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Beatrice Cenci

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Beatrice Cenci: Symbol and Vision in *The Marble Faun*

SPENCER HALL

HAWTHORNE SAW ART as a "symbolic mirror"¹ in which the phenomenal world, purged of nonessentials, was made to reflect timeless and essential modes of being. Since he believed ultimate reality to be spiritual, works of art might therefore embody or symbolize spiritual struggles, truths, enigmas. As Millicent Bell points out, art acquired for Hawthorne a kind of prophetic voice in that it could suggest those timeless spiritual realities which recur in human history, and Roy Male states perceptively that the characters in *The Marble Faun* recognize themselves as actors in a timeless myth.² Illuminated by such considerations, the crucial importance of the visual arts in *The Marble Faun* could hardly have gone unnoticed: Guido's Archangel, the Faun of Praxiteles, the figure of the child, dove, and serpent have all received critical attention.³ Yet perhaps the most significant objet d'art in the romance has remained, appropriately enough, in enigmatic shadow. I refer to Guido Reni's portrait of Beatrice Cenci.⁴

Guido's Beatrice takes its place in the ample gallery of art works which, along with the Roman setting and the allusions to

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1. Millicent Bell, *Hawthorne's View of the Artist* (Albany, 1962), pp. 58-64.

2. *Hawthorne's Tragic Vision* (Austin, 1957), p. 163.

3. Recent studies have suggested in particular the relevance of the book's presentation of art to its other thematic tensions: the New World and the Old World, Protestantism and Catholicism, free will and determinism, innocence and guilt. See esp. Paul Brodtkorb, "Art Allegory in *The Marble Faun*," *PMLA* 77 (1962): 254-67, and Gary Scrimgeour, "*The Marble Faun*: Hawthorne's Fairy Land," *AL* 36 (1964): 271-87.

4. See Corrado Ricci for the view that what the nineteenth century, including Hawthorne, took to be Beatrice was actually Guido's "Sibilla Samia" (*Beatrice Cenci*, trans. Morris Bishop and Henry Longan Stuart, 2 vols. [New York, 1925], 2: 288). I am persuaded that the genesis of *The Marble Faun* itself can be located, at least in part, in Hawthorne's reactions to the portrait.

history, help to universalize, to make archetypal, to mythologize the action of the story. There is, however, something unique about the portrait. It is the only objet d'art in the book which is related to more than one character. The model and Donatello have their respective artistic prototypes, but only Beatrice bears a double reference. The painting becomes, as it were, a kind of nexus between Miriam and Hilda, a "symbolic mirror" in which each recognizes her own identity and which thus reflects the inexorable bond of common humanity which links the two women together.

It is their relationship, furthermore, not the more usually discussed character pairings of Kenyon and Hilda, Donatello and Miriam, which is at the heart of the book's meaning. The confrontation of philosophies represented by the two women is the charged center of Hawthorne's allegorical vision,⁵ and it is with Beatrice that the deep truth of that confrontation lies—the inescapable "sisterhood" which, for good or for evil, Hilda and Miriam must share. Hawthorne stresses this "sisterhood" in the several meetings between his dark and fair heroines, thus exploiting a thematic potentiality left unfulfilled in the relationship between Zenobia and Priscilla in *The Blithedale Romance*. And it is Guido's portrait of Beatrice (or Hilda's copy of it) which is the symbolical and narrative center around which two of the most important of these encounters revolve.

In chapter seven, "Beatrice," and again in chapter twenty-three, "Miriam and Hilda," the two women are set into relief against the portrait.⁶ Chapter seven witnesses a dramatic transformation in which Miriam's expression becomes Beatrice Cenci's—a transformation made all the more meaningful when Hilda notices the change and Miriam entrusts her with a letter for the Palazzo Cenci, the scene of Beatrice's patricide and of Hilda's future detention. And while Beatrice's portrait affords an artistic prototype of Miriam, the woman of experience, it also adumbrates the fall into

5. As Hyatt Waggoner suggests, *The Marble Faun* "is more allegorical than any of the three preceding romances" (*Hawthorne: A Critical Study*, rev. ed. [Cambridge, Mass., 1963], p. 224).

