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# Sophia's Enduring Influence: Hawthorne's Creative Resurgence and the Genesis of *The Marble Faun*

## Lea Bertani Vozar Newman

The role a devoted spouse can play in a writer's life was catapulted to center stage when the Pulitzer prize for biography was awarded to Stacy Schiff for *Vera* (Random House, 1999), a riveting account of the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Vladimir Nabakov. While the time and places and details of the Nabakov marriage and those of the marital union between Nathaniel and Sophia Hawthorne could not be more different, the adoration each wife felt for the writer she married and the myriad ways in which his works were infuenced by his loving partner's presence and support are remarkably similar. In much the same way that the course of Nabakov's writing career was shaped and nurtured by Vera Nabokov, the achievements of Hawthorne were greatly enhanced by Sophia Hawthorne, most notably during two especially productive phases of his career.

That Sophia was her husband's muse during the years they lived as newlyweds at the Old Manse in Concord has become a truism in Hawthorne studies. One of the most obvious examples is the short story "The New Adam and Eve" where the bliss of the primordial couple in the fiction parallels the happiness of Sophia and Hawthorne as honeymooners at the Old Manse (Newman 232). What has not been generally acknowledged, however, is the enduring nature of Sophia's influence on Hawthorne and the role she played in the resurgence of his writing powers that resulted in his last completed novel, *The Marble Faun.*

Hawthorne began writing his Italian novel in Florence during the summer of 1858, a time his son Julian described as "the happiest period of Hawthorne's life" (2:190). Five years had passed since his last published work, a collection of classical myths for children called *Tanglewood Tales*. Since then he had kept his journal regularly during his years as consul in Liverpool between 1853 and 1857 and during his travels through France and Italy that followed, but he had not written fiction of any kind. A month-

and-a-half after their arrival in Florence, Hawthorne wrote in his journal: "I began a rough draft of a Romance" (14:604). In the notes to her edition of Hawthorne's notebooks, Sophia identifies the "Romance" as *The Marble Faun"* (14:834). A complex set of factors contributed to his return to creative writing, not the least of which was the supportive role Sophia played during their summer in Florence.

An insight into what prompted the move toward their earlier muse/writer relationship is provided in Sophia's letter to her sister Mary Mann written not long after the Hawthornes had settled into their summer residence in Florence. On 7 June 1858, Sophia wrote that her husband "did not live in Rome, he only existed" (referring to the family's initial four-and-a-half month stay in Rome), but she adds, "Here I find him again as in the first summer in Concord at the Old Manse" (18:152). That "first summer" was the summer of 1842 when Sophia and Nathaniel were newlyweds living in what both had called "Paradise," he in a letter to his sister Louisa, adding, "We are as happy as people can be" (Mellow 198, 622), and she in a letter to her mother: "I feel precisely like an Eve in Paradise" (Mellow 203, 622).

Sixteen years later and half way around the world, Sophia thinks of her husband as returning to the youth and vitality of the Old Manse years. Hawthorne's Florentine journal entries confirm Sophia's appraisal of his feelings of well-being and rejuvenation. Together with the entries in the journal Sophia kept during their summer in Florence, they reveal the extent of her influence in getting Hawthorne's creative juices flowing again. By helping him, now a middle-aged husband and the father of three children, recapture the happiness of their idyllic honeymoon years, she made it possible for him to embark on a new creative endeavor. As caretaker and as soul-mate, and with the help of Florence as a backdrop, she was able to rekindle in him the ideas and aspirations that were a part of their honeymoon years in Concord and that would impell him to return to his writing career. The aspects of their life as newlyweds that resurfaced in Florence were threefold. The first and most apparent was their dream of enjoying the natural and artistic beauty of Italy together; the second was their appreciation of Italy's most famous literary figure, Dante; and the third was their determination to nurture Hawthorne's talents as a writer, a goal they had set aside during the consul years in Liverpool.

