hawthorne tells us that "[s]o forcibly did he dwell upon this symbol [...] that it assumed new terrors in [the crowd's] imagination, and seemed to derive its scarlet hue from the flames of the infernal pit" (I: 68-9). With help from Wilson's sermon, the crowd's collective mind almost automatically connects the scarlet letter to "the infernal pit." This associative link between the letter's color and hellfire is reminiscent of Archibald Alison's concept of the imaginative train of images for which "no labor of thought or habits of attention are required; they rise spontaneously in the mind, upon the prospect of any object to which they bear the slightest resemblance" (26). In this way, Wilson's sermon does more than merely interpret the letter for his audience; it also models and encourages the passive associations that the audience uses both to understand and embellish upon Wilson's interpretation.

During Wilson's sermon, Hester's "glazed eyes" and "air of weary indifference" seem to imply that she is one of the few Salemites who does not adopt Wilson's interpretation or follow along with the crowd's fanciful associations (I: 69). As Bellingham and Wilson try to convert Hester into a woman of passive taste, her aggressive fancy (Hawthorne uses the word several times in the scene) spreads a shadow of incongruity over the whole process. She mixes her "burning blush" of shame with a "haughty smile" (I: 52). Her magnificent dress, her natural beauty, and, above all, her exquisitely embroidered letter make "a halo of the misfortune and ignominy in which she

was enveloped” (I: 53). Hester appears “lady-like in the antique interpretation of the term” (I: 53). She would have even become an “image of Divine Maternity” if there had been people in the crowd familiar with Roman Catholic iconography (I: 56). While the men of Salem expect Hester to act like the compliant, pious reader of the scarlet letter addressed in Wilson’s sermon, Hester boldly tries to redefine the scarlet letter into a sign of refinement or moral exception. As Nina Auerbach suggests, the scarlet letter converts Hester into an aesthetic object in the first scaffold scene so that she “presents herself pictorially, insisting on our scrutiny” (165). Still, though her suggested interpretations of the letter lie in direct opposition to Wilson’s, Hester relies on the same mental faculty—fancy—to construct this rebuttal.

Not only does Hawthorne suggest that Hester’s reading of the letter is fanciful with explicit references to her lively fancy, but he also describes her attempt to redefine the letter in such a way that it recalls Coleridge’s famous characterization of fancy as that which “brings together images which have no connection natural or moral, but are yoked together by the poet by means of some accidental coincidence” (*Table* 489-90). Though Hester’s rereading of the letter frees it from what Coleridge calls “the order of time and space,” it still “must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association” (*Biographia* I: 305). Hester’s similarity to the Virgin Mary, for instance, relies, like Wilson’s sermon, not on her construction of something original but rather on a loosely linked train of association. Her appearance begins an automatic, associative march in the mind of the “Papist among the crowd of Puritans,” who has seen countless representations of the Madonna (I: 56). Throughout the scene, Hester attempts to redefine the letter through similar shallow, rather than vital, comparisons between herself

and nobles, dignitaries, and saints. In this way, Hester's behavior recalls Emerson's definition of fancy as a faculty that "play[s] with the superficial resemblances of objects," but "not for [a] moral end," organizing itself according to "superficial" forms (e.g. demeanor, dress, and expressions), rather than "central" ideas (e.g. true character or inner desires) (*Letters* 14-5).<sup>3</sup>

As we might expect, Hester does not reap moral benefits from her initial reception of the scarlet letter. Like the examples of taste from the tales, Hester's fanciful interpretation is unable to keep her from isolation and depression. Indeed this demoralizing process begins as soon as she emerges from the jail, and Hawthorne explains that the letter had "the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and enclosing her in a sphere by herself" (I: 54). As she lives with the letter longer, Hester only enhances her isolation. She moves to an abandoned settlement on the outskirts of Salem and rarely interacts with others. Her letter becomes a locus of guilt for the entire community: an occasion for morbid curiosity and impromptu sermons that further set her off from the community as a scapegoat. As Hawthorne writes, "the links that united her to the rest of human kind [...] had all been broken" (I: 159-60). Alongside this loneliness, her daily exposure to the letter is unable to save her (just as aesthetic taste was unable to save the Ludlows, Smith, and Hutchinson) from despair. Feeling as though she is trapped between "an insurmountable precipice" and "a deep chasm," Hester at times wonders "whether it were not better to send Pearl at once to heaven, and go herself to such futurity as Eternal Justice should provide" (I: 166).

Here Hester's story is pressed up against the full weight of its tragic potential. Her murderous and suicidal broodings match the worst deeds and desires of Hutchinson,

Smith, and even Walter Ludlow. As Hawthorne writes, “The scarlet letter had not done its office” (I:166). Just as Hawthorne’s character in “The Custom-House” loses touch with the imaginative skill he had demonstrated in *Twice Told Tales* and *Mosses from an Old Manse* and begins to resemble the Inspector, so Hester slowly loses the artistic imagination that must have gone into her embroidery of the scarlet letter and begins to mirror the pitiful characters from the tales, exhibiting a fanciful taste and descending into moral gloom. Later in the romance, however, Hester is able to break away from this trend. And Hawthorne fittingly pairs her return from despair and isolation with two imaginatively creative acts from the novel’s last few chapters: Dimmesdale’s Election Day sermon and Hester’s own creative self-fashioning upon her return to Salem.

Like Hester, to whom he is connected by the “iron link of mutual crime” (I: 160), Arthur Dimmesdale begins the novel as something of a frustrated artist. Though most of his sermons, like Hester’s posturing on the scaffold, seem to do little more than fancifully mask his guilt-ridden ego, his refined appearance and delicate temperament are reminiscent of the artists from the tales, especially Owen Warland. During the formulation of his great Election Day sermon, Dimmesdale finally lives up to his artistic description: his composition and delivery of the sermon clearly alluding to Hawthorne’s Romantic definition of the imagination from “The Custom-House.” At the end of the tale, Dimmesdale takes his place as an artist of profound imagination, “who,” as Perry Miller wrote of Jonathan Edwards, “happened to work with ideas instead of poems or novels” (xvi).

