HAWTHORNE'S "PROPHETIC PICTURES"

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IN "THE PROPHETIC PICTURES,"[1] Nathaniel Hawthorne treated for the first time the problem of the artist—a problem which returned to vex him in his later writings and which he was never able satisfactorily to solve. It concerns the dichotomy of the act of artistic creation, which Hawthorne seems to have felt is man's most spiritual achievement, and of that "dark necessity," which, he feared, impels the artist by virtue of his very artistry towards the unpardonable sin, the violation of the human heart. The essential paradox of this position cannot be resolved; it can, of course, be ignored, as it is by Hawthorne himself in "The Artist of the Beautiful,"[2] but ignoring it does not make it less fundamental to his aesthetics. This paradox illustrates, moreover, that ambivalence of attitude towards the artist that any critic of Hawthorne's works must take into account. For this reason an examination of "The Prophetic Pictures," one of his earliest and clearest statements of the paradox, should illuminate a consideration of Hawthorne's aesthetic theory and of his conception of the artist's position in the social order.

Although Hawthorne scholars usually mention "The Prophetic Pictures" in their discussions of the writer's art, they have always, I believe, given it too summary a treatment to provide an adequate

[1] *Twice-Told Tales* (*The Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne,* ed. George Parsons Lathrop, Standard Library Edition, Boston and New York, 1882, I, 192-210). All succeeding references to "The Prophetic Pictures" will be to this edition.

[2] See R. H. Fogle, "The World and the Artist: A Study of Hawthorne's 'The Artist of the Beautiful,'" *Tulane Studies in English,* I, 50-51 (1949). (In the preparation of this article, I have been both aided and encouraged by Dr. Fogle, to whom I should like to acknowledge my indebtedness.) Speaking of Hawthorne's treatment of Owen Warland, who is "nearly unique in Hawthorne in successfully executing his ideal conception," Fogle calls attention to Warland's isolation from society: "because of the peculiar nature of his art he runs no risk of violating the human heart, of losing the respect for the sanctity of the human spirit, as do those who imitate the human form or delve into human psychology. . . . It is perhaps significant that Hawthorne, in this his most extensive and explicit study of the problem of the artist, has exempted Warland from a danger with which he himself was undoubtedly preoccupied. In painting the ideal artist he has as it were from affection freed him from this temptation, left him unstained by 'Earth's common lot of care and sorrow,' and in so doing weakened him."

exploration of its theme and central problem. Most of them, like F. O. Matthiessen, remark that Hawthorne's portrayal of the creator of the prophetic pictures shows admiration for the painter's skill but also a distrust of his cold, scientific detachment:

> But Hawthorne was not wholly sympathetic with his artists: he looked at the obverse side as well, pointing out that the painter was interested only in probing the hidden traits of his sitters, and was unconcerned by their fates, even when his eye could detect that one of them was headed towards insanity. In his cold indifference to everything except his art, "like all other men around whom an engrossing purpose wreathes itself, he was insulated from the mass of human kind."[3]

In addition to this general—and valid—interpretation of the tale, there have been advanced two or three other explanations of Hawthorne's purpose.[4] No one, however, has examined the tale closely enough to point out the dichotomy of its themes and the ambiguity of its conclusions. For in "The Prophetic Pictures" Hawthorne develops two parallel themes, related yet contradictory, which he does not unite until the end of the story and which even then he is unable to synthesize.

[3] F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (London, 1941), p. 223. Newton Arvin, in his Introduction to *Hawthorne's Short Stories* (New York, 1947), pp. xi-xii, carries this interpretation a step farther, emphasizing Hawthorne's belief in the active power of the artist and in the tragic implications of his power: "What interested [Hawthorne] . . . was not so much the sitters and their tragedy as the artist and his: for him the artist's power was always a potential and here an actual curse; his art might so easily become 'an engrossing purpose' which would 'insulate him from the mass of humankind,' as this painter's does, and transform him indeed from the mere reader of men's souls into an agent of their destinies. Hawthorne's portraits . . . become the symbols not only of the artist's clairvoyance but of a malignant fatality of which he may be the guilty medium."

