“What a city is this”: Hawthorne’s perplexing Rome

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*The Marble Faun*, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s last completed novel, has often elicited controversial reactions from literary critics on both sides of the Atlantic who, since its publication, have often lamented, among other things, the excessive obscurity of the novel’s plot and the uneven development of its dramatic structure. Certainly, the objective complexity of the aesthetic design the author had set for himself in a Romance which was to be entirely set in the ancient, and contradictory, heart of Europe must have made Hawthorne’s task even harder, particularly in terms of the difficulties he experienced in coming to grips convincingly with the spirit of a city like Rome, undoubtedly remote from the cultural habits of a native of Salem. In this sense, the impact of the Roman background, highly suggestive but also heavily connoted in its symbolic implications, contributed to unsettle some of his cultural assumptions, particularly as regards his perception of history and the notion of antiquity, as an entry of his *Notebooks* for February 7, 1858 clearly shows:

> It is strange how our ideas of what antiquity is become altered here in Rome; the sixteenth century, in which many of the churches and fountains seem to have been built or re-edified, seems close at hand, even like our own days; a thousand years, or the days of the latter empire, is but a modern date, and scarcely interests us; and nothing is really venerable of a more recent epoch than the reign of Constantine. (Hawthorne 1871, 60)

Undoubtedly, one of the aspects of the Roman way of life that both absorbs and baffles Hawthorne has to do with its peculiar relationship with the past, and the author’s inordinate fascination with classical sculpture, in this respect, seems to be closely related to that attraction. Throughout his entire novel, not to mention the many pages of his *Notebooks* dedicated to Rome and Florence, comments, descriptions and allusions to statues and statue-like images are both extremely frequent and particularly conspicuous in terms of their relevance within the general economy of his writings. It is my intention, in these notes, to expand on that specific aspect of *The Marble Faun*, focusing my discussion on the function Hawthorne attributes to marble effigies in his novel, while at the same time commenting on the nature of his discourse on sculpture, which in my opinion contributes to heighten the perplexing quality of his Roman romance. To stay in tune with perplexities and riddles – two subjects in which Hawthorne delighted – my final comments will primarily consist in a series of speculations related to Hawthorne’s unexplained decision to call the only Roman character in his novel Donatello, a choice that immediately provokes a striking coincidence with the name of the greatest master sculptor, of Florentine origin, active in the early part of the Italian Renaissance.
In an well-known review of *Passages from the French and Italian Note-Books of Nathaniel Hawthorne* – originally published on the *Nation* in 1872 – Henry James makes an interesting point concerning his predecessor’s supposed incapacity to come to terms with the substance of a large, ancient city, emphasizing his opinion that urban intricacies and peculiar atmospheres were simply alien to him, somehow incompatible with his attitudes:

The great city had said but little to him; he was deaf to the Parisian harmonies. Just so it is under protest, as it were, that he looks at things in Italy. The strangeness, the remoteness, the Italianism of manners and objects, seem to oppress and confound him. He walks about bending a puzzled, ineffective gaze at things, full of a mild, genial desire to apprehend and penetrate, but with the light wings of his fancy just touching the surface of the massive consistency of fact about him, and with an air of good-humored confession that he is too simply an idle Yankee *flaneur* to conclude on such matters. The main impression produced by his observations is that of his simplicity. They spring not only from an unsophisticated, but from an excessively natural mind.

Severe as they may sound, James’s comments on Hawthorne’s mild provincialism render well that sense of distance between the observer and the foreign, often surprising, scenario which he walks throughout—a disparity that never seems to be entirely bridged in the pages of *French and Italian Notebooks*, notwithstanding Hawthorne’s smooth and comely style in his journal works wonders in terms of the reader’s response. Somehow, it is as if for him the Roman scene were in itself irritating—too thick and too heavy to allow for fantastic and visionary flights, but most of all too crowded and perfectly theatrical as a background for a drama of the conscience such as that in which the four main characters of his novel are involved. That overall abundance of picturesque details is what frequently puzzles Hawthorne in his broodings, just as if the richness of an urban setting in which spareness is practically unheard of, were constantly rekindling the old conflict between the austerity of the Puritan mind and the pagan sensuality of the Catholic mentality. This last, to be sure, being a paradox indeed hard to come to terms with for many observers – James himself would not miss the occasion to amuse himself with it – and therefore not merely ascribable to Hawthorne’s supposed provincialism, as many of the observations that fill up his notes might perhaps suggest.