Throughout the novel Dimmesdale functions largely as Hester’s foil. As Nina Baym has suggested, he “is chiefly developed by Hawthorne as a contrast with and

comparison to the heroine” (68). Dimmesdale is not, for instance, outwardly haunted by the depression and loneliness that surrounds Hester. He has several admirers, among whom we might number Hawthorne’s narrator, who repeatedly stops to marvel at the effectiveness of Dimmesdale’s ministry. We learn that the young minister enjoys a marvelous reputation for piety, all of Salem believing that his growing physical weakness is due to “his too earnest devotion to study, his scrupulous fulfillment of parochial duty, and [...] fasts and vigils,” rather than his gnawing, undisclosed sin (I: 120). What is more, Dimmesdale’s sermons convert several of Salem’s citizens, and as Hawthorne relates, “Souls, it is said more souls than one, were brought to the truth by the efficacy” of his preaching (I: 157). Inwardly, however, Dimmesdale is constantly aware of the isolation and depression that more obviously affect Hester, secretly viewing his soul as “a pollution and a lie” (I: 143). Furthermore, while Hester’s penance is carried out daily in the public sphere, Dimmesdale drives himself to a penance of self-flagellation, which is as secret as it is morbid (I: 144).

Hawthorne’s constant foiling in his presentation of the lovers’ traits carries over even into his descriptions of their art. The scarlet letter is described in great detail. We hear of its dimensions, its color, its shape, its type, its place on Hester’s dress, and even the way Hester carries it in various scenes. We do not, however, learn of its creation, other than the fact that Hester embroidered it with “delicate and imaginative skill” (I: 81). Dimmesdale’s Election Day sermon gets the opposite treatment. Hawthorne somewhat offhandedly tells us that the sermon was about “the relation between the Deity and the communities of mankind, with a special reference to the New England which they were here planting in the wilderness” (I: 249). We do not, however, read any extracts of the

sermon and are left to infer its genius from the enthusiastic praise of the public, whose worshipful cheers gather to form “the brilliant particles of a halo in the air about [Dimmesdale’s] head” (I: 250-1).

Hawthorne gives significantly more notice to the process of the sermon’s invention, discussing the sermon’s composition at length in “Minister in a Maze.” Here, after Dimmesdale has agreed to elope with Hester, the maze of the chapter title most obviously symbolizes Dimmesdale’s moral confusion, which is made apparent in his sudden urge to discourage an old widow or to teach children how to curse. This moral confusion, however, seems to stem from Dimmesdale’s intellectual and aesthetic confusion—his mental maze. At the beginning of the chapter, the minister is locked into a chain of associations that seems to be governed by “the arch-fiend” (I: 219). When he sees a pure, young parishioner, he immediately wants to “blight all the field of [her] innocence with but one wicked look” (I: 220). Later, when he sees a drunken sailor, he instinctively wants to shake hands with him and begin a “volley of good, round, solid, satisfactory, and heaven-defying oaths” (I: 220). Now seeing his experience as a series of episodic, disparate incidents (the word is repeated several times in the beginning of the chapter), Dimmesdale is lost in the delirium of inclination that Coleridge identifies as the end result of an unchecked fancy (*Table* 489).

Far from Archibald Alison’s suggestion that we should follow and indulge our fanciful associations to foster a healthy taste and, ultimately, heighten the moral sense, Hawthorne suggests through Dimmesdale that we must often resist the trains of association, which sometimes originate in the darkest parts of our souls. At the end of the

chapter, Dimmesdale finally escapes this maze of associative fancy through an exercise in artistic imagination. Hawthorne writes:

[T]he minister summoned a servant of the house, and requested food, which, being set before him, he ate with ravenous appetite. Then, flinging the already written pages of the Election Sermon into the fire, he forthwith began another, which he wrote with such an impulsive flow of thought and emotion, that he fancied himself inspired; and only wondered that Heaven should see fit to transmit the grand and solemn music of its oracles through so foul an organ-pipe as he. However, leaving that mystery to solve itself, or go unsolved for ever, he drove his task onward, with earnest haste and ecstasy. Thus the night fled away, as if it were a winged steed, and he careering on it; morning came, and peeped blushing through the curtains; and at last sunrise threw a golden beam into the study, and laid it right across the minister's bedazzled eyes. There he was, with the pen still between his fingers, and a vast, immeasurable tract of written space behind him! (I: 225)

Here Hawthorne's definition of the artistic imagination from "The Custom-House" is realized. In the introduction, Hawthorne outlines an imagination that is at once both active and passive—creating new forms from memory and then passively mirroring them for the reader. Here Dimmesdale writes through the night with both the manic activity of a mythic jockey riding the "winged steed" of the night and the passive translucence of an organ, whose keys are pressed by some otherworldly power. In the introduction Hawthorne describes a neutral territory between empirical reality and ideal truth that artistic imagination engenders. Here, at the end of one of the novel's final chapters, Dimmesdale's sermon grays the line between immanent and transcendent, funneling "the grand and solemn music" of heaven through the base instrument of the hypocritical preacher. In the introduction, the imagination connects disparate sensations into a coherent whole, using bits of history and discovered artifacts to construct a detailed biography that imbues the artifact with sublime import. Here, Dimmesdale's "impulsive flow of thought and emotion" results in a "vast, immeasurable tract of written space" that

connects spiritual history with the political realities of “the New England which [the Puritans] were here planting in the wilderness.” Following Coleridge’s belief that the imagination tends toward unity (*Table* 489-90), Hawthorne has Dimmesdale unify the narrative of Puritan New England with the cosmic narrative of God’s “relation [... with] the communities of mankind.” Though we learn nothing more of the sermon’s content, we must infer from the reception of the sermon that Dimmesdale makes this connection adeptly, pointing his congregation towards a transcendent truth that “each knew better than he could tell or hear” (I: 248).

In his article on Dimmesdale’s sermon, M.X. Lesser suggests that Hawthorne conceals most of the sermon’s content from us to reflect his lack of a source, all six of the Election Sermons from the period being either lost or never transcribed (94). Such a reading, however, seems counter-intuitive (not to say dismissive of Hawthorne’s inventiveness), as though Hawthorne would remove Dimmesdale’s art from the novel so that we might notice that it is missing and, therefore, notice it. It seems in keeping with Hawthorne’s larger concerns about art, imagination, and morality to suggest that he mutes Dimmesdale’s sermon so that we would focus on something else: not the art that was missing but rather the *artistry* that went into creating it. Wanting to highlight the failure of taste at the beginning of the novel, Hawthorne focuses on the intricacies of the scarlet letter without explaining how it came to be. Now Hawthorne focuses on Dimmesdale composing the sermon, rather than the composition itself, highlighting the artistic imagination behind the work of art.

Indeed, it is this emphasis on artistry that seems to be the sermon’s separate “meaning for [Hester],” who, standing outside of the Salem church, hears through the



sermon's "indistinguishable words" and into the majesty of the inspired artist (I: 243). She hears past the sermon's Puritan nationalism and into the "plaintiveness" of Dimmesdale's "essential character" hidden within the cadence and swells of his delivery (I: 243). Hester catches the imaginative artistry behind Dimmesdale's words and listens to the sermon as though, to quote Perry Miller on Edwards once more, the sermon was "almost a hoax, not to be read but to be seen through" (51).