[4] See, for example, Elizabeth Lathrop Chandler's statement in her volume, *A Study of the Sources of the Tales and Romances Written by Nathaniel Hawthorne before 1853* (*Smith College Studies in Modern Languages,* Vol. VII, No. 4, July, 1926), p. 19: "In 'The Prophetic Pictures' Hawthorne first showed his great interest in the powers of art; the idea that a picture can reveal character was used most successfully later. He still insists, however, that prophecy cannot teach, but only experience." Another interpretation of Hawthorne's meaning is given by Alice L. Cooke in "The Shadow of Martinus Scriblerus in Hawthorne's 'The Prophetic Pictures,'" *New England Quarterly,* XVII, 598 (Dec., 1944): "The theme of 'The Prophetic Pictures' touches unquestionably upon the basic philosophical tenet . . . that the ends of learning are abused through the acquisition of knowledge that has no practical social value." A third interpretation of the tale is given by Mark Van Doren in *Nathaniel Hawthorne* (New York, 1949), p. 88: "'The Prophetic Pictures' likewise assumes a perpetuity of willingness in readers to shudder at the power of art—in this case paintings—to meddle in the destinies of men."

I

The theme which I shall first consider, since it first becomes evident to the reader, is Hawthorne's conception of the ideal artist, whom he presents as the painter of the prophetic pictures. Significantly, this character has no name; he is known merely as "the painter"—a title that implies him to be the quintessence of all painters and, by extension, of all artists. Furthermore, we know from the first paragraph of the tale, when Walter Ludlow eulogizes his accomplishments, that he is the epitome of all that is desirable in man:

"But this painter!" cried Walter Ludlow, with animation. "He not only excels in his peculiar art, but possesses vast acquirements in all other learning and science. He talks Hebrew with Dr. Mather, and gives lectures in anatomy to Dr. Boylston. In a word, he will meet the best instructed man among us on his own ground. Moreover, he is a polished gentleman—a citizen of the world—yes, a true cosmopolite; for he will speak like a native of each clime and country of the globe except our own forests, whither he is now going."

Because his "vast acquirements" have equipped the painter with tools for universal communication and understanding, he transcends the individual being and becomes a representation of the universal; he is a microcosm of the macrocosm, or—to use a juster image, and one that is a favorite with Hawthorne himself—a mirror[5] in which all men and all women will find themselves reflected. Like a mirror, the artist "catches the secret sentiments and passions" of those whose portraits he paints; however, because of his power to strip the spirit of its physical mask[6] and his ability to transfer to canvas the

[5] See Matthiessen, *op. cit.*, pp. 258-261, and Malcolm Cowley, "Hawthorne in the Looking-Glass," *Sewanee Review*, LVI, 545-563 (Oct.-Dec., 1948), for discussions of the significance of mirror imagery in Hawthorne.

[6] In Hawthorne's symbolic system, a reflected image often stands for ideal truth in contrast to the physical reality of the object itself. Matthiessen (*op. cit.*, p. 274) comments on this significance of the mirror imagery in "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment": ". . . a grotesque search for the fountain of youth is dramatized by four old people drinking an ambiguous fluid, which sparkles like champagne and, in the half light of the doctor's room, seems to gleam with a moonlike splendor. But at the moment of their exhilarated transformation, when the three now young gentlemen dance in a circle around the girl-widow, enamored by the freshness of her charms, 'by a strange deception, owing to the duskiness of the chamber, and antique dresses which they still wore, the tall mirror is said to have reflected the figures of the three old, gray, withered grandsires, ridiculously con-

spiritual truth which he perceives, he also gives to them a "duration," an "earthly immortality," which a mirrored image does not achieve.[7] Thus, he so informs his creatures of paint and canvas with spiritual force that it is difficult for the observer "to separate the idea of life and intellect from such striking counterfeits." In the intense moment of creation, he has re-created the souls as well as the bodies of his originals, for, as he himself says of his art, "The artist —the true artist—must look beneath the exterior. It is his gift—his proudest, but often a melancholy one—to see the inmost soul, and, by a power indefinable even to himself, to make it glow or darken upon the canvas. . . ."