The number of entries dedicated to statues and sculptors in his *Notebooks* is indeed impressive, and to this date it remains something of a little mystery why a writer of “romances” – as he himself defined his occupation – should be so intimately attracted by that particular form of art. Obviously, apart from the cultural enrichment and the sheer aesthetic pleasure to be derived from a first-hand view of a number of sculpted masterpieces – an experience that by itself would have justified Hawthorne’s extensive travels through Italy – he must have seen something particularly significant in sculpting—all the more so if one considers that he repeatedly addressed that theme in a variety of tales and sketches. One of the main reasons for such a remarkable interest on
Hawthorne’s part, however, was probably the result of other undeclared aesthetic drives such as, for example, his well known predilection for the allegorical. As Deanna Fernie has recently suggested, « [i]deal sculpture must have spoken to Hawthorne’s penchant for allegory, in its attempt to embody abstract concepts and in white marble’s correspondence with the ethereal». (Fernie, 14-15) Certainly, Hawthorne’s fondness for a type of writing made of multi-layered orders of signification, his tendency to keep below the surface of writing the ultimate meaning of the author’s intentions, may account, at least to some extent, for his attraction to sculpture, for that hidden, non explicit way of communicating that a marble figure affords. Again, Fernie seems to provide a convincing explanation for Hawthorne’s perplexing attitude, when she contends that, far from being a “flat symbol”, sculpture for him:

…acts as a troubled analogue to writing, the silent form “saying” more than words could ever do, yet producing the desire to find words that attempt to get at its meaning, just as William Blake would do in covering his engraving of the ancient Laocoon statue with annotations, or Keats in interrogating his Grecian Urn. (Fernie, 19)

On the other hand, that hypothesis seems to be corroborated by the fact that, since the beginning of the Roman section of his journal, Hawthorne devotes a number of comments to marble statues he chances upon while walking in the center of Rome, as if their presence were implicitly more stimulating, and strangely more substantial, than that of its inhabitants, who generally do not seem to command a comparable attention. To the eyes of this “unsophisticated” visitor – to go back to James’s definition – statues often seem to become repositories of ambiguity and of contradictory information, contributing to generate confusion both in terms of their artistic quality and origin. Plus, their suggestive appearance seems inevitably to raise questions and doubts in the mind of the beholder as to their authenticity—just as if their nature were indeed inherently baffling and misleading. Such is the case, among the many possible examples, of the two marble statues of the Dioscuri, boldly looking at the entrance of the Quirinale Palace – at the time still the residence of the Pope – right in the middle of Montecavallo Square. Hawthorne’s comment in his Notebook is tinged of genuine surprise:

What a city is this, when one may stumble, by mere chance,—at a street corner, as it were, on the works of two such sculptors! I do not know the authority on which these statues (Castor and Pollux, I presume) are attributed to Phidias and Praxiteles; but they impressed me as noble and godlike, and I feel inclined to take them for what they purport to be. (Hawthorne 1871, 67)

But alas, he was wrong! For what they purport to be is not what they are—actually those two colossal marble statues – not particularly impressive, apart from their huge dimensions – are, at best, Roman copies of a bronze group by Phidia and Praxiteles the Old, even though still today that attribution keeps being debated over by art historians and archeologists, who envision at least two possible alternatives. According to the first one, the Dioscuri may actually be two twin Roman
statues of Alexander the Great taming his favorite horse Bucefalus; the second hypothesis, instead, is based on the fact that the statues may actually represent the Dioscuri, but, being attributed to Emperor Caracalla’s age, they would date from a historical period of some some six centuries posterior to Phidia’s and Praxitele’s time. Be it as it may, the episode of the “Mistaken Twins” – this is how the Dioscuri of the Quirinale are often referred to by the experts – is a case in point of Hawthorne’s controversial relationship with Rome, a city whose essentially theatrical character bewilders him with its endless game of appearances hiding an unexpected substance, while at the same time forging new riddles that deeply perplex even a riddle-loving author like himself.