Fittingly, for a novel that repeatedly links imaginative acts to moral themes, Dimmesdale's redemptive confession at the end of the novel comes on the heels of this final, grand sermon.<sup>4</sup> The imaginative activity that Dimmesdale displayed in the sermon then translates into a burst of physical and moral activity that finally carries him to the scaffold to claim Pearl as his daughter and to take responsibility for his part in his and Hester's affair. In this sense, as Terence Martin has claimed, the sermon that Dimmesdale wrote just after planning to elope with Hester ironically becomes an "instrument for self-conversion," moving the reticent minister from sinful passivity into redemptive activity ("Dimmesdale's" 236). Though it is left unclear (in this novel) exactly how the two are connected, Hawthorne's decision to pair Dimmesdale's outpouring of an active artistic imagination with his sudden and otherwise unexplained move from his damning inclinations towards an act of confession suggests a causal connection between the two acts. It seems as though Dimmesdale's glimpse into ideal or heavenly beauty during his composition of the sermon empowered him to act upon the heavenly commands he already knew and believed.

Paul Gilmore has recently suggested that Hawthorne forces the art in his fiction—like Dimmesdale's sermon—into an ethereal idealism that is "anti-aesthetic" (81). This

anti-aesthetic art “must remain aloof from the world, floating outside the material existence of life” because art that tries to have an effect on the corporeal world “becomes simply a tool of control and manipulation” for unbalanced power structures (82, 81). Gilmore is undoubtedly right to suggest that Hawthorne mistrusts art rooted in the material world (e.g. the paintings from “Prophetic Pictures”), favoring more idealistic art (e.g. Owen Warland’s butterfly). He is wrong, however, to classify this art as anti-aesthetic or even apolitical. Rather, artistry becomes tangibly valuable in Hawthorne’s fiction—resulting in valuable ethical development—only when it, in the words of Hans Urs von Balthasar, “spiral[s] upwards, towards [a] divinely-wrought event” or a divinely-wrought form (58). It is only then that art and the artist are able to escape the unbalanced power structures of the material world that stem from our “aesthetic fallenness” or original sin (Balthasar 58).

Inspired, it seems, by the otherworldly truths encoded in Dimmesdale’s delivery, Hester also displays an artistic imagination in the final chapters of *The Scarlet Letter*. Though she once again, on her return to Salem, embroiders magnificent garments (this time clothes for her grandchildren, rather than the badge of her own public ridicule), the primary outlet for her artistry seems to come in her discussions with troubled women who come to her with questions, “demanding why they were so wretched, and what the remedy” (I: 263). No longer isolated from the rest of Salem in her cottage, Hester comforts the women and counsels them, telling them “of her firm belief, that, at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven’s own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness” (I: 263). Like Hawthorne, Hester

becomes “a citizen of somewhere else” (I: 43), seeing through empirical reality and blending the cold, practical world of Salem with the imaginary world she knows it may yet become.

Sacvan Bercovitch, in his influential study of Hester’s return, sees her social work as the unraveling of her former radicalism and the completion of the socializing process that began with the first scaffold scene. This new Hester is, Bercovitch writes, “the dissenter as agent of socialization, a self-professed sinner self-transformed into a herald of progress” (159). Bercovitch’s reading, while doing well to note the irony of Hester (formerly, the antinomian rebel) shifting into a quiet role in society at the novel’s close, seems to overlook the terms of Hester’s socialization. She does not become a fanciful, authoritative mechanism of indoctrination and socialization, along the lines of a Bellingham or Wilson. Rather, Hester becomes the ideal, imaginative judge that Hawthorne hints at by negation in the first scaffold scene. With her imaginative ability to empathize and hope for the future, Hester is one of the few characters in all of Hawthorne’s fictional universe “capable of sitting in judgment on an erring woman’s heart, and disentangling its mesh of good and evil” (I: 64). And if the first scaffold scene is a contest between the Salem elite and Hester over the proper interpretation of the scarlet letter, Hester here, at the end of the novel, finally wins. Able now to draw vital comparisons between herself and nobles or dignitaries or saints, Hester re-imagines the letter from the hellfire of Wilson’s sermon into the celestial “angel” that it becomes in the historical memory of Salem’s descendants (I: 32). In her return to imaginative artistry at the end of the tale, Hester (like Dimmesdale and Hawthorne) trades the moral drudgery

and isolation of a fanciful mind for the aesthetically and socially unifying force of an artistic imagination.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Forging an Imaginative Taste in *The Marble Faun*

In the nineteenth century, terms like *creation* and *art* were often placed in explicit opposition to terms like *taste* and *criticism*. In his 1810 *Philosophical Essays*, Dugald Stewart refers to (and partially disputes) the “doctrine which has been commonly, or rather universally, taught of late” that creativity exists primarily among primitive societies, while taste belongs to more advanced civilizations (V: 399). Hawthorne’s sister-in-law Elizabeth Peabody presents something similar to this “universal” doctrine in the introduction to *Aesthetic Papers*, her short-lived Transcendentalist journal, writing that “neither taste nor the aesthetic principle has any conscious place in creative, but only in critical ages. The progress of criticism is the reverse of that of art” (4). Throughout his writing Hawthorne, who saw little of value in the common understanding of taste and also objected to unbridled creativity, seemed troubled by this polarization of artist and audience. In his early and middle years, he created characters like Alice Vane and Hester Prynne to present readers with artists who learn to actively appreciate the art of others and who draw moral value from their creative taste. In *The Marble Faun*, his final published novel, Hawthorne offers his premier example of artist-turned-viewer in Hilda the copyist, who synthesizes artistic creativity and critical acuity—merging imagination with taste. Along with this definition of a new type of taste, Hawthorne structures his romance in such a way as to force his audience to imaginatively engage with his story, becoming, in a sense, artists themselves. No longer content to create fictional artists who become imaginative members of an imaginary audience, Hawthorne prods his readers

into the combined role of audience and artist that he believes necessary in order for them to properly appreciate his romance and, even more importantly, derive moral worth from his art.

Though both the title and subtitle of *The Marble Faun; or the Romance of Monte Beni* suggest that the main character is Donatello (the “modern Faun” and Count of Monte Beni [IV: 463])—we cannot be certain that this emphasis was always Hawthorne’s intention.<sup>1</sup> “St. Hilda’s Shrine,” a working title that Hawthorne gave his American publishers a few weeks before completing the novel in order to advertise it (XVIII: 206), suggests that Hawthorne may have considered Hilda, at least while he was writing the story, as important a character as Donatello. This interest in Hilda should not be too surprising, for though she does not experience a moral transformation as dramatic as Donatello’s, Hilda certainly models Hawthorne’s concept of imaginative taste, which is central both to his theory of romance and his apparent desire to educate his readers.