Their Italian dream had a long history. When Hawthorne and Sophia were secretly engaged, in 1840, they were already entertaining the fantasy of being in Italy together. Sophia had given Nathaniel a pair of paintings of Lake Como to decorate his room at the George Hillard house on Pinckney Street in Boston, and the couple standing on a bridge in one of the paintings is identified by Hawthorne in his letter to Sophia as themselves. In the same letter, Nathaniel playfully addresses Sophia repeatedly as "Dearissima," Italianizing his term of endearment (15:401, 403).

Sophia's own fascination with Italy predates anything we know about Hawthorne's interest. Long before she had met her husband, she was attempting to learn Italian—as early as 1828, according to her son Julian (*Circle* 231). One scholar dates the origin of Sophia's dream of going to Italy still earlier, in 1824, when she began to study drawing and first read *Corinne* by Mme. de Stael (Tharp 58). Sophia's correspondence with her sister Elizabeth confirms her fantasy: "Pack up—Betty—& let us be off—for three or four years!" she writes on 5 September 1832; a letter from Elizabeth written during this period encourages her "to go on with the Italian" (Mathews 157). Evidence that she was indeed practicing her Italian has recently been found in F. Bottarelli's *Exercises of Italian Speech* (London, 1822); the exercise book (in the Bowdoin College collection) shows random markings by Sophia and her signature five times (Nelson 561). The "Historical Commentary" accompanying the Centenary Edition of *The French and Italian Notebooks* acknowledges the influence Sophia exerted on Hawthorne in matters Italian: "references . . . to Italy and Italian culture come in works written after meeting Sophia in 1837" (14:906–07).

Sophia's Italian predilection is also evident in her choice of decorations for their first home together as a married couple. Reproductions of Italian works of art were placed throughout the Old Manse, frescos of the Sybyls and Prophets by Michelangelo on the walls of the dining-room and Leonardo da Vinci's Madonna of the Bas Relief over the fireplace (Julian Hawthorne 1:368–71). In "The Old Manse," the preface to *Mosses from an Old Manse,* Hawthorne points out how "the grim prints of Puritan ministers" that had blackened the walls of his study were replaced with "the sweet and lovely head of one of Raphael's Madonnas, and two pleasant little pictues of the Lake of Como" (10:5).

The Italian dream persisted over many years, its presence hinted at in the references to Italy scattered throughout Hawthorne's works before he left America in 1853. A recent essay by Leonardo Buonomo details and examines these "Italian Signs in Hawthorne." Hawthorne's total conversion to Sophia's Italian cause is clear in a letter he writes to his friend Grace Greenwood in April 1852. He has bought a house in Concord, he explains, instead of spending "the money to go to Italy," but he insists, "I do not yet give up that long-cherished idea" (16:533). When he was appointed consul in Liverpool by President Franklin Pierce, his long-time friend and classmate at Bowdoin College, making his "long-cherished idea" a reality was part of his plan from the beginning. On 18 May 1853, he wrote to the wife of another old friend from Bowdoin, Horatio Bridge, that he and his family would spend "a year in Italy before returning" to America (16:685). By 30 March 1854, near the end of his first year as consul in Liverpool, his Italian plans had mushroomed; he wrote to Bridge directly, declaring: "If it were not for my children, I should probably never return, but after quitting my office, should go to Italy, and live and die there" (Mathews 157). And according to Una Hawthorne, in a letter to her Aunt Lizzie on 9 March 1857, less than a year before they left England: "Mama has got a great Italian Grammar, and she intends studying Italian in earnest. She and Papa are going to talk it together" (Mathews 157).

But the long awaited dream that fueled all this enthusiastic anticipation had been rudely shattered, for Hawthorne at least, by the bleak Roman winter that greeted them upon their arrival in Italy in January 1858. In the first entry in his Italian notebook (3 February), after his first two weeks in Rome, he writes: "I shall never be able to express how I dislike the place, and how wretched I have been in it." He continues: "Cold, nastiness, white-washed houses, sour bread, pavement, most uncomfortable to the feet, enormous prices for poor living, beggars, pickpockets, ancient temples and broken monuments with filth at the base, and clothes hanging to dry about them, French soldiers, monks, and priests of every degree, a shabby population smoking bad cigars—these would have been some of the points of my description." He goes on to admit that "there are better and truer things to be said" but nevertheless concludes, "old Rome does seem to lie here like a dead and mostly decayed corpse, retaining here and there a trace of the noble shape it was, but with a sort of fungous growth upon it, and no life but of the worms that creep in and out" (14:54).