Just as the artist whom Hawthorne here presents has superhuman qualities, so is his act of artistic creation a superhuman act. It is, in fact, a godlike act, analogous to—if not a duplicate of—God's divine artistry in His creation of man.[8] Like Adam, who was first shaped of clay and then animated by the spirit, the painter's portraits assume first their physical and then their spiritual identities. We are told, for example, that, as the artist proceeds with the portraits of Walter and Elinor, their features begin to assume such vividness that they appear to be disengaged from the canvas. However, since the facial expressions of the portraits are as yet unfixed and "more vague than in most of the painter's works," we know that these shapes are only the lovers' "phantom selves," their unmeaningful physical likenesses, not the abode of their spirits. Like God in creating Adam, the painter completes the physical details of his portraits before he inspires them with their souls. At the end of the last sitting, the portraits are still mere painted likenesses, but before

tending for the skinny ugliness of a shrivelled grandam.' No wonder that Melville . . . marked this subtle instance where the reflection in a mirror, as well as in the glass of memory and imagination, kept the truth that had been lost by the characters' frantic delusion."

[7] It should also be noted that, according to Hawthorne, the painter was a mirror for natural objects as well as for human beings. We are told that "he had . . . lain in a canoe on the bosom of Lake George, making his soul the mirror of its loveliness and grandeur."

[8] The completed portraits, the result of the painter's creative act, duplicated God's creations, a circumstance that again suggests the divine nature of art: "In most of the pictures, the whole mind and character were brought out on the countenance, and concentrated into a single look, so that, to speak paradoxically, the originals hardly resembled themselves so strikingly as the portraits did."

the next day, when Walter and Elinor call to examine them, they have been given spiritual vitality.

An even more specific identification of the artist with the Divinity appears in the painter's apostrophe to art, in which he claims for the artist a creative power similar to the Creator's own:

"O glorious Art . . . thou art the image of the Creator's own. The innumerable forms, that wander in nothingness, start into being at thy beck. The dead live again. Thou recallest them to their old scenes, and givest their gray shadows the lustre of a better life, at once earthly and immortal. Thou snatchest back the fleeting moments of History. With thee there is no Past, for, at thy touch, all that is great becomes forever present; and illustrious men live through long ages, in the visible performance of the very deeds which made them what they are. O potent Art! as thou bringest the faintly revealed Past to stand in that narrow strip of sunlight, which we call Now, canst thou summon the shrouded Future to meet her there? Have I not achieved it? Am I not thy Prophet?"

Since the power to synthesize past, present, and future gives to the artist's vision an eternal validity and to the artist an omniscience which is normally attributed only to the mind of God, it is logical to assume in the artist the ability to use his knowledge in a Godlike fashion—in other words, to create, and to comprehend the past, the present, and the future in his creation.

Thus far we have considered chiefly the sunlit features of Hawthorne's artist, without pausing to reflect upon certain gloomy characteristics and dark potentialities that shadow his figure in ambiguities. The first of these is the suggestion that the painter's talents may be a sort of witchcraft, deriving from the "Black Man" rather than from God.[9] This hinted association of the painter with the "Black Man" casts a doubt over the value of his vision for mankind: if it is satanic in its origins, its revelation of the universal truths which lie buried in material substance may lead men to evil rather than to good.

[9] "Some deemed it an offence against the Mosaic law, and even a presumptuous mockery of the Creator, to bring into existence such lively images of his creatures. Others, frightened at the art which could raise phantoms at will, and keep the form of the dead among the living, were inclined to consider the painter as a magician, or perhaps the famous Black Man, of old witch times, plotting mischief in a new guise."