On the surface, Hawthorne’s characterization of Hilda demonstrates Rita K. Gollin’s claim that his “beliefs about art were those of his time” (129). As Hawthorne develops his description of Hilda, however, the vocabulary he has borrowed from contemporary aesthetics breaks down, and so he leaves it behind, forging something new in his synthesis of taste and imagination. Hawthorne’s first descriptions of Hilda’s copy work, for instance, seem to label her as a woman of Common Sense taste. He writes:

No other person, it is probable, recognized so adequately, and enjoyed with such deep delight, the pictorial wonders that were here [in Rome] displayed. She saw—no, not saw, but felt—through and through a picture; she bestowed upon it all the warmth and richness of a woman’s sympathy, not by any intellectual effort but by this strength of heart. (IV: 57-8)

Like Francis Hutcheson's theory that our appreciation of art relies, ultimately, on our feelings of sympathy with the aesthetic object, rather than our rationale for appreciating it, Hilda copies from her emotions, rather than her intellect, and, fittingly, this sympathetic appreciation of the paintings results in that chief emotion of taste—"deep delight." Encouraging us to further group Hilda together with the Common Sense school, Hawthorne later comments that if the artists in the galleries where Hilda worked "paused to look over her shoulder, and had sensibility enough to understand what was before their eyes, they soon felt inclined to believe that the spirits of the Old Masters were hovering over Hilda, and guiding her delicate white hand" (IV: 58). Here Hilda seems not to have a vital, dynamic imagination, but rather to be a passive medium for the Italian masters, painting only as they guide her. She is Kames, Alison, or Stewart's ideal viewer, who instinctively understands what the artist is attempting and derives pleasure from allowing the artwork to manipulate her sympathies.

As Hawthorne continues with his sketch of Hilda, however, she seems to move past this purely Common Sense label. "Her copies were indeed marvelous," Hawthorne writes, but "[a]ccuracy was not the phrase for them; a Chinese copy is accurate. Hilda's had that evanescent and ethereal life—that flitting fragrance, as it were, of the originals" (IV: 58). Some of these copies, in transcending mere accuracy, even surpassed the originals, for Hilda "had been enabled to execute what the great Master had conceived in his imagination, but had not so perfectly succeeded in putting upon a canvas" (IV: 59). Here it becomes clear that Hilda creates such exquisite copies of the old masters through an active imagination that takes inspiration from the paintings but then recreates them, rather than through a passive sympathy that sees the old masters as a jumping off point

for a “long train of feelings and recollections” (Alison 27). Rather than truly being Raphael or Fra Angelico’s passive medium, Hilda executes her copies from the same ideal source, with the same type of dynamic imagination so that “the most skillful artists declared that she had been led to her results by following precisely the same processes, step by step, through which the original painter had trodden to the development of his idea” (IV: 59). Rather than turning herself into one of Rome’s “Guido machines” (IV: 59), as Hawthorne refers to the other copyists, Hilda performs her copy work with an imaginative taste, merging a creative vision as powerful as the original painter’s with an equally keen sympathy that is able to instinctively feel the painting’s tone and direction.

Later in the novel, Hawthorne provides another description of Hilda’s imaginative taste through Kenyon, a sculptor who is at once perceptive and thoroughly in love with Hilda. The description comes in the form of a confrontation, Kenyon having seen Hilda in a confessional at St. Peter’s and fearing that she converted to Catholicism. The sculptor begins, “You seemed to me a rare mixture of impressibility, sympathy, sensitiveness to many influences, with a certain quality of common sense,” before changing his mind and saying, “—no, not that, but a higher and finer attribute, for which I find no better word” (IV: 367). In lieu of this “better word,” Kenyon praises Hilda as “a creature of imagination” with “a native rectitude of thought and something deeper, more reliable than thought” (IV: 367). Here again, the sketch begins with a description reminiscent of Common Sense philosophy’s ideal person of taste. Hilda is “a rare mixture of impressibility, sympathy, [and] sensitiveness” profoundly capable of passive interpretation and appreciation led by the painting’s physical qualities. Then, as Hawthorne’s narrator does earlier in the novel, Kenyon jettisons his praise of Hilda’s



“common sense” for something that is more difficult to define. Hilda certainly has a full measure of Common Sense qualities, but she goes beyond these, combining her “rectitude of thought” with an active imagination that is capable of forming thoughts that stem from an ethereal realm of ideas, rather than wholly relying on the train of association begun by physical objects. Hilda, then, lives up to Hawthorne’s Romantic conception of the artist even in her Common Sense appreciation of art.

Hilda’s cold reception from most contemporary critics is at least partially based on their failure to notice her novel combination of taste and imagination. Many of these critics, failing to see Hilda’s ability to shift between active and passive modes of thought, quickly classify her as a part of the “female stereotype of passivity and reception [that] permeated the 1850s” (Coale 63). Others see her as one of Hawthorne’s most troubling inventions. In this vein, Milton R. Stern calls Hilda “not a heroine, but a moral fungus, growing priggishly out of the disintegration of other people’s lives” (106). Attacking her as an agent of banal aesthetics, rather than Victorian morality, Frederick Crews writes that Hawthorne repeatedly forces his reader to “choose between artistic profundity and Hilda-ism; they are incompatible” (236). Similarly, Nina Baym suggests that Hilda’s elevation at the end of the novel “represents [...] a defacing not only of Hawthorne’s own ideas about great art and romanticism, but a defacing of *The Marble Faun* itself” (114).

