Hawthorne's Roman Holiday

"*The Marble Faun* and the Waste of History" by Millicent Bell, in *Southern Review* (Spring 1999), 43 Allen Hall, Louisiana State Univ., Baton Rouge, La. 70803–5005.

Seldom read today, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Marble Faun* (1860) was the closest thing to a bestseller that eminent author ever had. Early readers were particularly taken with the descriptive views of Rome accompanying the narrative. A *New York Times* reviewer predicted (accurately) that the novel would serve as a guidebook for visitors to the Eternal City. Modern critics, however, have usually been dismissive of the work's travelogue aspect—wrongly so, asserts Bell, an emeritus professor of English at Boston University and the author of *Hawthorne's View of the Artist* (1962). Hawthorne's "allegedly undigested and inferior descriptions" serve an important "poetic function" in the novel, Bell says.

The Marble Faun, she notes, was the pioneering "international novel." In works of this genre, Americans abroad (Hilda and Kenyon in this case) experience a moral and cultural encounter with the Old World. "Like [Henry] James's travelers later," Bell writes, "Hawthorne's visitors to Rome find themselves putting their Americanness to the test. Sin and suffering overtake the European Miriam and Donatello, and in coming to terms with them the Americans undergo a trial of their inherited Puritan ethic."

Of the novel's four protagonists, Bell observes, "only Hilda emerges unchanged, still a Puritan maiden; Kenyon, who might have accepted the lesson of his Roman experience, lays his knowledge aside." The two return to America, "where, as Kenyon told Donatello, 'each generation has only its own sins and sorrows to bear.' The 'weary and dreary Past' is not piled 'upon the back of the Present,' as it is in Rome."

In framing this story, Bell says, the narrator's scenic musings sound like a musical undertone and "qualify Hilda's optimistic idealism," offering "a stoic and ironic vision" of history, the perpetual making and remaking of the past's debris. Contemporary Rome, says the narrator—and Hawthorne, "seems like nothing but a heap of broken rubbish thrown into the great chasm between our own days and the Empire."

The book's oft-ignored descriptions, Bell says, "present a view of the human record as a chronicle not only of confusion and flux but successive miseries, treacheries, and bloodshed. Above all, bloodshed." As Hawthorne (1804–64) was writing *The Marble Faun*, the Civil War loomed on the horizon. Within months of its publication, Fort Sumter would be fired upon. Hawthorne, writes Bell, would become "a lonely dissenter among war enthusiasts," foreseeing "a society in which the world he had known might be as altered and reduced to fragments as the Roman past."

The End of Art?

"The Trivialization of Outrage: The Artworld at the End of the Millennium" by Roger Kimball, in *Quadrant* (Oct. 1999), 46 George St., Fitzroy, Victoria, Australia 3065.

The controversial elephant-dung Virgin Mary recently exhibited in the Brooklyn Museum of Art was another reminder that almost *anything* can be accepted as art today. This is "bad for art—and for artists," says Kimball, managing editor of the *New Criterion*. "It is especially bad for young, unestablished artists, who find themselves scrambling for recognition in an atmosphere in which the last thing that matters is artistic excellence."

Artists desperate to say or do something new in an "art world" obsessed by novelty "make extreme gestures simply in order to be noticed," Kimball observes. But the audience becomes inured. "After one has had oneself nailed to a Volkswagen (as one artist did), what's left?"

To fill the aesthetic void, Kimball points out, politics rushes in. "From the crude political allegories of a Leon Golub or Hans Haacke to the feminist sloganeering of Jenny Holzer, Karen Finley, or Cindy Sherman, much that goes under the name of art today is incomprehensible without reference to its political content."

The avant-garde, which emerged with its "adversarial" gestures in the late 19th century, Kimball avers, "has become a casualty of its own success. Having won battle after battle, it gradually transformed a recalcitrant bourgeois culture into a willing collaborator in its raids on established taste. But in this victory were the seeds of its own irrelevance, for without credible resistance, its oppositional gestures degenerated into a kind of aesthetic buffoonery."

Too much is made, Kimball contends, of the tribulations of the 19th-century avant-garde artists, such as Edouard Manet, Paul Gauguin, and Vincent Van Gogh. "The fact that these great talents went unappreciated has had the undesirable effect of encouraging the thought that *because* one is unappreciated one is therefore a genius." The truth, however, writes Kimball, is that, in any era, "most art is bad. And in our time, most art is not only bad but also dishonest: a form of therapy or political grumbling masquerading as art."

The contemporary art world, in his view, has lost touch with beauty—and "without an allegiance to beauty, art degenerates into a caricature of itself." Yet a purely aesthetic conception of art, divorced from the rest of life, is also unsatisfactory. Art needs "an ethical dimension," Kimball insists. "We have come a long way since Dostoyevsky could declare that, 'Incredible as it may seem, the day will come when man will quarrel more fiercely about art than God.' Whether that trek has described a journey of progress is perhaps an open question."

Mailer the Meteor

In an interview in *New England Review* (Summer 1999), novelist Norman Mailer tells of the impact early fame had on him.

One reason I've always been interested in movie stars is because of the sudden success of The Naked and the Dead *[1948]. I really have the inner biography, in an odd way, of some young actor who has a hit, and is catapulted from being someone who haunts the spiritual bread lines to someone who's worth millions—I'm not talking now about money but of the shift in one's ego. I had that experience. After all, I was utterly unknown. By my own lights I'd not been much of a soldier, and that ate at me. In a squad of 12 men I would have been number seven, eight, or nine, if you're going to rank them by ability. I was always at the bottom half of the squad. That hurt me; I wasn't a good soldier and I wanted to be one. . . . So I was without any large idea of myself and my abilities as a man, and abruptly I was catapulted upward. Suddenly I possessed a power that came to me from my work. Yet it didn't feel as if it had come from what I had done. Indeed, I was very much like a young movie actor who doesn't know where he is, and who he is. I hadn't heard in those days of identity crises, but I was in one. Movie stars have always fascinated me since. I felt I knew something about their lives that other authors don't. . . . It took me 20 years to come to terms with who I was and to recognize that my experience was the only experience that I was ever going to have.*

OTHER NATIONS

The Russian Silence

"The Weakness of Russian Nationalism" by Anatol Lieven, in *Survival* (Summer 1999), International Institute for Strategic Studies, 23 Tavistock St., London WC2E 7NQ, United Kingdom.

It's another case of Sherlock Holmes's dog that didn't bark: the absence during the 1990s in the former Soviet region of any mass mobilization of Russians along