Another indication of the artist's potentialities for evil is his cold and analytic heart.[10] His art is to the painter a monomania that has stifled all his sympathies, all his warmth of feeling, and all his tenderness towards his fellows. His preoccupation is so great that his art has become more important in his eyes than God's creations, its prototype, and he has lost interest in the destiny of everything except his paintings. When he visits Walter and Elinor after his long absence, his thoughts are for the pictures, not for the human beings whose tragedy they prophesied: "'The Portraits! Are they within?' inquired he of the domestic; then recollecting himself—'your master and mistress! Are they at home?'"

As Hawthorne has already indicated, this reversal of human values, this self-imposed isolation from actuality, may have resulted in the artist's becoming a madman rather than a prophet:

> It is not good for man to cherish a solitary ambition. Unless there be those around him by whose example he may regulate himself, his thoughts, desires, and hopes will become extravagant, and he the semblance, perhaps the reality, of a madman. Reading other bosoms with an acuteness almost preternatural, the painter failed to see the disorder of his own.

To call the painter mad is, of course, to judge him by human values. In actuality, he lives apart from humanity on the plane of his own ideas, where he finds his meaningful existence, becoming there a synthesizing energy, a symbol for all artistic creativeness. This semi-abstract though potent being is to Hawthorne the quintessential artist and, as such, an ambiguous figure. Although his attributes are in themselves praiseworthy—a superhuman creativeness, a clear perception of eternal truth, and a gift of prophecy which derives from this perception—he is touched by a suggestion of

[10] The following description of the painter is frequently quoted to illustrate Hawthorne's fear of the cold isolation which, he felt, might prove to be the lot of every artist: "Like all other men around whom an engrossing purpose wreathes itself, he was insulated from the mass of human kind. He had no aim—no pleasure—no sympathies—but what were ultimately connected with his art. Though gentle in manner and upright in intent and action, he did not possess kindly feelings; his heart was cold; no living creature could be brought near enough to keep him warm. For these two beings [Walter and Elinor], however, he had felt, in its greatest intensity, the sort of interest which always allied him to the subjects of his pencil. He had pried into their souls with his keenest insight, and pictured the result upon their features with his utmost skill, so as barely to fall short of that standard which no genius ever reached, his own severe conception."

diabolic madness, which implies that he may use them evilly. Hawthorne does not by explicit statement resolve the doubt which he raises concerning the relative malevolence or benignity of the artist's power. Instead, he places him in a social situation and then proceeds to study his influence on those whose lives he enters and to examine his responsibility to society.[11]

II

The second problem to be considered in "The Prophetic Pictures," the relationship and responsibility of the artist to society, is implicit in the narrative itself, through which the painter moves as a powerful but almost abstract force. In describing the artist, Hawthorne dwells upon the effect of his personality on the people of Boston and upon his impressive spiritual and mental qualities, ignoring almost entirely his physical appearance.[12] Furthermore, he tells us that the painter's countenance is "well worthy of his own pencil"—in fact, that it recalls one of his portraits, which are, after all, painted images, not creatures of flesh and blood. This hint of unreality about the painter reinforces our conception of him as a disembodied force, particularly when we remember that he is famous for painting the minds and hearts, rather than the features, of his subjects.

The two more solidly human characters of the tale are Walter Ludlow and Elinor, into whose lives the painter steps with what Hawthorne indicates may be the footfall of destiny. Nothing about them suggests abstraction. At the beginning of the story, Walter is presented as an excitable young man, given to sudden enthusiasms, such as the one which he develops for the painter, and inclined to an unreasoned half-belief in the superstitions of ignorant folk. Elinor, who is quiet in manner and reserved in her emotions, is the more sensitive of the two, her disposition to belief in the occult deriving from an intuitive perceptiveness rather than from a timorous ignorance. It is from Elinor that we learn, even before

[11] See Matthiessen, *op. cit.*, p. 238. Matthiessen points out an important aspect of Hawthorne's treatment of his characters, his interest in them as social beings: "He was always concerned in his stories not merely with the individual, but with the collective existence."