In their eagerness to attack Hilda’s conservative morality, such critics ignore the copyist’s acceptance of and participation in Hawthorne’s very own Romantic method of artistic composition. Hawthorne highlights this artistry in his depiction of Hilda and Kenyon as they leave St. Peter’s. Filled with life upon leaving the cathedral, Hilda views all of her surroundings through an imaginative lens. When she looks at Hadrian’s tomb,

which in medieval times had been converted into a prison and was adorned with a statue of Michael, Hilda imagines “an interview between the Archangel and the old Emperor’s ghost,” in which “Saint Michael [...] would finally convince the Emperor Hadrian that where a warlike despot is sown as the seed, a fortress and a prison are the only possible crop” (IV: 370). Later, when overlooking the Tiber, Hilda imagines a concept for a seven-part allegorical poem based upon “the holy candlestick of the Jews” (thought to be lost in the Tiber), in which, “As each branch is lighted, it shall have a differently coloured luster from the other six; and when all the seven are kindled, their radiance shall combine into the intense white light of Truth!” (370-1)

It is worth noting that Hilda’s imaginative readings of Rome, with their brief sketches of a plot and suggestions for a moral, resemble nothing so much as the entries in Hawthorne’s early *American Notebooks*.<sup>2</sup> Also, her ability to see an allegorical poem in the waters of the Tiber, which Hawthorne describes as “a mud-puddle in strenuous motion” (IV: 370), is strikingly similar to Hawthorne’s claim in “The Old Manse” that a moral concerning the “infinite capacity” of the “earthliest human soul” can be inferred from “any mud-puddle in the streets of a city” (X: 8). Hawthorne has already suggested that Hilda’s imaginative taste stems from the same source as Raphael’s inspiration or Michelangelo’s intellect. Here he connects it to his own process of composition, revealing, perhaps, an Emersonian belief in the underlying unity of all truly imaginative minds—a unity that Hawthorne seems determined to draw his readers into as the novel progresses.

Hawthorne’s acute interest in how his readers approach *The Marble Faun* is evident from the start. His preface begins with an extended address to an ideal reader—

“that all-sympathizing critic [...] whom an author never actually meets, but to whom he implicitly makes his appeal, whenever he is conscious of having done his best” (IV: 1). Perhaps, Hawthorne begins with a direct, if somewhat whimsical, address to this “Gentle, Kind, Benevolent, Indulgent, and most Beloved and Honoured Reader” because he realizes that *The Marble Faun* will be difficult for much of his mainstream audience (IV: 2). Indeed, the novel functions at once as the culmination of Hawthorne’s theory of romance (he claimed to have “never thought or felt more deeply, or taken more pains” with a work [XVIII: 262]) and his most obvious statement against what he calls in one letter the “plottish proprieties” of nineteenth-century fiction (XVIII: 259). As the novel proceeds it becomes clear that Hawthorne wants his readers to not only respond sympathetically to the themes of his story, but also to see in the ambiguity of the novel the opportunity to exercise imaginative taste. As Frank Kermode has written of Hawthorne’s romances, “[H]is texts, with all their varying, fading voices, their controlled lapses into possible inauthenticity, are meant as invitations to co-production on the part of the reader” (113). Hawthorne carefully fragments his story, then, hoping that his readers will piece a coherent narrative together with their own imaginations.

In order to provoke this imaginative response, *The Marble Faun* is replete with descriptions of objects, conversations, and people that are missing key elements or are, like the description of Dimmesdale’s sermon from *The Scarlet Letter*, conspicuously empty. Often, Hawthorne conveys an obscure mood rather than plain facts, forcing his readers to question the authority of his narration. Take, for instance, the introduction to Miriam’s meeting with her mysterious nemesis—the model—from the aptly named chapter “Fragmentary Sentences”:

[T]here have come to us but a few vague whisperings of what passed in Miriam's interview, that afternoon, with the sinister personage who had dogged her footsteps ever since the visit to the catacomb. In weaving these mystic utterances into a continuous scene, we undertake a task resembling, in its perplexity, that of gathering up and piecing together the fragments of a letter, which has been torn and scattered to the winds. Many words of deep significance—many entire sentences, and those possibly the most important ones—have flown too far, on the winged breeze to be recovered. If we insert our own conjectural amendments, we perhaps give a purport utterly at variance with the true one. Yet, 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 (IV: 93).

The above passage works both as a preface to Miriam's mysterious conversation and as a description of Miriam herself, whose biography as it appears in the romance is also something of a fragmentary sentence. The reader is responsible for interpreting Miriam's character, for drawing a meaning from the strange admixture of dubious innocence and gloom that surrounds this haunted artist. Our complicity in creating the story along with Hawthorne is then reinforced by his use of the first-person plural, which lends this section both the air of a nineteenth-century editorial and something of a familiar, if not conspiratorial, alliance between writer and reader. We join Hawthorne in weaving the fragments of a conversation and a life into a whole, and along with Hawthorne we risk distorting the truth of the conversation and, more importantly, the truth of Miriam's character in our imaginations.

In making sense of the holes in Hawthorne's plot, we are forced to become a part of the "class of spectators" that Hilda identifies as able to "find a great deal more in [works of art] than the poet or artist has actually expressed" (IV: 379). Like Hilda in her copy work, we can arrive at a complete reading of the novel only by "following precisely the same processes, step by step, through which [Hawthorne] had trodden to the

development of his idea” (IV: 59). In this way Hawthorne’s frustration of the narrative becomes a tool for what seems to be the goal of his entire romantic theory—the education of his readers’ imaginations. His shadowy prose blurs the line between actual and imaginary and forces his readers to evaluate the truth of the narrative on their own. This is undoubtedly the reason Hawthorne frustrates our reading of the all-important moment of murder later on in the novel and the reason he more playfully refuses to describe Kenyon and Hilda’s final romantic meeting, Donatello’s genealogy, or (repeatedly) whether or not Donatello’s ears are furry (IV: 170-1, 461, 231, 467).

*The Marble Faun*’s romantic ambiguity is perhaps sharpest felt at the end of the novel. Here, Hilda has recently come back from what seems to have been an ecclesiastical kidnapping, and Miriam and Donatello are poised for a final act of penance to relieve their searing consciences. Hawthorne, however, does not explain any of these loose ends. Instead he describes a bracelet that Hilda received from Miriam and asks, “[W]hat was Miriam’s life to be? And where was Donatello? But Hilda had a hopeful soul, and saw sunlight on the mountain-tops” (IV: 462). Far from the melodramatic conclusion of Hawthorne’s penultimate novel *The Blithedale Romance*, which ends with Coverdale’s halting confession “I—I myself—was in love—with—PRISCILLA!” (III: 247), *The Marble Faun* ends on an unresolved chord, leading many of Hawthorne’s contemporaries to assume that it collapsed beneath the weight of its own mysteries, that Hawthorne did not provide his readers with a proper denouement because he was unable to figure it out himself.