His assessment of Florence five months later markedly contrasts with this initial impression of Rome. Instead of a cold and uncomfortable second floor Roman flat, about which all he has to say is that "I . . . sat in my corner by the fireside, with more clothes on than ever I wore before" (14:53), he describes in exuberant detail the "immense suite of rooms . . . spacious, lofty, with frescoed ceilings" that he and his family have found in Florence, complete with a terrace and a garden. While the advent of spring undoubtedly plays a role in the contrast he perceives, he gives the Florentine ambience full credit. He loves "the clear atmosphere, the bright sunshine, the light cheerful hues of the stucco, and . . . the vivacious character of the human life in the streets," concluding with, "I hardly think there can be a place in the world where life is more delicious for its own simple sake than here" (14:284–85).

Obviously creature comforts were essential to Hawthorne's contentment, but more is at work here than simply a response to amenable living arrangements. Hawthorne's pleasure in Florence included, in addition to this general *joie de vivre*, a greater appreciation for Italy's famous works of art, an arena opened up for him by Sophia. Hawthorne's enthusiasm for viewing famous paintings, frescos, and sculptures lagged far behind his wife's. His skepticism prompted him to wonder, at one point, "whether we do not bamboozle ourselves in the greater part of the admiration which we learn to bestow" on such alleged masterpieces (14:350). Nevertheless, after two weeks with Sophia in Florence, he declared, "I never enjoyed pictures so much anywhere else, as I do in Florence" (14:314). In Rome, it had been Maria Mitchell, the American astronomer, who accompanied Sophia on her sight-seeing excursions while Nathaniel, according to Mitchell, stayed home in front of the fireplace "with his feet thrust into the coals, and an open volume of Thackeray upon his knees" (Mellow 485, 649). In Florence, Hawthorne did an about-face, spending the greater part of his first month happily visiting its galleries, museums and churches. His journal entries in June repeatedly open with the phrase "My wife and I," followed by "went to the Pitti Palace today" or "have been to the church of St. Lorenzo" or "went to the Uffizi gallery" (14:303, 325, 316). In the honeymoon letter quoted above, Sophia had added: "We have not done much but enjoy each other." The Hawthornes were apparently once again enjoying each other, even as they enjoyed the art treasures of Florence. Sophia had her husband with her, in body and in spirit, as he was during "the first summer in Concord at the Old Manse." His newly found appreciation for the Italian masters of art would eventually become an integral part of his novel *The Marble Faun* whose germ he had already conceived.

Evidence that Nathaniel also associated the summer of 1858 with the summer of 1842 can be found, if somewhat obliquely, in one of his journal entries. Prompted by the ghost stories that were circulating among their acquaintances in Florence, he remembers and records two incidents that took place during his honeymoon summer. His account of the first "incident" provides a rare glimpse into the bedroom intimacy of Nathaniel and Sophia:

> These stories remind me of an incident that took place at the Old Manse, in the first summer of our marriage. One night, about eleven oclock, before either my wife or I had fallen asleep (we had been talking together just before) she suddenly asked me why I had touched her shoulder. The next instant, she had a sense that the touch was not mine, but that of some third presence in the chamber. She clung to me in great affright, but I got out of bed and searched the chamber and adjacent entry, and, finding nothing, concluded that the touch was a fancied one. (14:419)

The second incident he recalls in this journal entry is a public one that takes place in the parlour of the Old Manse, but what is significant about the entry is that he remembers the time as "the same summer of our honeymoon" (14:9). Hawthorne was making the same linkage between the felicitous days in Florence in 1858 and his happy honeymoon nights in Concord that Sophia had made.