6. The portrait appears again in chap. 36, "Hilda's Tower," where we learn that the young Italian artist's painting of Hilda "by many connoisseurs . . . was supposed to have been suggested by the portrait of Beatrice Cenci" (*The Marble Faun*, Centenary Ed. [Columbus, 1968], p. 330; further page references in my text are to this edition). The dispute between the artist and the picture dealer about its proper title echoes the distinctions made by the two women themselves in chap. 7 and suggests the centrality of the portrait's role in establishing the characters of the two heroines.

experience awaiting the innocent Hilda. The latter's first reaction is to call Beatrice "a fallen angel, fallen, and yet sinless," whose "sorrow [is] so black" that it oppresses "very nearly as sin would" (66). Such of course is to be Hilda's own destiny—Hilda who is frequently described as an angel and who can bear any amount of sorrow but not a "feather's weight" of sin. When, however, the young American suddenly recalls Beatrice's crime and her pity turns to condemnation, Miriam is quick to blunt the "sharp steel sword" of her innocence by insisting upon the common identity uniting all three women. "Poor sister Beatrice! For she was still a woman, Hilda, still a sister, be her sin or sorrow what they might" (68). (We shall return shortly to the important distinction between sin and sorrow in the book's philosophical vision.)

Hilda, Miriam and Beatrice meet again in chapter twenty-three, after the murder of the model. Having achieved an "intimate consciousness" (205) of sin by witnessing the murder, it is now Hilda's turn to discover her own identity in Beatrice Cenci's enigmatic countenance. She turns to the mirror to find, as Miriam had found before, Beatrice's expression depicted in her own face.⁷ Also as before, Hawthorne underscores the symbolical implications of the portrait with an overt reference to the concept of sisterhood. While on the narrative level of action Hilda responds to Miriam's crime by severing their friendship forever, the two women's mutual identification with Beatrice Cenci sponsors our belief that, as Hawthorne says, the "bond" between them "was vital yet" (211). The sisterhood asserted by Miriam remains effective: "I loved you dearly! I love you still! You were to me as a younger sister; yes, dearer than sisters of the same blood" (207). It is important that we recognize the function of Guido's portrait in establishing this bond, for the reconciliation which it defines is not—indeed cannot be—rendered completely on a narrative level. If Hawthorne is to be true to his characters, Hilda must isolate herself from Miriam after the murder, and in fact the two women are never reconciled. If, on the other hand, he is to be true

7. "But, as regards Beatrice's picture, the incident suggests a theory which may account for its unutterable grief and mysterious shadow of guilt, without detracting from the purity which we love to attribute to that ill-fated girl. Who, indeed, can look at that mouth—with its lips half-apart, as innocent as a baby's that has been crying—and not pronounce Beatrice sinless! It was the intimate consciousness of her father's sin that threw its shadow over her, and frightened her into a remote and inaccessible region, where no sympathy could come. It was the knowledge of Miriam's guilt that lent the same expression to Hilda's face" (205).

to his philosophical vision, Hawthorne must insist upon the necessary, the tragically irretrievable sisterhood of his dark and light heroines; upon the common humanity which subsumes the woman of experience and the "angel" of purity.



That Hilda recognizes herself in the portrait only after witnessing Miriam's sin is a symbolic rendering of her fall from absolute innocence, of her new awareness of evil. The fact that Miriam too has found her own likeness in the portrait—reinforced by the statements concerning sisterhood and by such descriptive details as the blood spot which is variously attributed to both women—suggests that Hawthorne sees the awareness of evil as a necessary condition of humanity. We must now look more closely at Hawthorne's vision of humanity as it is revealed through an examination of Guido's portrait. The first question to be raised is obvious: why Beatrice Cenci? In providing an answer we shall find *The Marble Faun* to be darker, more tragic, and more "modern" than is usually recognized.