And a riddle, indeed, is the marble effigy that gives Hathorne’s novel its title, minutely depicted in its very first chapter, soon after the introduction of the four main characters, who appear to be literally overwhelmed by a number of statues, crowded in one of the rooms of the Capitol gallery. The narrator’s description of the Faun is a veritable hotchpotch of conflicting traits, directly intended to emphasize the curious mixture of human and animal nature which coexist within that singular being. The result of such a scrupulous representation, early in the novel, is to surround with a touch of ambiguity the character of Donatello, whose physical appearance, certainly not by chance, happens to resemble closely that of the statue:

The form, thus displayed, is marvellously graceful, but has a fuller and more rounded outline […] it is most agreeable in outline and feature, but rounded and somewhat voluptuously developed […] the nose is almost straight, but very slightly curves inward […] The mouth, with its full yet delicate lips […] conveys the idea of an amiable and sensual creature, easy, mirthful, apt for jollity, yet not incapable of being touched by pathos. (Hawthorne 1937, 595)

Not unlikely what a few years earlier had befallen little Pearl in The Scarlet Letter, here too the sharp contrasts and slight discrepancies the narrator disseminates in his description tend to emphasize that sense of inconsistency and elusiveness that will eventually become Donatello’s trademark. Just like in Pearl’s case, too, Donatello’s countenance and behavior are likewise subject to unexpected metamorphoses and sudden transformations that somehow seem to be the result of his obscure and unruly double-nature. And to make things more equivocal, for all the macroscopic differences between the two characters, yet the subtle game the narrator plays is to have the reader suspect that also in Donatello’s case that mysterious syndrome may be due to remote reasons of a moral nature. No wonder that the English publisher, obviously intending to foreground Hawthorne’s fascination with metamorphoses and conversions, should decide to print the novel under the title Transformation, only to incur in the author’s complaint for that choice.

That same fluid quality that allows for transformations, however, was to play a different role in the case of the city chosen by Hawthorne as the setting of his last romance, for what ultimately made him particularly uncomfortable with Rome was what he perceived as its
elusiveness—an aspect which he would turn into a full-fledged, insisted motive of his novel. That same note reverberates throughout his journal in a number of scattered observations in which it is not hard to catch an occasional note of genuine surprise. It is the case, for example, of an entry in his Notebook for February 20, 1859, in which Hawthorne dwells on Beatrice Cenci’s portrait, a painting traditionally attributed to Guido Reni, that he had just admired in the gallery of Palazzo Barberini, the stately palace of a noble Roman family in which, at that same time, the American sculptor William Wetmore Story – a possible model for his fictional Kenyon – had taken his residence. In their somewhat obscure formulation, Hawthorne’s comments betray the deep impact that Reni’s painting must have had on him, as, among other speculations, he openly admits that «…as regards Beatrice Cenci I might as well not try to say anything; for its spell is indefinable, and the painter has wrought it in a way more like magic than anything else». (Hawthorne 1937, 89) It might perhaps be worth adding that that was the same painting which, just about a year earlier, had also startled Hawthorne’s fellow writer and long-time friend Herman Melville, who, during his Roman sojourn of 1857, had himself briefly commented on the young woman’s «expression of suffering about the mouth» as well as on her «appealing look of innocence, not caught in any copy or engraving».