Another journal entry that attests to the Florence/Old Manse connection is primarily devoted to describing Hawthorne's response to Michelangelo's statue of Lorenzo de Medici. On 19 June 1858, Hawthorne and Sophia visited the church of St. Lorenzo and later the same day Hawthorne recorded his impressions: "No such majesty and grandeur has elsewhere been put into human shape. It is all a miracle; the deep repose, and the deep life within it; it is as much a miracle to have achieved this, as to *make a statue that would rise up and walk*" (14:327; my emphasis). Hawthorne does not name "Drowne's Wooden Image" or even indicate that he wrote a story in which a statue does rise up and walk, or, at the least, appears to. Yet he did write such a story and he remembers its premise, without apparently connecting it with the tale he wrote in the early spring of 1844 while he and Sophia were still newlyweds (Newman 71–72). According to Millicent Bell, its theme of the dependence of genius on the power of love is most appropriate to Hawthorne's honeymoon period at the Old Manse (127).

A more generalized reference to his feeling of renewed youth during his time in Florence can be found in still another journal entry, this one involving an attempt to explain his heightened sensibility: "The nights are wonderfully beautiful now. When the moon was at the full, a few nights ago, its light was an absolute glory, such as I seem only to have dreamed of . . . in my younger days" (14:430).

Hawthorne and Sophia's fantasy of experiencing the beauty of Italy for themselves had become a satisfying reality. Not surprisingly, both of them were reminded of their first years togther when the dream was taking shape. Another association could also have triggered this resurgence of memories from the old Manse years. Florence's most famous literary figure, Dante Alighieri, may have played a part.

During the first year of the Hawthornes' marriage, Dante was one of the writers they read together. On 12 January 1843, six months after their wedding, Sophia wrote to her mother: "We had established ourselves after tea in the study & my husband had commenced reading aloud Cary's Dante, with Flaxman open before us" (Cowles 5). Another of Sophia's letters, this one written two months later to Hawthorne's sister Louisa, again documents their reading of Dante. "We read to each other in the evening," she writes; "I have read aloud some of Byron lately & also Dante is now on the table" (Cowles 6). Sophia herself was probably the most significant influence on Hawthorne's exploration of Dante's works, and the time when her influence was strongest appears to have been during the Old Manse period. In fact, the first letter quoted above is the only evidence available to date that clearly establishes Hawthorne's actually having read the *Divine Comedy*.

Sophia's long standing admiration for a fellow Dante disciple, Ralph Waldo Emerson, may also have contributed to the newly married couple's engagement with Dante during the Old Manse years. Sophia was a follower of the Transcendentalist movement in New England and admired Emerson as its titular leader. She wrote to her sister Elizabeth in 1838: "I think Mr. Emerson is the greatest man—the most complete man—that ever lived" (Mellow 141). Emerson had visited Italy in 1833 (Barish 62–64) and began his translation of Dante's *La Vita Nuova* in 1843 (La Piana 122) when the Hawthornes were living in his former home, the Old Manse, where Emerson had written most of one of his major works, *Nature*. Between 1842 and 1845, they saw a great deal of Emerson, who still lived nearby, in spite of what Sophia called her husband's "abomination of visiting." According to Sophia, "Whenever he [Emerson] comes to see him, he always takes him away so that no one may interrupt him in his close and dead-set attack upon his ear" (Mellow 204–05). At Emerson's invitation, the two writers took a long two-day walk together on the 27th and 28th of September, 1842, during which they talked, among other things, about the poet Landor, whom Emerson had visited in Florence (Mellow 214–15). Emerson's recollections of Florence and his growing appreciation of Dante, as he was working on his translation of *La Vita Nuova*, could well have been a part of his "close and dead-set attack" upon Hawthorne's ear.

The presence of Dante is also evident in the number of allusions to him that can be found in the stories Hawthorne wrote while he and Sophia lived at the Old Manse. Dante is mentioned by name in two of his 1843 publications, "The Hall of Fantasy" and "Fire-Worship"; the former relegates a place among the "rulers and demigods in the realms of imagination" to "the dark presence of Dante," while the latter equates the "strange combinations of sounds" from a chest full of firewood with noises made "in that infernal forest of lamentable trees which breathed their complaints to Dante" in the circle of Hell inhabited by the suicides (10:173,144). Two other pieces written during the Old Manse period echo the Dantean trope of the lowest depths of Hell being a terrain of freezing cold: the touch of the Wandering Jew's hand "without a single throb of human brotherhood . . . like ice" in "A Virtuoso's Collection" (1842) and the characterization of the unfeeling Gervayze Hastings in "The Christmas Banquet" (1844) as "cold, cold, cold" (Doubleday 670).