A number of answers have already been implied, but they are incomplete. The union of Miriam and Hilda in a common womanhood represented by Beatrice is central, but this point needs development. What we require is something at once philosophical and personal. What was the effect of Beatrice's portrait upon Hawthorne and what complex of attitudes and insights did it come to represent for him?⁸ Some educated guesses may be made, and the proper starting point is a description of the painting, given in Hawthorne's own voice, which is almost an exact transcription of a passage from his Notebooks.

The chair, in which Hilda sat, was near the portrait of Beatrice Cenci, which had not yet been taken from the easel. It is a peculiarity of this picture, that its profoundest expression eludes a straightforward glance, and can only be caught by side glimpses, or when the eye falls casually upon it; even as if the painted face had a life and consciousness of its own, and resolving not to betray its secret of grief or guilt, permitted the true tokens to come forth only when it imagined itself

8. The complex and ambiguous nature of Hawthorne's response is indicated by a remark in the *French and Italian Notebooks*: "I hated to leave the picture, and yet was glad when I had taken my last glimpse, because it so perplexed and troubled me not to be able to get hold of its secret" (quoted in Louis Haselmayer, "Hawthorne and the Cenci," *Neophilologus* 27 [1941]: 62).

unseen. No other such magical effect has ever been wrought by pencil. (204-5)

Add to this the first description of Beatrice by Hilda—remembering always how it is colored by Hilda's character—and we have a summary of Hawthorne's response to Beatrice, elements of which are repeated again and again throughout the novel.

"She knows that her sorrow is so strange, and so immense, that she ought to be solitary forever, both for the world's sake and for her own; and this is the reason we feel such a distance between Beatrice and ourselves, even when our eyes meet hers. It is infinitely heartbreaking to meet her glance, and to feel that nothing can be done to help or comfort her; neither does she ask help or comfort, knowing the hopelessness of her case better than we do. She is a fallen angel, fallen, and yet sinless; and it is only this depth of sorrow, with its weight and darkness, that keeps her down upon earth, and brings her within our view even while it sets her beyond our reach." (65-66)

The major elements are: sin and sorrow, isolation, and consciousness.

Nathalia Wright lists the recurrent allusions to the sin-sorrow antinomy in *The Marble Faun*, but although she calls our attention to Hawthorne's preoccupation with the issue, she does not attempt to investigate it.⁹ There may be a doctrinal basis for this distinction somewhere in Hawthorne's theological learning, but I have not been able to find it. Perhaps the closest that we can come is the conventional distinction between sin and guilt based upon the criterion of intention. Original sin may lay the burden of sinfulness upon all men, but guilt implies a malicious intent on the part of the individual will—not the fallen nature common to postlapsarian humanity, but the conscious corruption of private will for which every individual is responsible.

As Hyatt Waggoner suggests, furthermore, Hawthorne in *The Marble Faun* provided the first extended treatment of sin, as opposed to guilt, in his writings.¹⁰ I think that "sin" with regard to Beatrice, Miriam, and Hilda is at times assumed under such terms as "sorrow," "grief," and "misery." Much of the ambiguity which Hawthorne sensed in the painting arose, we recall, from his inability to penetrate Beatrice's "secret of grief or guilt." Miriam

9. "Hawthorne and the Praslin Murder," *NEQ* 15 (1942): 12.

10. *Hawthorne* (Cambridge, Mass., 1955), pp. 214-16.

expresses the same unclarity several times. For example, " 'I accept my own misery,' continued Miriam—'my own guilt, if guilt it be—and, whether guilt or misery, I shall know how to deal with it' " (197).