Hawthorne, however, was particularly impressed with Beatrice’s dramatic story, not simply because of the general fascination with incest and parricide that affected the majority of the romantics of Anglo-American extraction, but also because, as the references to the painting in the novel clearly suggest, in his fictional design the young woman should have implicitly functioned as a female counterpart of his faun-like character of Donatello. Just as this last one is openly torn between a state of innocence and a deep feeling of guilt for having murdered the model, so the child-like face of Beatrice in the famous portrait – a copy of which Hilda has artfully completed – appears baffling and mysterious, even in its fragile and strangely luminous fixed stare. In front of that stare, both Miriam and Hilda are puzzled: and as the first of the two asks the other where the “mysterious force” of that look comes from, the second replies that it must derive from the fact that «She is a fallen angel, fallen, and yet sinless». In an essay dedicated to Beatrice Cenci’s presence in Hawthorne’s and Melville’s works, Diane Long Hoeveler suggests that in The Marble Faun:

…both heroines embody the two most important facets of Beatrice’s story; they are, as Beatrice was, simultaneously victims and avengers. This bifurcated identity is reflected in their actions and their detailed reactions to Hilda’s copy of the Cenci portrait. In their responses they reveal their past, present, and future situations and, as such, the portrait and both women, more than Kenyon or even Donatello, embody Hawthorne’s belief in the cyclical and repetitious nature of human history. (Hoeveler, 9)

Certainly, the fact that both Melville and Hawthorne make reference to Beatrice Cenci’s portrait in two of their most important, if not successful, novels like Pierre (1852) and The Marble Faun (1860) can hardly be accidental, since for both writers that figure represents the very embodiment
of the enigma concerning the future of “civilized humanity”, that is to say the possibility – to their eyes already partially jeopardized – that the American people actually succeed in avoiding once and for all that state of deep corruption which is ultimately responsible for the Cenci’s familial tragedy. If for Melville Beatrice’s face is «double-hooded, as it were, by the black crape of the two most horrible crimes», for Hawthorne the dramatic condition of being at the same time the victim of incest and the agent of parricide turns the unfortunate young woman into an exemplary icon of a tragic, mysterious destiny forever doomed to remain unsolved. Going back to Palazzo Barberini’s gallery for a last visit to the painting on the eve of his final departure from Rome, he muses in an entry of his Notebook for May 15, 1859: «...the picture is quite indescribable, inconceivable, and unaccountable in its effect; for if you attempt to analyze it, you can never succeed in getting at the secret of its fascination [...] it so perplexed and troubled me not to be able to get hold of its secret». (Hawthorne 1871, 504-505)

Moving in a directly opposite direction to Emerson’s, who in his essay of 1841, “Art”, maintained that «The best pictures can easily tell us their last secret», Hawthorne – but other dark romantics like Melville and Poe would have probably subscribed – insists in suggesting that, on the whole, artistic expressions cannot avoid to be intimately ambiguous, and therefore inescapably perplexing. The wealth of statues, paintings, and architectural landmarks that Hawthorne gets in touch with in the streets of Rome, in museums and artists’ private studios, seem invariably to propose the same refrain, namely the moral dilemma concerning the coexistence of conflicting signs, as an essential component of the very act of artistic representation. In this respect, the comments Malcolm Bradbury dedicated to The Marble Faun in his 1995 book Dangerous Pilgrimages seem still to be entirely appropriate, particularly when he contends that:

Hawthorne’s Italian romance stands out from his other novels not just because it is his first expatriate fiction, set in Europe, but because the ambiguous utopia it confronts is none other than that of art itself. The Italy it deals with is itself an artefact, an artistic object, shaped around the painterly myths, of arcadia and decline and fall, that belonged with the subject. (Bradbury, 150)

Rome’s perplexing quality, in the end, seems to be a direct result of its doubleness, a condition that accounts for its intimate ambiguity, and that, like with works of art, makes up for their being at one time grandiose and corrupt, magnificent and pitiful. Whether that condition is actually a consequence of the struggle between the opposite drives towards good and evil that cohabit within the artist’s conscience is certainly debatable—what seems to be less debatable is Hawthorne’s conviction that they are, and that the city of Rome, being itself an artistic object, is particularly conducive to the emergence of that conflict.