A few weeks after publishing *The Marble Faun*, Hawthorne composed a postscript to clear up some of these mysteries at the request of both his publishers and

several discontent critics.<sup>3</sup> His ironic tone in the postscript is a sharp break from the novel's ethereal ending, and it reflects both his repeated stance that he "should prefer the book as it now stands" [i.e. without the postscript] (XVIII: 247) and the ease with which he could supply the book with a conventional denouement. After explaining to his readers that he meant to leave them somewhat in the dark, for mystery is "the kind of atmosphere essential to the effect at which he aimed" (IV: 463), Hawthorne has Hilda and Kenyon reveal the novel's mysteries to the inquisitive narrator in a curt question and answer format. Miriam, we learn, was using her powerful connections in Rome to escape "one of the most dreadful and mysterious events that have occurred in the present century" and to fade into "real obscurity" (IV: 467, 465). Hilda was kidnapped by these connections and housed with nuns after delivering Miriam's final letter to them. Donatello confessed to murdering the model and is now in prison.

In some ways, the postscript's narrator is reminiscent of the narrator from "Edward Randolph's Portrait." Just as the earlier narrator hopes to track down the actual darkened portrait from the tale, thinking it "not unnecessary proof of the authenticity of the facts here set down" (IX: 269), so does this narrator pester his characters to figure out the facts. He asks pointed questions and, like a deceitful reporter, assures his sources that their answers will be "kept a profound secret" (IV: 466). The narrator's final question, "Did Donatello's ears resemble those of the Faun of Praxiteles?" (IV: 467) explicitly crosses the line that Hawthorne established at the beginning of his postscript, showing that this pragmatic questioner belongs to the class of readers for whom "the book is [...] a failure" (IV: 464).

Shortly after sending this charmingly satirical postscript to his publishers, Hawthorne received a letter from John Motley, an acquaintance from Hawthorne's time in Rome, who praised *The Marble Faun's* mysterious, romantic tone. "I like those shadowy, weird, fantastic, Hawthornesque shapes," Motley writes, "flitting through the golden gloom which is the atmosphere of the book—I like the misty way in which the story is indicated rather than revealed" (qtd. in Hawthorne XVIII: 257-8). In his response, Hawthorne exuberantly writes that Motley was "certainly that Gentle Reader for whom all my books were exclusively written" (XVIII: 256), indicating that the ideal reader Hawthorne mentions in the preface is not someone who praises his stories or even one who simply enjoys his stories, but rather is one who understands his stories as an opportunity to, as he writes to Motley, "work out my imperfect efforts, and half make the book with your own imagination, and see what I myself saw, but could only hint at" (XVIII: 256).

It is precisely because *The Marble Faun* is Hawthorne's most determined attempt to lead his readers to a more imaginative taste that he judges the book by the quality of its readings rather than the quality of his writing. And so he calls the romance "a success" when Motley reads it, just as he had called it a failure when it was read by the "beer-sodden English beefeaters[, who] do not know how to read a Romance" and can only be contented, like the narrator of the postscript, with a more authoritative account of the facts hand-fed to them from the author (XVIII: 256). Far from Robert Hughes's recent contention that "Hawthorne seems to be asking for a radical passivity" from his readers, which "the actual reader cannot bear" (157), Hawthorne calls his readers to exercise a radical *activity* of re-creating the story in their minds and (in a true Hildaesque fashion)

striving towards the ideal truths that Hawthorne's romance falls short of fully articulating.

With this emphasis on imaginative reading instead of authoritative writing, *The Marble Faun* resists becoming an object of Common Sense taste. It refuses to conjure for the reader that ideal presence of realistic narration so important to Kames, and likewise it stalls the train of association that lies behind Alison's aesthetics. Still, though it certainly opposes these passive conceptions of taste, it would be wrong to argue that *The Marble Faun* renounces all hopes of appreciation. As Hawthorne makes clear while instructing his readers in the preface, *The Marble Faun* searches for those who, like Motley, instinctively approach its mysteries and unrealities not as failures in its composition, but rather as occasions for exercising that dynamic, Romantic imagination that most critics had hitherto relegated to the realm of artistic creation. In short, Hawthorne hopes his readers will bridge the gap between artistry and appreciation by, like Hilda, absorbing both roles.

With his stylistic innovation, focus on interpretation, and disregard for "plottish proprieties," Hawthorne's theory of romance seems to anticipate much of postmodern philosophy, making *The Marble Faun* a convenient subject for studies in contemporary theory.<sup>4</sup> In particular, Hawthorne's interest in inviting readers into the story's production calls to mind Roland Barthes's emphasis on fashioning *writerly* (as opposed to *readerly*) texts: texts that "make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer" (*S/Z* 4). Both Hawthorne and Barthes are critical of "the pitiless divorce which the literary institution maintains between the producer of the text and its user, between its owner and its customer, between its author and its reader" (Barthes *S/Z* 4). And both propose a similar



method for mending this divorce, encouraging readers to take charge of the text and continuously shape it according to their own creative imaginations. Just as Hawthorne applauds Motley for “half mak[ing] the book of [his] own imagination” (XVIII: 256), Barthes argues that good criticism has an “aptitude [...] to cover [texts] as completely as possible by its own language” (*Critical* 259). And just as Hawthorne is critical in his tales of taste that passively allows the work to sweep over the subject’s mind, Barthes is critical of aesthetic principles in which reading is “reduced to a passive, inner *mimesis*” (*Image* 162).

Of course, the writers have their differences as well. Hawthorne, as something of a neo-Platonist, thinks that imaginatively recreating the text as you read will lead you to the ideal vision that originally inspired the artist. On the other hand, Barthes, as a Marxist materialist, believes that the active reader will arrive at her own, idiosyncratic vision so that “to rewrite the writerly text would consist only in disseminating it, in dispersing it within the field of infinite difference” (*S/Z* 5). The two theorists are most sharply separated by this idealist/materialist difference, however, in their hopes for the outcome of imaginative taste. And though Motley’s desire to “revel” in “the romantic atmosphere of [*The Marble Faun*]” may seem in line with the chief end of Barthes’s self-proclaimed “hedonistic aesthetics” (XVIII: 258, *Image* 163), Hawthorne and Barthes ultimately aspire to different and even opposing goals. While Barthes cites *jouissance* or an erotic “pleasure without separation” as the highest purpose of the text (*Image* 163), Hawthorne maintains the goals (though not the methods) of the Common Sense school, hoping for his audience to both experience pleasure *and* heighten their moral senses.

Fittingly, Hilda, as Hawthorne's chief example of imaginative taste, also stands out as his chief example of its moral payoff. In Hilda piety and aesthetics are perfectly blended so that "religion and the love of beauty [are] at one" (IV: 404). We can see this in Kenyon's often blended praise for her devotion and creativity. In one of these enumerations of Hilda's fine qualities, Kenyon calls her a "treasure of sweet faith and pure imagination" (IV: 103). Though the reader may anticipate *pure* to modify *faith* and *sweet* to modify *imagination*, Kenyon's choice to switch the adjectives suggests that in Hilda there is little distinction; to praise her imagination is to praise her faith. Likewise, there is little distinction between Hilda's faith and her morality, for this "daughter of the Puritans" believes herself to be "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" (IV: 54, 208).