[12] The only physical characteristic of the painter which Hawthorne mentions is his "deep eyebrows," beneath which he watches the countenances of his sitters.

the artist has entered the lives of the two lovers, that her coming marriage, which appears superficially to be destined for happiness, may be overshadowed by evil. When Walter mentions the artist's ability to paint the souls as well as the bodies of his subjects, he is startled by Elinor's frightened look. She hastily dismisses his perplexed enquiry about what ails her, but she cannot dismiss the emotion that caused it:

> . . . when the young man had departed, it cannot be denied that a remarkable expression was again visible on the fair and youthful face of his mistress. It was a sad and anxious look, little in accordance with what should have been the feelings of a maiden on the eve of wedlock. Yet Walter Ludlow was the chosen of her heart.

Elinor then reflects that she should not be surprised at Walter's being startled by a look, because she remembers from her own experience "how frightful a look may be." Yet, she remarks, it may be that she is fanciful, for she has seen that look but once.

Walter's superstitious awe of the painter's talents and Elinor's fearful reluctance to face him prepare the reader for the portentous interest which their appearance arouses in the painter, who cancels appointments with two influential Bostonians in order to have time for their sittings. He feels, he says, that he *"must not lose this opportunity,* for the sake of painting a few ells of broadcloth and brocade."[13] What the painter has seen in their faces, however, is hard to determine: although Elinor's fears have suggested that it must be gloom and grief, the painter himself was struck by the appearance of the lovers at the moment when, standing in a shaft of sunlight, they seemed to be "living pictures of youth and beauty, gladdened by bright fortune."[14] It is possible, of course, that the

[13] Italics mine. The reader is also prepared to accept the artist's cavalier dismissal of wealth and influence by Hawthorne's previous description of his attitude towards those who applied to him for sittings: "Whenever such proposals were made, he fixed his piercing eyes on the applicant, and seemed to look him through and through. If he beheld only a sleek and comfortable visage, though there were a gold-laced coat to adorn the picture and golden guineas to pay for it, he civilly rejected the task and the reward. But if the face were the index of any thing uncommon, in thought, sentiment, or experience; or if he met a beggar in the street, with a white beard and a furrowed brow; or if sometimes a child happened to look up and smile, he would exhaust all the art on them that he denied to wealth."

[14] The significance of sunlight and shadow in Hawthorne as symbols of good and evil respectively is discussed by Walter Blair in "Color, Light, and Shadow in Hawthorne's Fiction," *New England Quarterly,* XV, 74-94 (March, 1942).

artist's interest was aroused by the dramatic irony of the situation—by the contrast of the physical brightness which enveloped Walter and Elinor with the aura of spiritual gloom that he perceived emanating from them. The artist's powers have been so described that the reader easily assumes that he has seen through the sunlight and the physical beauty of these two youthful figures into the eternal truth of their souls.

Having carefully plotted the situation in which these three characters are to be involved, Hawthorne then begins to examine the complicated relationship of the artist with his sitters, who are in actuality the raw materials of his new creation. The question of whether or not the painter is able to influence the future lives of those whom art has placed in his power is handled ambiguously. Walter, whom we have seen to be half-disposed to accept the validity of superstitions, does not dismiss the thought. Although he smiles about it, it lingers in his mind, even after he and Elinor have definitely arranged for their sittings:

> After they had taken leave [of the artist], Walter Ludlow asked Elinor, with a smile, whether she knew what an influence over their fates the painter was about to acquire.
>
> "The old women of Boston affirm," continued he, "that after he has once got possession of a person's face and figure, he may paint him in any act or situation whatever—and the picture will be prophetic. Do you believe it?"