The best known story of the Old Manse period in which Dante and his "great poem" are indisputably present is "Rappaccini's Daughter." It was written between mid-October and mid-November of 1844, the year after Hawthorne and Sophia were reading Dante together (Newman 259). The opening paragraph sets the story in Padua, Italy, and introduces the reader to Giovanni Guasconti as a "young stranger, who was not unstudied in the great poem of his country" (a reference to Dante's *Divine Comedy*); the coat-of-arms over the doorway of the old mansion where Giovanni is living is identified as belonging to a family whose ancestor "had been pictured by Dante as a partaker of the immortal agonies of his Inferno." The Dantean echo in "Rappaccini's Daughter" that has been most exhaustively analyzed is the name Hawthorne assigns to the title character, Beatrice, who in the *Commedia* is Dante's guide to Paradise (Cowles 12; McCabe 217; Moss 152; Pollin 32).

A specific and palpable context for these allusions was waiting for Hawthorne and Sophia in Florence in the summer of 1858 when they found themselves walking the streets where Dante walked, in the city where Dante was born and raised. Both Hawthorne's journal and Sophia's notebook attest to Dante's pervasive presence in Florence. It was their custom, after a day of sight-seeing, to spend their evenings together on either side of their dining room table, putting down separate records of the day's observations (14:913). Sophia's references to Dante outnumber Hawthorne's, suggesting she may have led the way in encouraging his awareness of Dante as a cultural icon; but whether he recorded the Dante sites in his journal or not, he and Sophia visited them together. Sophia's notebook recounts how, in the court of the Duomo, they "delayed awhile by the 'Sasso di Dante'" where, according to "an inscription on a marble slab in the wall," Dante "used to sit and look at the Campanile and the Cathedral" (Sophia Hawthorne 406). Other entries by Sophia describe their seeing "an authentic portait" of Dante within the Duomo (383) along with the inlaid marble pavement of the Baptistery that had once held a font supposedly "broken by Dante, when rescuing a child from drowning" (387–88). Both Sophia and her husband consider the monument to Dante in the church of Santa Croce unworthy of him; Hawthorne calls it "unimpressive" (14:343), Sophia, "not good at all" (403). They are disappointed when they cannot gain admittance to the Bargello where they hoped to see "Giotto's Dante" (14:373). A subsequent entry reveals a satisfactory alternative; they settle instead for "an accurate tracing from Giotto's fresco of Dante" when they visit "Mr. Kirkup, an old Englishman" who was a long-time resident of Florence. Hawthorne devotes several pages to this "antiquarian" and "necromancer" who was able to show them "a plaster-cast of Dante's . . . taken from his face after death" as well as "some manuscript copies" of Dante's writings (14:390–92, 394).

Dante was clearly everywhere in Florence, reinforcing Hawthorne's long-standing familiarity with Dante's masterpiece and ultimately resulting in Dantean reverberations in *The Marble Faun*. Kenyon, the character most often viewed as Hawthorne's spokesman, reads "an antique edition of Dante" and refers to the poet directly and indirectly in several key passages. Other Dantean parallels are detailed in David Kesterson's essay on Hawthorne's debt to Dante in the completed novel (50–59). During these first months in Florence, Hawthorne's idea for the novel was just beginning to germinate; it was a time when Sophia and Dante were a part of the fabric of his daily life as they had been back in Concord.