And even Hilda is forced to question her own relationship to these alternatives: " 'Am I, too, stained with guilt?' thought the poor girl, hiding her face in her hands" (205). Hawthorne, to be sure, immediately intrudes to make it clear that Hilda is indeed "sinless"—that is, guiltless—and that it is in her unutterable depth of sorrow alone that she approximates Beatrice Cenci. This is, however, only one aspect of his larger vision. In that vision Beatrice symbolizes the potentialities both for guilt and for a sorrow which may oppress "very nearly as sin would." Such correspondence is possible because the sorrow which Hawthorne treats results from the "intimate consciousness" of sin: "The pillow was more disturbed; she had turned her face upon it, the poor child, and bedewed it with some of those tears, (among the most chill and forlorn that gush from human sorrow), which the innocent heart pours forth, at its first actual discovery that sin is in the world" (204).

If, as I have said, Beatrice Cenci symbolizes a common womanhood to which both Miriam and Hilda belong, one of the ways in which she does this is by embodying in herself these two intimately connected alternatives of moral experience. Whatever conclusion we may reach about Miriam's past, she is guilty of the model's murder. And no matter how pure Hilda may be, Hawthorne affirms that there is sin in the world and that consciousness of it, notwithstanding the sorrow it brings, is both essential and inescapable to earthly men and women. Miriam tells Hilda: "As an angel, you are not amiss; but, as a human creature, and a woman among earthly men and women, you need a sin to soften you!" (209) Hawthorne would like to see Hilda as an angel, but his imaginative vision will not allow such a view. He will not permit Hilda to sin and thus acquire guilt, but he does see that to involve her in humanity is to involve her at least in the sorrow which originates in sin. She herself recognizes this as a step in her spiritual maturation: "Ah, now I understand how the sins of generations past have created an atmosphere of sin for those that follow! While there is a single guilty person in the universe, each

innocent one must feel his innocence tortured by that guilt. Your deed, Miriam, has darkened the whole sky!" (212).

A second characteristic of Beatrice's portrait, isolation, leads us to another tragic paradox in Hawthorne's vision: the very sin or sorrow which makes us human, which makes us sense an affinity with other sinners, may also isolate us from the rest of humanity. Hawthorne had adumbrated the idea before: there are traces of it in *The Scarlet Letter* and in the short stories, but never before had he faced it so squarely as in this last romance. Beatrice "knows that her sorrow is so strange, and so immense, that she ought to be solitary forever, both for the world's sake and her own" (65); her knowledge of her father's sin has frightened her into a remote and inaccessible region, where no sympathy could come" (205); "it was a sorrow that removed this beautiful girl out of the sphere of humanity, and set her in a far-off region. . ." (64). Thus Hawthorne sees the pressure "not to betray" her secret as alienating Beatrice, as forcing her to escape the glance of fellow creatures, while Hilda is alienated in the same manner by the secret knowledge of Miriam's guilt. And yet, paradoxically, it is just this kind of knowledge which Hilda must gain in order to come down from her tower and walk among men. It is precisely her "depth of sorrow, with its weight and darkness, that keeps Beatrice down upon earth, and brings her within our view even while it sets her beyond our reach" (66).

Thus the isolation which Hawthorne sensed in Guido's portrait finds expression in the characters of his two heroines and, through them, in the philosophical vision of the book. In chapter five Miriam shows her paintings to Donatello. A figure resembling Miriam herself recurs in them all, always in the attitude of an outsider looking in at the life around her. "Yet now, Hilda," she cries out in chapter twenty-three, "your very look seems to put me beyond the limits of humankind!" (208) And if her sin isolates Miriam from human kind in general and from Hilda in particular, the knowledge of that sin has a similar effect on Hilda.