When the sittings begin, it is evident that the painter sees in his subjects more than reveals itself to the superficial observer. Having been forced to reject his first plan of introducing the lovers on the same canvas, he nevertheless works on the paintings simultaneously, because, he explains in his "mystical language," the faces throw light upon each other. And extending his study of the influence that each lover has on the other, he executes secretly a crayon sketch, in which, it is to be presumed, he shows the lovers in the "appropriate action" that he wished originally to represent on the large canvas. During this period of studious analysis, the painter has no apparent effect, either deleterious or benevolent, on Walter and Elinor; he himself, however, is ill occupied with violating their hearts by attempting to uncover their hidden characters.

The idea that the futures of Walter and Elinor are within the painter's control is re-emphasized by what occurs after the portraits have been completed and the lovers come to inspect them. Their stepping across the painter's threshold seems at this moment to be symbolic of their entering his sphere of influence: they step from sunshine into shadow, thus leaving the light of nature which has hitherto illumined them, to stand in the brooding gloom which emanates from the portraits. The portraits, too, are portentous of change: of grief and terror in Elinor and of some temperamental development in Walter, which he interprets as a "livelier" mood, but which frightens the sensitive Elinor. And then the artist, who sees in Elinor a comprehension of the meaning of his portraits, frightens her still more by showing her the sketch that he has made of what he has seen will be the culmination of her relationship with Walter.

The question now arises concerning the responsibility of the artist for the future events in the lives of Elinor and Walter. When he shows Elinor the crayon sketch, which, as we know from the conclusion of the tale, is a drawing of Walter about to plunge a knife into her bosom, he tells her that he has represented only recognizable truth. He says,

> "If I have failed . . . if your heart does not see itself reflected in your own portrait—if you have no secret cause to trust my delineation of the other—it is not yet too late to alter them. I might change the action of these figures too [referring to the crayon sketch]. But would it influence the event?"

Elinor, in whom we have observed sensitive premonitions of the artistic revelation before her, is evidently convinced that changing the portraits and the sketch will not "influence the event." She refuses to have the pictures altered, but she also refuses to acknowledge their fundamental truth, remarking merely that, if her picture is sad, she will look the gayer by contrast.

On the ideal level, then, it appears that the painter has no responsibility for the futures of Walter and Elinor; his painting, which synthesizes past, present, and future, is a facet of eternal and unalterable truth—the truth of the relationship between Walter and Elinor, which must result in the tragedy that he has foreseen, unless

the lovers themselves avoid it by separation. In an absolute sense, the painter has fulfilled his responsibility to society by revealing to the world the truth which he has perceived. Further action he cannot take; that lies with those to whom he has revealed his meaning. That they fail to act is due, not to the artist's irresponsibility, but to their own inability fully to grasp the revelation or to their wilful disregard of its import.[15]

On the psychological level the problem has greater complexity. Hawthorne suggests from this standpoint that the meaning of the paintings may not be absolute, but may conform to the attitude and the character of the beholder. He hints at this possibility when Walter and Elinor, on their first visit to the painter's apartment, study the portraits hanging on the walls and find different meanings in the painted faces:

> "This dark old St. Peter has a fierce and ugly scowl, saint though he be," [said Walter] . . . . "He troubles me. But the Virgin looks kindly at us."
>
> "Yes; but very sorrowfully, methinks," said Elinor.
>
> The easel stood beneath these . . . old pictures, sustaining one that had been recently commenced. After a little inspection, they began to recognize the features of their own minister, the Rev. Dr. Colman, growing into shape and life, as it were, out of a cloud.
>
> "Kind old man!" exclaimed Elinor. "He gazes at me as if he were about to utter a word of paternal advice."
>
> "And at me," said Walter, "as if he were about to shake his head and rebuke me for some suspected iniquity. But so does the original. I shall never feel quite comfortable under his eye till we stand before him to be married."