The final aspect of their early married life that resurfaced in Florence was Sophia's efforts to create an environment that would encourage Hawthorne to devote his energies to writing. Although the "Casa del Bello" in Florence may seem far removed from the Old Manse in Concord, it provided the same kind of retreat. The Hawthornes were able to rent the ground floor of the "palace of three pianos" at what is now 36 Via de Serragli, "a few steps" away from Florence's serene Boboli Gardens (Sophia 449). On first seeing the arrangement of rooms around the central piazza, Sophia immediately assigned "the pleasantest room (looking into the garden)" to her husband to use as his study. In Florence, as everywhere else where Sophia had made a home for him, her first consideration was to set aside a place where he could read or write or just think and imagine.

Hawthorne's initial response to his new quarters perfectly fulfills his wife's expectations: he fancies that he "can overflow into the summer house, or an arbour, and sit there dreaming of a story" (14:284). The story he imagines himself dreaming materializes in short order because, by July 14, six weeks after their move into the Casa del Bello, he is working on a new narrative. According to the entry in his pocket diary for that date, he is "principally employed sketching the plot of a Romance" (14:602).

The glimmer of an idea for an Italy-based novel appears to have occurred to him several weeks earlier, just after his initial sight-seeing walk through Florence's center—and about the same time that Sophia had written to her sister with the happy news that her husband was "again as in the first summer in Concord at the Old Manse" (Hawthorne 18:152). In response to his first view of the Palazzo Vecchio, "where many scenes of historic interest have been enacted," he muses how much richer, more "picturesque, and full of curious incident" the history of Florence is compared to that of England: "A hundred plots of a tragedy might be found in Florentine history, for one in English." Miriam's story in *The Marble Faun* is such a tragedy, as convoluted and violent a tale as the history of the conspirators that Hawthorne imagines hanging from the windows of the Palazzo Vecchio—"or precipitated from them upon the pavement of the square below" (14:287). The pivotal event that he eventually devises for the plot of his novel is murder by just such a precipitation, although he shifts the scene to Rome's Tarpeian Rock.

Hawthorne's journal and pocket diary entries for the remainder of his stay in Florence reflect his growing involvement with his new work-in-progress. On July 17, he writes: "Staid at home all day . . . . I began rough draft of a Romance"; on July 27: "I seldom go out now-a-days . . . having been engaged in sketching out a Romance"; on September 1, a month after the family's move to the Villa Montauto on the outskirts of Florence, he returns to his notebook with his first entry since August 19: "I usually spend the whole day at home, having been engaged in planning and sketching out a Romance" (14:604, 375, 396). Sophia must have been delighted to see her husband's new found energy directed toward resuming his writing career.

One specific contribution Sophia may have made to *The Marble Faun,* heretofore unacknowledged, is the name Hawthorne chose for the Italian protagonist of his romance, Donatello. Hawthorne repeatedly saw the works of the famous Renaissance sculptor during his stay in Florence; his name appears three times in his Florentine notes (14:347, 358, 404), but it is in Sophia's journal that a connection with the character in *The Marble Faun* can be found. In her notebook entry for July 3, she describes "an exceedingly beautiful small statue of David by Donatello. He has killed Goliath, and stands musing. . . . there is force in his delicacy, but it is the force of genius, and not of physique" (440). Hawthorne accompanied his wife that day, and although he does not comment on Donatello's David in his notebook (it was a very full day of art-viewing), it was his habit to read his wife's journal regularly, just as she read his. Donatello's killing of the mysterious monk who had been tormenting Miriam parallels David's vanquishing of Goliath; like Donatello's David, Hawthorne's Donatello is young and delicate, yet forceful enough to slay his foe. The association with the sculptor who fashioned this courageous, idealistic youth may have been a factor in naming his brave, naive Italian hero.

Whether Sophia provided that detail, the central role she played in the genesis of *The Marble Faun* remains clear. Without her influence, Hawthorne might never have been alerted to the attractions of Italy or ventured to travel there, much less conceived of a novel steeped in Italian culture and set in Italy. Her influence during the summer of 1858 in Florence was a key element in the burst of creative energy that propelled Hawthorne to start writing again after a five year hiatus. By rekindling in him the happiness they shared during their honeymoon at the Old Manse—when they read Dante and dreamed of visiting Italy together—she set the stage for his revitalization and for his creation of what would become one of the nineteenth-century's best known novels of Americans in Italy.

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