"But I am alone—alone! Miriam, you were my dearest, only friend! Advise me what to do!" (211)

"I never dreamed," said Hilda—"how could you think it?—of betraying you to justice. But I see how it is, Miriam. I must keep your secret, and die of it, unless God sends me some relief by methods which are now beyond my power to imagine." (212)

Hilda's understanding has increased since chapter seven; she realizes now that no code of public justice can ever comprehend the shadowy complexities of sin. The reader too must realize this, for if he does not, Donatello's self-surrender to the authorities may be taken simply as a conventional act of social and moral responsibility. Rather than this, it seems to me, his imprisonment should be seen as a symbolic act of estrangement and isolation. Miriam will not be waiting faithfully, like a Dickensian heroine, to embrace the chastened Donatello after he has paid his debt to society. The "Faun" has indeed made the journey of experience into manhood, but Hawthorne's deepest vision demands that we recognize what manhood, or womanhood, can entail. It demands that we recognize isolation, tragic and ultimate, as a potential condition of humanity.

To Hilda God does send the relief which she could not imagine in the form of the Catholic priest. Her confession is not to be taken, however, as a religious sacrament. It is rather the communion, the communication of human beings; had it been her mother or Kenyon instead of the priest, the effect would have been the same, and this is one of the few hopes which Hawthorne allows us in the romance. In the dark night of human isolation, an isolation caused by the awareness of sin in ourselves and in others, the candle of human sympathy flickers, lit by that very awareness. Upon the foundation of mutual guilt Donatello and Miriam build mutual commitment and love. Only through deep sorrow does Hilda come to accept Kenyon as a lover, although she is never quite reconciled with Miriam.

And yet what must our final judgment upon these actions be? Hilda's marriage seems an afterthought, thematically correct but nerveless. In the more completely realized and imaginatively fullbodied action, both Miriam and Donatello end in self-imposed alienation—wiser, humbler, more human, to be sure, but alone. Such considerations should temper any uncritical acceptance of the *felix culpa* theme as the "moral" of the story. Sin and sorrow may temper us to accept participation in the human condition, but what if the human condition itself is a state of spiritual estrangement? Beatrice, reflected in the "symbolic mirror" of art and darkly wrapped in the folds of her fathomless isolation,

again adumbrates a major element of Hawthorne's most subtle vision.

For Hawthorne, "the painted face had a life and consciousness of its own" (204). He intuits in Beatrice's expression a self-consciousness originating from sin—whether from the awareness of her own guilt or from her knowledge of another's—and he includes self-consciousness with sin and sorrow as both causal and characteristic of human alienation: "Nature, in beast, fowl, and tree, and earth, flood, and sky, is what it was of old; but sin, care and self-consciousness have set the human portion of the world askew" (239–40). Whatever the consequences (and as we have seen, they may be dire) both his heroines are forced to self-knowledge in order to fulfill themselves as participants in the drama of a fallen humanity. Any escape from the demands of this drama, whether through aestheticism, religion, or hedonism, is in Hawthorne's view impossible.

Miriam, troubled by the uncertainty of her own guilt or innocence, seeks a deeper self-knowledge from the beginning. Her reaction to Beatrice is significant: "'Ah,' continued Miriam passionately, 'if I could only get within her consciousness! If I could but clasp Beatrice Cenci's ghost, and draw it into myself! I would give my life to know whether she thought herself innocent, or the one great criminal since time began!'" (66–67) The nature of Miriam's past remains in shadow, but she does succeed in understanding and accepting her own guilt for the murder of the model. Not until Hilda has confirmed the message which Donatello read in her eyes does her soul find quiet. And not until she has come to full consciousness of the "hatred, triumph, vengeance, and, as it were, joy at some unhopd for relief" (210) which welled in her own heart and which motivated her action can she begin to reaffirm, through penitence, her tragic yet heroic humanity.