Hawthorne begins an explicit twinning of Hilda's spiritual morality and imaginative taste midway through the novel, when Hilda, after watching Donatello murder the model at Miriam's bidding, "wander[s] through those long galleries" of Rome "wondering what had become of the splendour that used to beam upon her from the walls" (IV: 341). The moral gloom and responsibility of witnessing a murder dims her aesthetic sense, so that art, for her, "had lost its consecration" and she "condemned almost everything that she was wont to admire" (IV: 341).

Just as the moral gloom of the murder dims her aesthetic sense, however, a reawakening of her imaginative taste in St. Peter's leads her to a rejuvenating act of penitence.<sup>5</sup> Hawthorne describes St. Peter's as the culmination of religious art. He writes: "It seemed an embodiment of whatever the imagination could conceive, or the

heart desire, as a magnificent, comprehensive, majestic symbol of religious faith. All splendour was included within its verge, and there was space for all” (IV: 367). In this sublime chapel, Hilda finds again the pleasure of art. She “gaze[s] with delight” at the whole of the surroundings: “the cherubim that fluttered upon the pilasters,” “the marble doves, hovering, unexpectedly, with green olive-branches of precious stones,” and even “those grim Popes, who sit each over his tomb” (IV: 350). To Hilda’s trained eye, each and every flourish of the cathedral “contributed its little all towards the grandeur of the whole” (IV: 350). And, in the words of Coleridge, her “imagination modifies images and gives unity to variety; it sees all things in one” (*Table* 490).

Hilda’s delight in creatively merging the cathedral’s decorations into a unified vision then seamlessly translates into religious fervor. She admires a shrine featuring “a mosaic copy of Guido’s beautiful Archangel” before, suddenly, “[finding] herself kneeling before the shrine [...]. She laid down her head and sobbed out a prayer; she hardly knew to whom, whether Michael, the Virgin, or the Father; she hardly knew for what, save only a vague longing, that thus the burthen of her spirit might be lightened a little” (IV: 352). The instinct and emotion radiating from Hilda’s prayer (it seems to be more of a feeling than a thought) call to mind her moral sense, which is awakened, as Kames might point out, by her taste for the arts—the cathedral in general and Guido’s painting in particular. Hilda’s taste, however, is, as we have already seen, no simple affair of passive art-consumption. Her taste is informed by a lifelong imaginative appreciation for paintings, which oscillates between a passive sympathy with the art and an active artistry that recreates the work from its fundamental imaginative vision. This

taste is then linked to her moral sense or “her character” for which the surrounding art “was peculiarly adapted” (IV: 352).

Hilda’s subsequent confession to the priest, the culmination of this aesthetic and moral resurgence, bears a striking resemblance to her artistry. At first the confession seems to be an exercise in instinct and passive sympathy. Hilda speaks from the “turbulent overflow of emotion too long repressed,” and when she cannot find the words, she is led on by the priest’s “apposite questions that [...] acted like a magnetism in attracting the girl’s confidence” (IV: 357). Later, though, when the priest confronts her, saying he could (since Hilda is not Catholic) report her confession to the police, Hilda asserts her independence and even moral authority over him, exclaiming, “This is not right, Father!” (IV: 359). In her copying, Hilda seems to passively submit to the painting, but actually searches out the painting’s imaginative root. Likewise, in her confession, Hilda seems to submit herself to the priest, but actually searches out a divine audience of which the priest is a symbol. Rather than being converted by the priest’s “magnetism,” Hilda says at the end of their conversation, “I dare not step farther than *Providence shall guide me*” (IV: 362 my emphasis).

Here, Hawthorne lightens the “great power of blackness” that Melville sees in the tales’ focus on “Innate Depravity and Original Sin” (243). Formerly, his stories featured a fanciful taste that led its audience to pessimistic conclusions about predestination (e.g. Dimmesdale’s fear, while locked in the maze of fanciful association, that he is being led by the “foul imagination” of “the fiend” [I: 220-1] and Walter Ludlow’s bleak exclamation, at the end of “Prophetic Pictures,” “Our fate is upon us!” [XI: 181]). Now,

Hilda's imaginative taste puts her in touch with spiritual forms and in line with a benign, providential destiny.

This rejuvenating confession and alignment with providence is causally and methodologically linked to Hilda's imaginative taste, which intensifies her moral sense through recreations of and exposure to ideal truths. In short, her morals benefit from her taste. Here, in her confession, Hilda is freed from the moral gloom that surrounded her. She is also, if we might infer forgiveness and sympathy from her tears of hope for Miriam (IV: 462), freed from the excessively harsh morality—what one critic calls the “life-denying either/or categories of understanding” (Piper 72)—that characterized her midway through the novel and led her into such a deep gloom. Perhaps this is what Kenyon means, when, just after Hilda leaves the confessional, he praises her “taste” as “so exquisite and sincere that it [rises] to be a moral virtue” (IV: 367). For, according to Hawthorne, the moral power of art relies upon viewers who follow Hilda, infusing their taste with a vital imagination. And so it should come as little surprise that once Hilda loses part of her imaginative edge—becoming less “perfect a copyist” after witnessing the murder (IV: 375)—Hawthorne quickly marries her off to Kenyon, the novel's main spokesperson for Romantic artistry, symbolizing his marriage of taste and imagination with the union of these two aesthetically-minded expatriates.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Conclusion

In 1849, while he was still writing *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne began work on “Main-street” at the insistence of Elizabeth Peabody, who had asked him to contribute a story to her *Aesthetic Papers*.<sup>1</sup> In the tale, a humble showman tells the history of Salem, while also cranking a “shifting panorama” that shows characters from history walking about the town’s main-street to “[illustrate] the march of time” (XI: 49). Throughout the tale, this novel artist is heckled by a critic in his audience who refuses to suspend his disbelief and, once the show is finished, demands a refund, exclaiming, “I said that your exhibition would prove a humbug and so it has turned out. So hand over my quarter!” (XI: 82)

This quarrelsome relationship between critic and artist seems to support Peabody’s assertion that “[t]he progress of criticism is the reverse of that of art” (4), a claim that the tale’s original readers might have seen just a few pages earlier in the journal’s preface. The critic watches the production through “blue glasses, with bows of Berlin steel” (XI: 52), recalling Peabody’s belief that “the German mind” formulated aesthetic criticism (3), and his exceedingly practical stances leave little room for romance. Indeed, it seems impossible for the artist to thrive in the midst of the critic’s unflinching opinion that art must create a vital illusion of reality or be relegated as worthless. “I make it a point to see things precisely as they are” (XI: 63), the critic insists, demanding that the artwork lead him through the emotions of taste without requiring any strenuous effort on his part. At points in the tale, the critic’s insistence on

strict verisimilitude goes so far as to spoil the show for the rest of the audience, ruining, as the showman claims, “the illusion of the scene” (IX: 63).