Naturally, Hawthorne was well aware that the stigma of ambiguity, as originally inscribed in art’s language, extends to writing as well, and even though in his last novel there is no trace of “the
figure of that first ancestor“ who haunts the Custom House and reprimands the writer for his worthless “business in life”, still a sense of pervasive guilt weighs oppressively upon every corner of his fictional Rome. Granted, the general darkness of the setting is partly the legacy of its rooted romantic tradition – mostly British and French, but also German, Russian and now American too – nevertheless in The Marble Faun Hawthorne seems to add to that tradition a genuinely Puritanical touch of gloom that reflects his personal, deep discomfort with the eternal city. Thus, the colorful, picturesque appearances of the city are nowhere to be seen, as the entire scenario is turned into an obscure, dismal background for which is hard to find a comparable literary antecedent. Not only does Rome become a symbolic representation of art’s ultimate ambiguity and all-pervading immanence—it also becomes the correlative of a locale saturated by a utter state of moral opacity, the tangible result of an unrestrainable, ever expanding corruption. The idea of Rome as the romantic capital of classical art and contemporary abjection may have been very well reinforced, as it has often been suggested, by the unusually chilly and damp weather that greeted a feverish Hawthorne upon his arrival in the city and prompted him to write the famous phrase: «Old Rome lies like a dead and mostly decayed corpse, retaining here and there a trace of the noble shape it was». Nonetheless, that idea is also strictly functional to the main oppositional paradigm that grounds his novel, and that at least in appearance can be condensed in the old, stereotyped formula based on the conflict between American innocence and European corruption. In this case, however, the Roman background, thanks to its own obliquity, forces Hawthorne to alter that worn out scheme, precipitating all characters – innocents abroad included – into that murky atmosphere in which it becomes literally impossible to proceed by clear-cut distinctions.

All of this, of course, may very well have added to Hawthorne’s perplexity, affecting as a consequence also the handling of the overall economy of his novel. After all, the author himself, in his “Conclusion”, hastily added to the second edition of the novel, implicitly acknowledges the possible shortcomings of his own narration:

> There comes to the author from many readers of the foregoing pages, a demand for further elucidations respecting the mysteries of the story. He reluctantly avails himself of the opportunity afforded by a new edition, to explain such incidents and passages as may have been left too much in the dark … (Hawthorne 1937, 856)

In a revealing reading of Hawthorne’s romance, entitled “Perplexity, Sympathy, and the Question of the Human”, Emily Budick notes that in the end all of the main characters of Hawthorne’s novel eventually end up in failure, due to their common inability to feel sympathy towards one another – most notably towards Donatello – whose mysterious nature, since the beginning, becomes a matter for a number of ill-concealed comments and questions on their part, on «whether he had furry ears or no». On that subject, the author himself shows his commitment to keep silent, even at the cost of
recognizing – as he openly does in his postscript – that: «As respects all who ask such questions, the book is, to that extent, a failure». Hawthorne’s silence on that subject – one may speculate – is not necessarily dictated by a form of paternalism or by a lack of sympathy towards his character’s predicament, as much as by a genuine sense of coherence towards his own aesthetic principles. Interestingly enough, in the opening paragraph of the novel’s last chapter the narrator himself expresses his conviction that: «The actual experience of even the most ordinary life is full of events that never explain themselves, either as regards their origin or their tendency» (Hawthorne 1937, 852), and, as the bulk of Hawthorne’s fiction clearly shows, he would keep using that “inexplicable quality” as a strategic element of his narrative technique until the end of his literary career. It seems rather unlikely, therefore, that the author could seriously consider the possibility to disrupt such a dependable tool of his practice—a possibility that the voice of the narrator contributes to make even more remote, as, in the very first chapter of the novel, he affirms that: «[s]ide by side with the massiveness of the Roman Past, all matters that we handle or dream of nowadays look evanescent and visionary alike». (Hawthorne 1937, 594) It is safe to say that, as the recognized American champion of the Romance, Hawthorne did his best to exploit artistically that “peculiar quality of malignity” of the Roman ambience that he had directly experienced while living in the city.