Nothing in Hawthorne's manner of relating this incident justifies

[15] Although those friends of Walter and Elinor who were "people of natural sensibility" speculated endlessly on the meaning of the portraits, scrutinizing them "like the pages of a mystic volume," they were unable to agree on their significance. The failure of this group to act upon the artist's revelation was due to their lacking a full comprehension of his meaning. One person among them, however, seems to have understood it: announcing "that both these pictures were parts of one design, and that the melancholy strength of feeling, in Elinor's countenance, bore reference to the more vivid emotion, or, as he termed it, the wild passion, in that of Walter . . . he even began a sketch, in which the action of the two figures was to correspond with their mutual expression." However, like Elinor, he failed to act on this perception, perhaps because of the inherent weakness that causes men to reject the truth of an unpleasant revelation.

our deducing that Elinor's vision is true and Walter's, false. In fact, when we consider Hawthorne's treatment of Elinor's intuitions, we find that he seems to imply that she is sensitive to psychological suggestion. At the opening of the story, we are told that Elinor has only suspected a strangeness in Walter: she was once frightened by a look—a look which does not reappear upon his face until she sees it again in the completed portrait. After her horrified examination of the portrait, her frame of mind is such that, by the time the artist shows her the crayon sketch, she has been psychologically conditioned to accept the dark prophecy of her future. Her growing melancholy may, therefore, be easily attributed to the suggestion which he planted in her mind.

Elinor, however, is passive; she does nothing to bring about the artist's prophecy, except in so far as her melancholy may have the natural effect of increasing Walter's moroseness. It is Walter, the active member of the pair, whose behavior, it is to be expected, will demonstrate most forcibly the painter's influence, if any influence he have. The lack of sensitive perception in Walter, combined with his susceptibility to superstitious belief, predisposes him to accept the old wives' report that once the painter "has got possession of a person's face and figure, he may paint him in any act or situation whatever—and the picture will be prophetic." Therefore, if Walter saw the crayon sketch, which the artist intended for the eyes of Elinor alone—and here, characteristically, Hawthorne leaves the matter in doubt[16]—its effect may have been so great that he was unconsciously forced to consummate the action therein depicted.

The progress of the narrative sustains the validity of this psychological interpretation of the tale. Elinor, who understands the spiritual basis of the artist's prophecy, grows daily in resemblance to her portrait; Walter, who cannot comprehend the artistic ideal, accepts the future certainty of the culminating physical act alone and does not grow to resemble his portrait until the moment when he raises his knife to perform that act. At the same moment the painter, who has just appeared in the open door, cries, " 'Hold,

[16] Hawthorne's account of the situation is this: "Turning from the table, [Elinor] . . . perceived that Walter had advanced near enough to have seen the sketch, though she could not determine whether it had caught his eye."

madman!' " and Walter subsides into passivity, muttering, " 'Does Fate impede its own decree?' " This half-mad mutter tells us that Walter, at least, regards the artist as the agent of destiny and that he has acted on an impulse to fulfil the fate that was pronounced upon him.

Although Walter's identification of the artist with destiny may be dismissed as the irrational fancy of a disordered mind, the plausibility of the idea is strengthened by its having already suggested itself to the painter. After entering the house, as he approached the room in which he knew the portraits hung, he "seemed to hear the step of Destiny approaching behind him, on its progress towards its victims. A strange thought darted into his mind. Was not his own the form in which that destiny had embodied itself, and he a chief agent of the coming evil which he foreshadowed?"

Then, when he steps between Walter and his victim, he seems to be the embodiment of their fate: "He had advanced from the door, and interposed himself between the wretched beings, with the same sense of power to regulate their destiny as to alter a scene upon the canvas. He stood like a magician, controlling the phantoms which he had evoked."

Despite these strong suggestions of the fatality of artistic powers, a close reading of the text will show that both the painter and Walter are deluded: the artist is not the agent of destiny among mankind. His power to arrest Walter's hand is proof enough that the murder was not preordained. It does, however, indicate that his skill in probing his subjects' hearts, coupled with their own natural dispositions, caused Walter and Elinor to act the parts which he envisioned for them, and that the capacity for patient suffering in Elinor and the capacity for criminal madness in Walter are indeed the essence of their souls.