Still, hidden within this repartee between showman and belligerent critic, Hawthorne betrays a hope that criticism and art need not be so opposed. The showman constantly calls on the critic to use his imagination to appreciate the spectacle, begging him at first to recognize that “[h]uman art has its limits” and later to view the panorama in “the proper light and shadow” (XI: 52, 57). Eventually, the showman asks the critic to take a lesson from another one of the viewers: a “young lady, in whose face I have watched the reflection of every changing scene” (IX: 63). Here, in the showman’s various pleas to the critic, Hawthorne summarizes the three main appeals to critical taste he will make in his career: first, an argument that is most pronounced in his early tales, he suggests that art by itself is powerless to effect real change; second, a position we see stressed in the “Custom-House,” he asserts that one needs a creative, romantic environment in which to understand romances; and third, a sketch that Hawthorne expands in *The Marble Faun*, he offers the example of a young woman who continuously shapes and recreates the art in her mind. Though the tale proceeds from this third plea onward with its light satire of critical taste, it is worth noting that even here, in his clearest articulation of the cross purposes of reader and writer, Hawthorne envisions an ideal spectator who infuses her appreciation of art with an active artistry. For it is only with such an imaginative taste, Hawthorne believes, that the critic can fully experience the delight and moral education that art offers its viewers.

## Notes

### Chapter One: Introduction

1. By the time Hawthorne started writing tales in the late 1820s, this definition had changed slightly, shifting its emphasis from an appreciation of nature *and* the arts to primarily an appreciation of arts. Webster's 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language* reflects this shift in emphasis, defining *taste* as "the faculty of discerning beauty, order, congruity, proportion, symmetry, or whatever constitutes excellence, particularly in the fine arts and belles lettres."

### Chapter Two: The Impotence of Taste in the Tales

1. See Marion L. Kesselring's *Hawthorne's Reading: A Transcription and Identification of Titles Recorded in the Charge-Books of the Salem Athenaeum*.

2. Hutcheson was widely criticized for these equations and progressively distanced himself from them in later editions of the *Inquiry*. He was perhaps most memorably mocked by Richard Griffith, who wrote: "Hutcheson [sic.], in his philosophic treatise on beauty, harmony, and order, plus's and minus's you to heaven or hell, by algebraic equations—so that none but an expert mathematician can ever be able to settle his accounts with St. Peter—and perhaps St. Matthew, who had been an officer in the customs, must be called in to audite [sic.] them" (229).

3. For a detailed account of Common Sense philosophy's impact on the early American University, see the first chapter of Terence Martin's *Instructed Vision*. When Martin later discusses "the alliance of morality and criticism" in Kames's thought, he adds that "[a]ny American critic [of Kames's day] would agree wholeheartedly" (103).

4. See Matthiessen 223, Axelsson 149, and Bell 78-9.

5. For a longer discussion of the imagination as necessary for sympathy, see the first chapter of Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

### Chapter Three: Imagination's Influence in *The Scarlet Letter*

1. See Martin's *Instructed Vision* 125 and Golin and Idol 14.

2. Coleridge and Emerson most likely came to such definitions of the imagination through the works of Maass, Schelling, Schiller, and the other German Idealists (see Engell and Bate's gloss in *Biographia* I: 124).



3. It is a testament both to the complexity of Hester's character and the density of Romantic terminology that, though I read Hester as an example of the fanciful audience, i.e., not *enough* of a Romantic, she is often read as Hawthorne's warning against the excesses of Romantic Transcendentalism and an overactive imagination. See, for instance, Bloom's reading of Hester as a Transcendental "American Eve" (xi) or Bercovitch's extended exploration into Hester's Emersonian individualism (125-8).

4. Though Dimmesdale's confession is not universally seen as redemptive, I will here take it for granted, given Hawthorne's heavy-handed description of the scene as a time of forgiveness and pious meditation. For a different reading see Scott Derrick's reading of Dimmesdale's confession as a phallogocentric, "re-masculizing triumph" (127), coming largely at Hester's expense or Margaret Reid's suggestion that "Dimmesdale's final confession is [...] self-destructive without the potentially redemptive promise of contributing to the developing colony" (126).

#### Chapter Four: Forging an Imaginative Taste in *The Marble Faun*

1. *Transformation*, the title Smith & Elder (Hawthorne's London publishers) gave the novel, also suggests Donatello, who undergoes the novel's most major transformation, as the main character. Hawthorne, however, hated the title, and in a letter to one of his American publishers, he calls Smith & Elder "pig-headed individuals," writing that their title presents his romance as "Harlequin in a pantomime" (230).

2. The proposed conversation between Michael and Hadrian, in fact, probably draws from Hawthorne's sketch of Hadrian's ghost from his *Italian Notebooks*, in which the dead emperor "glides up and down, disconsolate, in that spiral passage which goes from top to bottom of the tomb; while the Gauls plant themselves on his very Mausoleum to keep the imperial city in awe" (XIV: 144).

3. Hawthorne's idea "of writing a few explanatory pages, in the shape of a conversation between the author, Kenyon, and Hilda" seems to be partially sparked by a letter from his publishers and partially by reviews like that of Henry Chorley, who thought Donatello and Miriam's story lines "are all left too vaporously involved in suggestion to satisfy any one whose blood has turned back at the admirable, clear and forcible last scenes of 'The Scarlet Letter'" (XVIII: 242; 297). At any rate, Hawthorne himself believed that "everybody complains that the mysteries of the Romance are not sufficiently cleared up" (XVIII: 242).

4. The aforementioned Robert Hughes, for instance, places his discussion of Hawthorne's theory of romance in *The Marble Faun* within his book's larger discussion of Lacan, Levinas, and Badiou's postmodern ethics.

5. It may seem odd to talk about Hilda's *penitence* when she merely witnessed a crime. However, as Olivia Gatti Taylor convincingly argues, Hilda does take part in and receive the benefits of a Catholic confession, which she merges with a Puritan emphasis on individualism to form a strange fusion of ecumenical penitence (148-50).

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

1. Hawthorne originally gave Peabody “Ethan Brand,” but upon reading it, she asked him “for something as great as well as more cheerful” (qtd. in Hawthorne XI: 382).

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