In conclusion, I would like to address yet another aspect of Hawthorne’s novel that may help shed light upon its multi-layered, self-reflexive discourse on the technique of non finito—one of the many riddles still propounded by The Marble Faun, that in recent years has been at the center of the attention of literary critics and art historians alike. What I am particularly interested in is the possibility to establish a correspondence between Kenyon’s unfinished marble bust of Donatello and a somehow similar state of incompleteness of the novel itself, which is evidenced by the fact that Hawthorne himself felt the urgency to offer his readers «further elucidations respecting the mysteries» of his story, by adding to it a “Conclusion”. A number of critics, including E. M. Budick and D. Fernie, share this thesis, grounding their judgement primarily on the assumption that towards the end of the novel Hawthorne’s control over his material happens occasionally to slip out of his hands. While certainly possible, that conclusion seems nevertheless to be only partially convincing, particularly since it is a well-known fact that, uncanny as they might be, Hawthorne’s narrations are always tightly contrived and carefully crafted. Perhaps, a more realistic hypothesis could allow for the possibility that that lapse were actually intentional, especially if one considers that throughout the entire novel the narrator’s insisted allusions to works of art that remain in an unfinished state can hardly be dismissed as sheer coincidences. In her recent study Hawthorne, Sculpture, and the Question of American Art, for instance, Deanna Fernie calls attention to one such allusion, pointing out that «the narrator’s unexpected and belated claim in chapter XLI that Kenyon’s marble bust of
Donatello [...] was the image that first inspired its narrative» is a statement that actually unravels the novel «by forcing the reader to think back over the events ... in the light of this new piece of information». (Fernie, p.213) Further on, she also argues that such a narrative solution ends up by introducing in the narration the sense of an implicit lack of consequence and closure, which serves to establish a tacit parallel between Donatello’s bust, that Kenyon wishes to leave unfinished, by telling Hilda that «not another chip shall be struck from the marble», and the text of The Marble Faun, which Hawthorne himself considered as a somehow unfinished novel.

The narrator’s final comments, at the end of Chapter XLI, ought to be quoted in full, for the content of the passage, in its entirety, is essential to my conclusion:

And, accordingly, Donatello’s bust (like that rude, rough mass of the head of Brutus, by Michael Angelo, at Florence) has ever since remained in an unfinished state. Most spectators mistake it for an unsuccessful attempt towards copying the features of the Faun of Praxiteles. One observer in a thousand is conscious of something more, and lingers long over this mysterious face, departing from it reluctantly, and with many a glance thrown backward. What perplexes him is the riddle that he sees propounded there; the riddle of the soul’s growth, taking its first impulse amid remorse and pain, and struggling through the incrustations of the senses. It was the contemplation of this imperfect portrait of Donatello that originally interested us in his history, and impelled us to elicit from Kenyon what he knew of his friend’s adventures. (Hawthorne 1937, 810-811)

Particularly revealing in that crucial passage is the voice’s reference to the head of Brutus – a bust Michelangelo sculpted in 1538, currently preserved at the Bargello – that, according to the same narrator, is known for the non finito state of the subject’s face. That technique of the “unfinished”, mostly used to emphasize the dramatic and spiritual intensity of a given subject, is particularly relevant to this discussion in that Donatello, the XVth Century Florentine master sculptor, helped developing and practising it, while, in the latter period of his activity, he worked in Padua. A second, equally relevant item, is the author’s intentional allusion to a correspondence between the marble bust being still chiseled and the novel being still written—a comparison which the narrator proposes under the garb of a suggestive, half-formed mise en abîme hinged on the loose notion of imperfection. Finally, one more conjecture: if, on the basis of the correspondence just hinted at the term spectators is extended to include the readers of the novel, that sentence can be interpreted as another self-reflexive admonition to all those who mistakenly believe that the Faun of Praxiteles is the inspiration and the core of the narration, while, as one has just seen, that center is represented by the unfinished bust of Donatello. This allusion, moreover, is immediately followed by a metanarrative admonition to go back and look again (or read again) to try and catch a glimpse of the mystery that a work of art – whether a statue, a painting, or a novel – always preserves in itself, and that it consciously propounds in the guise of a riddle.