III

This consideration of "The Prophetic Pictures" explains, I believe, the ambivalence of Hawthorne's attitude towards the artist. Hawthorne's artist exists, perforce, on two levels: the human level, where, unless he moves in the special circumstances of an Owen Warland, he needs must associate with his fellow-beings; and the

absolute level, where he acts as a godlike creator, calling forms out of nothingness into a life that is "at once earthy and immortal."

On the absolute level the artist partakes of the eternal vision, where truth has an organic unity outside of time. The painter, therefore, was able to capture the essential spirit of his subjects, and for this reason his portraits had an ideal validity that the flesh denied: "paradoxically, the originals hardly resembled themselves so strikingly as the portraits did." Because his "prophetic pictures" represented the ideal Walter and the ideal Elinor, they were true to the lovers, even though they may not have been factually accurate in the frame-reference of time. Their ideal truth is, of course, the important truth, because to Hawthorne spiritual life is the reality, whereas physical life is insubstantial,[17] nor does a man "cease to be a sinner because, through circumstances or cowardice, he does not act upon his impulses."[18]

"The Prophetic Pictures" shows that there is a paradox of truth and falsehood within the artist himself. His vision, which is valid among the absolutes of the ideal level, is ironically invalid on the lower human level among the accidents of matter. Just as ethics among mankind is relative, so is truth, and the man who is a murderer in his soul is not tried in court unless he becomes a murderer in deed. The painter may, therefore, be guilty of having led Walter into active, social evil: although on the absolute plane, Walter was unquestionably a murderous madman, he might not have tried to realize his crime, had not the true nature of his soul been revealed to him by the artist. In other words, Hawthorne implies, the artist's vision—absolute truth—is too bright for the eyes of most men; instead of lighting the obscurities of this world, it is apt to blind its beholders, causing them to blunder into crimes which seem the inspiration of devilish powers.

As long as the artist concerns himself with humanity, his position will be ambiguous, for in him there is the dichotomy of absolute good and relative evil. The truths which he reveals to the world, even with intentions as laudable as those that motivated the painter to try to save Elinor from an unhappy fate, may harm, rather than

[17] Matthiessen, *op. cit.*, p. 241.
[18] Austin Warren, *Rage for Order: Essays in Criticism* (Chicago, 1948), p. 91.

help, mankind; for the artist, who lives his real life in the realm of the absolute, is as incapable of understanding humanity as humanity is incapable of understanding him and his vision. This is clear from the last question which the painter asks of Elinor and her last reply:

> "Wretched lady!" said the painter, "did I not warn you?"
>
> "You did," replied Elinor, calmly, as her terror gave place to the quiet grief which it had disturbed. "But—I love him!"

In these few sentences is revealed the unbridgeable abyss between the cold demands of absolute values and the warm compromises of human affection.

The ambiguity of Hawthorne's artist in society is unresolved at the end of "The Prophetic Pictures" and seems to be unresolvable. In an explicit moral at the conclusion of the tale, Hawthorne himself makes a hasty and unsatisfying evaluation of the problem: that, since the lessons of art are universally unheeded, the dichotomy of good and evil in the artist need not trouble us:

> Is there not [he says] a deep moral in the tale? Could the result of one, or all our deeds, be shadowed forth and set before us, some would call it Fate, and hurry onward, others be swept along by their passionate desires, and none be turned aside by the PROPHETIC PICTURES.

That Hawthorne does not seriously intend this somewhat offhand statement to be considered the true "deep moral" of the tale is evident, I believe, when we remark his concern throughout the story with analyzing the nature of the artist, as well as the effect of art in the world. It seems, rather, an admission of his inability to resolve satisfactorily the problem which he posed for himself at the beginning of the tale: the reconciliation between the spiritual nature of artistic creation and the evil which may result from it.