The case with Hilda is far different. If Miriam approaches valid self-consciousness from a state of perplexed introspection, Hilda must approach it from a state bordering on unconsciousness. Her movement from a pseudoangelic ingenuousness to a knowledge of sin and to the related awareness of her own imperfect humanity is one of the major actions of the novel. The parallel with Donatello's development is striking. Richard Harter Fogle is quite right, I

think, in calling these two characters representatives of different norms: Donatello of the "lower simplicities of Nature" and Hilda of the "higher simplicity of Heaven."¹¹

The lower simplicity, the norm of man's Arcadian past, is insufficient to his present fallen state, since Donatello, like Everyman, must make the journey from the Edenic "tower among the Apennines" to a degraded Rome. Self-consciousness, as we have seen, is one of the hallmarks of this journey. The higher simplicity or innocence, however, ideally should include the experience of fallen man. This is precisely where Hilda fails, for instead of comprehending the sin which walks beside her in the streets of Rome and making thereof a higher innocence, she ignores it; she climbs her tower or loses herself in the abstractions of art, and the reader is reminded of the Miltonic distinction between ignorance and innocence. Yet once awareness is forced upon her, once she descends from the tower, she loses the dimension which would have made a "higher" synthesis possible.

Like Beatrice, Hilda is isolated and removed from humanity by her consciousness of sin. The "higher" innocence does have its representatives in the book, however, who, aware of sorrow and sin, are yet able to embrace mankind. Such are Raphael's angels: "We see Cherubs, by Raphael, whose baby-innocence could only have been nursed in Paradise; Angels, by Raphael, as innocent as they, but whose serene intelligence embraces both earthly and celestial things. . ." (338). Such is, above all, the Virgin who offers "the sympathy of Divine Womanhood, afar in bliss, but not remote, because forever humanized by the memory of mortal griefs" (332). He, in symbolic implication if not in narrative voice, demands that Hilda be compared to these—and found wanting.

He seems torn between the psychological need to see Hilda as angelically innocent and the honest realization that such innocence, in an earthly woman, implies spiritual pride, a lack of human sympathy, and a failure of self-knowledge. Hilda is castigated, with greater or less severity, for all these faults. Her relationship to art is an index of the unconsciousness which is the price of her innocence. In the same manner that she consecrates the streets of Rome by unknowingly projecting her own innocence wherever she goes, she is able to overlook the "moral blotches" in Raphael's character: "She had a faculty (which,

11. *Hawthorne's Fiction: The Light and the Dark* (Norman, Okla., 1952), pp. 168–69.

fortunately for themselves, pure women often have) of ignoring all moral blotches in a character by the mere act of turning such spotless eyes upon them" (338).

When she copies a picture, she does so as a "medium," as "a finer instrument, a more exquisitely effective piece of mechanism, by the help of which the spirit of some great departed Painter now first achieved his ideal, centuries after his own earthly hand, that other tool, had turned to dust" (59). She can copy Guido's Beatrice so exquisitely, and yet fail to appreciate the intimate knowledge of sin which is the essence of that portrait, because she is only a tool, virtually devoid of consciousness. Hilda's coming to consciousness is a step in the direction of humanization, as symbolized by Beatrice's portrait, but it also involves a loss of her former relationship to art, and she must now endure, for the first time, "The Emptiness of Picture Galleries."



Miriam and Hilda represent Hawthorne's most pronounced treatment of the dark and fair heroine types. Beatrice, I think, provided Hawthorne with the imaginative possibility of uniting both types; her constantly changing expression—an attitude shared by both Miriam and Hilda at different times—offered the ambiguous image which Hawthorne needed for his ambiguous union. In Beatrice the potentialities of the two heroines meet: experience and innocence, sin and sorrow, sexual intensity and ascetic purity.

The fusion is of vast importance to the book. In this last completed romance Hawthorne goes a long way towards dissolving the distinctions between good and evil, right and wrong, which had informed his earlier works, substituting for them a more comprehensive, less dichotomized view of fallen humanity, grim yet cautiously heroic. He would like to believe in fair heroines with the strength of angelic innocence, but ultimately he cannot. Although, as has been said, he cannot allow Hilda literally to meet Miriam's open arms, his philosophical vision requires that they be joined in a symbolic sisterhood. In this way, then, Beatrice Cenci incarnates Hawthorne's most mature and complex vision of human experience.