Following this interpretive line, my own final contention is that, having the author indeed established an intentional parallel between the marble bust and his novel, his discourse on sculpture
extends to include a self reflexive exploration of his own writing that allows him to make an important step ahead towards the development of a poetics of the unfinished. In doing so, the writer recognizes in the Florentine sculptor the initiator of that aesthetic view which, in his final years, Hawthorne himself would identify with. Thus the two artists, Donatello and Hawthorne, are ideally united by their common inclination to look at the “unfinished” as to a more authentic, and revealing, stage of the artistic composition, as Deanna Fernie implies by calling to witness of her thesis Michelangelo’s Captives—what to date remains as the most celebrated example of that genre in sculpture. While in Rome, Hawthorne’s only partially successful effort to distance himself, as an American artist, from the pervasive, somehow oppressive, presence of the vestiges of the Classic, and especially of the Neo-Classic, traditions seems to lead him towards a sculptor like Donatello, as a possible model for his own renewal as a writer. The Florentine artist, in this respect, offered the writer a powerful alternative to the exhausted perfection of classical sculpture, a way out from the influence of the Academic, and a possibility towards a yet unexplored idea of modernity. An act of rebellion which bears strong similarities with what, roughly in those same years, would lead to the first exploits of the Impressionists in the world of painting. In Hawthorne’s case, the attempt to move forward by turning back to an early Renaissance sculptor like Donatello, and to the haunting obscurity of some of his subjects, is an implicit signal of his awareness that a sense of opacity may prove beneficial to creative innovation.

As to that, a perplexing city like Rome could indeed provide Hawthorne with a wealth of suggestions and material, both historical and scenic, to write his darkest tale—the American romance that his narrator anticipates since its first chapter by sketching the eerie sensation with which the city embraces her trans-Atlantic visitors:

It is a vague sense of ponderous remembrances; a perception of such weight and density in a bygone life, of which this spot was the centre, that the present moment is pressed down or crowded out, and our individual affairs and interests are but half as real here as elsewhere. [...] Side by side with the massiveness of the Roman Past, all matters that we handle or dream of now-a-days look evanescent and visionary alike. (Hawthorne 1937, 593-94)
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2 A vivid impression of that same conflict is sketched by Henry James in “A Roman Holiday”, when he speaks of the statue of Marcus Aurelius on the Capitol Square, in these terms: “The admirably human character of the figure survives the rusty decomposition of the bronze and the slight ‘debasement’ of the art; and one may call it singular that in the capital of Christendom the portrait most suggestive of a Christian conscience is that of a pagan emperor.” (142)
4 Hawthorne's novel was first published in England, in February 1860, as Transformation: or the Romace of Monte Beni, in III volums, by the London publisher Smith, Elder & Co. In his essay, Hawthorne (1879), James speaks at length of the two different titles, criticizing the author for choosing as a title The Marble Faun: “Hawthorne's choice of this appellation is, by the way, rather singular, for it completely fails to characterise the story, the subject of which is the living faun, the faun of flesh and blood, the unfortunate Donatello”.
5 Both Melville in Pierre (1852) and Hawthorne in The Marble Faun (1860) make reference to the figure of Beatrice Cenci, as portrayed in the painting attributed to Guido Reni (1599).
Replacing brick with marble is also a sign that the fortunes of the city were improving, so he also means that he left the city richer than it was when he came to power (i.e. "found" it). Whether or not he actually had anything to do with the rising Roman fortune, I don't know, but he is certainly taking credit for it with that statement. 0. 0. Augustus is not the founder of Rome's fortunes - in fact, many of the policies and conquests that led to this fortune resulted from the later ages of the Republic (Caesar's conquests in Gaul, mainly, Pompey the Great's conquests), and Caesar's reforms as an acting monarch. Augustus is probably saying that he had a city with a foundation - brick, and turned it into a prospering, rich city of marble. 0. 1. The City can still show the remains of its defensive wall and some other signs of the Roman time. In other parts of the City almost every stone, every wall, every house is Saxon or Norman or connected with some famous man, book or historical event. The City of London was described by a Roman historian as a "busy emporium for trade and traders" and this description could have been applied to it at any time since then. The City still remains one of the most important commercial centres in the world. All the principal streets lead to the heart of the City, which is represented by three buildings: