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# Science and Art in Hawthorne's "The Birth-mark"

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MOST students of Hawthorne recognize the principal position of "The Birthmark" in *Mosses from an Old Manse*. Yet they have not fully considered the implications of its underlying philosophy for many of the social and ethical concerns that dominate his canon and, importantly, for his aesthetic. Generally, critics have restricted their consideration to the following issues: whether Aylmer is a failed humanitarian or a callous scientist who, like Chillingworth and Ethan Brand, values head more than heart; whether the story illustrates, perhaps allegorically, a conflict between science and religion; whether Aylmer is a misogynist who, as Hawthorne did, fears sexuality. Although some critics have asserted that Aylmer is a "scholar-idealist" and a "refraction of the artistic nature,"[1] terms to which Randall Stewart and F. O. Matthiessen gave currency, none has offered an extensive study of the precise manner in which his ambition and methods are those of the artist. This essay contends that Aylmer is indeed a type of the romantic artist, and it indicates those components of the Neoplatonic theory of



[1]See, for example, David Baxter, " 'The Birthmark' in Perspective," *Nathaniel Hawthorne Journal 1975* (Englewood, Colo.: Microcard Edition Books, 1975), pp. 232–40; Richard P. Adams, "Hawthorne: The Old Manse Period," *Tulane Studies in English*, 8 (1958), 130; and Millicent Bell, *Hawthorne's View of the Artist* (New York: New York State Univ. Press, 1962), pp. 182–85.

art that Hawthorne here examines from an ethical and an aesthetic perspective.

The evolution of the story's germinal ideas as revealed in his notebooks not only places its central concern in a context that is relevant to aesthetic pursuits but also defines the moral judgment that determines action and tone. Accepting the premise that the artistry of nature, regardless of the apparent coarseness and lack of finish that some products may exhibit, is superior to the artistry of humanity because nature "works from the innermost germ," Hawthorne was initially critical of any discontent with the quantity and quality of nature's bounty.[2] "Those who are very difficult in choosing wives," he wrote, "seem as they would take none of Nature's ready-made articles, but want a woman manufactured purposely to their order" (p. 26). The same premise, I believe, at least partiallly governs another entry: "A person to be in the possession of something as perfect as mortal man has a right to demand; he tries to make it better, and ruins it entirely:—For instance, a noble mansion, and in his attempts to improve it, he causes it to fall to the ground" (p. 56). Like the first germ, this one also implies that while humanity may intuit perfections that transcend existence, humanity must shape its aspirations in terms of the decreed conditions of existence, which is unalterably imperfect. Disregard of the decree, then, leads to deserved loss.

Hawthorne refines the questing spirit and the moral issue implicit in the previous entries when, in a third, he directly pits humanity against nature: "A person to spend all his life and splendid talents in trying to achieve something naturally impossible—as to make a conquest over nature—" (p. 56). The quest is now explicitly illicit, for the radical seeker pursues an object that lies in a realm upon which humanity should not intrude. The final germ, however, defends aspirations toward qualities that nature, fallen, does not provide: "A person to be the death of his beloved, in trying to raise her to more than mortal perfection; yet this should be comfort to him, for having aimed so highly and holily" (p. 86). Hawthorne, usually condemnatory of excesses and most often an

[2]*Hawthorne's Lost Notebook 1835–1841.* Transcript and preface by Barbara S. Mouffe. (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1978), p. 47. Subsequent references to this edition appear in the text.

advocate of guarded capitulation to the essential imperfection of actuality, lauds pursuit of illicit beauty even as he notices the price that nature relentlessly exacts.[3]

When he composed the fiction six years after recording its moral core, Hawthorne had had a great deal of exposure to the doctrines of the New England transcendentalists, who may have been responsible for Aylmer's metaphysical dualism and, more particularly, his radical idealism. For his seeker Hawthorne fabricated a scientist and a Neoplatonist who, believing that spirit inheres in matter, which may lead to if not become pure spirit, quests in the narrative present for ideal beauty. The object of his quest permits an equation of his activities and those of the Neoplatonic artist. Few readers have judged Aylmer a genuine idealist in part because his conduct is that of a proud and obsessed scientist whose single goal is to conquer nature. The dramatized character is in almost diametric opposition to the import of the allegorical polarization of Aminadab and Aylmer, of Georgiana's response to records of her husband's previous experiments, and of narrative claims. But the discord between what Aylmer does and what the narrator and Georgiana tell us about him is problematic only if one follows traditional criticism and delimits the primary concern of the fiction to a conflict between head and heart or inhuman science and compassionate humanity.[4] This re-

[3]Some scholars accept the following entry, Hawthorne's summary of Combe's quotation of Pinel, as a germ of "The Birth-mark": "a young man of great talents and profound knowledge of chemistry, who had in view some new discovery of importance. In order to put his mind into the highest possible activity, he shut himself up, for several successive days, and used various methods of excitement; he had a singing girl with him; he drank spirits; smelled penetrating odors, sprinkled cologne-water round the room, &c &c. Eight days thus passed, when he was seized with a fit of frenzy, which terminated in Mania" (*The American Notebooks,* ed. Claude M. Simpson. Vol. 8 in *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne,* ed. William Charvat, et al. [Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1972], pp. 235–36). I reject this entry as a source of thematic and moral core because it provides methodology and setting only.

[4]Among these who approach the work traditonally are James E. Miller, Jr., "Hawthorne and Melville: The Unpardonable Sin," *PMLA,* 70 (1955), 91–114; W. R. Thompson, "Aminadab in Hawthorne's 'The Birthmark,' " *Modern Language Notes,* 70 (1955), 413–15; and Terence Martin, *Nathaniel Hawthorne* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1965), pp. 68–70. Scholars who break from tradition and view Aylmer sympathetically include Thomas F. Walsh, Jr., "Character Complexity in Hawthorne's 'The Birthmark,' " *Emerson Society Quarterly,* no. 23 (2nd quarter

strictive focus should force one to say—and no one has said—that Hawthorne failed to give Aylmer the qualities that Georgiana and the narrator attribute to him and that he failed to construct an action appropriate to the complexities of the preconceived moral judgment that he introduces into the fiction.

Should the reader emphasize Aylmer's Neoplatonism and his quest for ideal beauty, the disjunction between drama and assertion assumes a thematic function: it is Hawthorne's means to test the *modus operandi* and values of the ideal artist. One need not reduce the story to a well-wrought allegory to perceive in it an inconclusive appraisal of several aspects of the aesthetic that assumed increasing importance for Hawthorne during the 1840s. He initiated with "The Birth-mark" a series of fictions that explore the social, aesthetic, and moral assets and liabilities of the Neoplatonic artist. In this first knowledgeable and sustained study of the transcendental aesthetic, Hawthorne juxtaposes its goal and method against his conception of humankind and his ethic, and he finds no synthesis because the very quest for more than mortal beauty ironically releases the mortal flaws of the finite artist. Even as he sanctions the original object of the scientific artist's endeavors and condemns Aminadab's triumphant mockery, Hawthorne cannot embrace Neoplatonic art although its potential to render a perceptually monistic universe and thereby to satisfy human spirituality appeals to him.

Regardless of his radical objective and method, after his marriage Aylmer is an Owen Warland, an artist of the beautiful for whom science is ostensibly a means to "ideal loveliness," the "per-

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1961), 12–15, and Alfred S. Reid, "Hawthorne's Humanism: 'The Birthmark' and Sir Kenelm Digby," *American Literature*, 38 (1966), 337–51. Along with Reid, R. B. Heilman, "Hawthorne's 'The Birthmark': Science as Religion," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 48 (1949), 575–83, and Thomas F. Scheer, "Aylmer's Divine Roles in 'The Birthmark,'" *American Transcendental Quarterly*, 22 (Spring 1974), 108, center on a relatively conventional interplay of science and religion, and their readings disclose still other reasons to praise or condemn the protagonist. Least traditional in their psychosexual interpretations, which tend to condemn Aylmer, are Simon O. Lesser, *Fiction and the Unconscious* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), pp. 87–90; Frederick C. Crews, *The Sins of the Fathers: Hawthorne's Psychological Themes* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), pp. 111, 125, 156–57; and Jules Zanger, "Speaking of the Unspeakable: Hawthorne's 'The Birthmark,'" *Modern Philology*, 80 (1983), 364–71.

fect idea," "the infinite."[5] Several explicit references to the conventional material and forms of sculpture make him a type of the artist who strives to hypostasize his vision of supernal beauty. Aylmer compares himself to Pygmalion and thus casts Georgiana as his Galatea;[6] the narrative voice compares the birthmark to a bas-relief and to the blue veins of marble. Further, for Hawthorne, as for many scholars of the nineteenth century, there was no clear demarcation between the activities of medieval alchemists and the activities of post-Copernican experimental scientists. He notes quite rightly that the *Transactions of the Royal Society*, replete with "wonders" that reveal a credulity equal to that of the Middle Ages, are "hardly less curious and imaginative" than the tomes of Albertus Magnus, Cornelius Agrippa, Paracelsus, and Roger Bacon. These works he judges to be "full of romance and poetry" (p. 48). Seeking "the region of miracle," post-Copernican scientists, like the alchemists, employ the precise faculties that artists exercise: the higher intellect or intuitive faculty, the imagination, the heart. Hawthorne even more explicitly establishes a rapprochement between art and Aylmer's science through a display of optical phenomena that evidences a harmonious interaction of Aylmer's logical and imaginative faculties: "Airy figures, absolutely bodiless ideas, and forms of unsubstantial beauty, came and danced before [Georgiana], imprinting their momentary footsteps on beams of light" (p. 44). A series of idealized mimetic images follows this exhibition.

The scientist, of course, is not precisely an artist, and the difference between their methodologies and ends enables Hawthorne to dramatize forcefully those human factors that pervert the ideals of Neoplatonic art. Aylmer, more consistently the aesthetic scientist than the scientific aesthete even after his marriage, directs his attention to processes and compounds that have no obvious relation to an immediate spiritual end: the abortive daguerreotype, the rapidly germinating plant that a single touch

[5]"The Birth-mark," *Mosses From an Old Manse*. In Vol. 10 of *The Centenary Edition*, pp. 38, 52, 49. Further references to this edition will appear in the text.

[6]Robert D. Arner ("The Legend of Pygmalion in 'The Birthmark,'" *American Transcendental Quarterly*, 14 [Spring 1972], 168–71) persuasively argues that the mythical sculptor provides the basic structure, the central symbol, and the ironic dimension of Hawthorne's fiction.

blights, the cosmetic lotion, the potent perfume and poison. His early study of fountains, mines, volcanoes, clouds, and human physiology was equally empirical and materialistic, and, significantly, it aimed for knowledge of "the elemental powers of nature" (p. 42) so that he could utilize its laws, which Hawthorne does not distinguish from the laws of God.[7] However, the narrative voice deliberately underplays empiricism to the advantage of the scientist's Neoplatonism. When Aylmer loses sight of the ideal beauty that he tries to objectify, the narrator and Georgiana, rather than addressing his perverted ambition and perverse attitudes, reverently inform us that all of his studies appertain to divine absolutes. His folio is

> both the history and emblem of his ardent, ambitious, imaginative, yet practical and laborious, life. He handled physical details, as if there were nothing beyond them; yet spiritualized them all, and redeemed himself from materialism, by his strong and eager aspiration towards the infinite. In his grasp, the veriest clod of earth assumed a soul. . . . Much as he had accomplished . . . his most splendid successes were almost invariably failures, if compared with the ideal at which he aimed. . . . The volume . . . was the sad confession, and continual exemplification, of the short-comings of the composite man—the spirit burthened with clay and working in matter—and of the despair that assails the higher nature, at finding itself so miserably thwarted by the earthly part. (p. 49)

Precisely because Aylmer is "a man of science" (p. 36), be his science ever so imaginative, and a lover of the beautiful, he is well

[7]Although he has sought to control nature through mastery of its creative process, Aylmer has been morally responsive to its authority. He believes that formulas for the universal solvent and for an elixir of life may be discovered. Nevertheless, he tells Georgiana, his respect for knowledge as knowledge and for the harmony of nature would prohibit his employing them. This implicit sacramental view of nature corresponds to his view of the ideal. Critics tend to disregard his worship of the absolute and to condemn Aylmer's efforts by appealing to the precise Judeo-Christian values that inhere in his regard for absolutes. Randall Stewart, for instance, judges Aylmer a doctrinaire perfectionist who is "ambitious for success and fame in his profession" and guilty of usurping God's authority. Stewart suspects that any grief that Aylmer may experience at the end of the story is less for the death of his wife, who puts "in mortal man a trust which belongs to God alone," than for his failed experiment (*American Literature and Christian Doctrine* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1958], pp. 79–80). See Edward S. Van Winkle, "Aminadab, the Unwitting 'Bad Anima,' " *American Notes and Queries*, 8 (1970), 131–33.

adapted to Hawthorne's juxtaposition of matter and spirit, time and eternity, pure intellect and intuition, the profane and the holy—each of which enters into the transcendental aesthetic.

Appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, then, we are to view science as a means to those absolutes to which Aylmer is totally devoted. His marriage furthers his quest in that it unites his love of his wife and his devotion to ultimates, which is responsive to Georgiana's perfect spirituality and to her near-perfect physicality. If prior to his marriage he quested for undefined ideal entities, his love for his wife so subsumes and gains strength from his love of science that he now strives to objectify a defined spiritual principle. Wedded to a woman who inspires a vision of ideal beauty, he becomes a romantic artist "the whole value of whose existence" is dependent on his successfully utilizing all of his achieved knowledge—"the thoughts of years" (p. 54)—to hypostasize his highest conception: the perfect idea of holy love that is inseparable from the perfect idea of divine beauty. This first transcendentally worthy search prompts him, before he begins the corrective procedure, to tell Georgiana that she has led him "deeper than ever into the heart of science" (p. 41). Like the model who inspires Drowne with the skills necessary to sculpture his masterpiece, Georgiana also inspires Aylmer to acquire the knowledge that he needs to effect the embodiment of his vision.

Although his pathological reaction to the minute mark (Aylmer confesses soon after his marriage that he does not know whether the mark is a charm or a defect) may, for some critics, signal no more than a morbid fastidiousness that wrongly undervalues Georgiana's sprituality, it actually underscores Aylmer's uncompromising commitment to the "more than mortal perfection" of the eternal, which the enthusiast wishes to bestow on humanity. Her coming "so nearly perfect from the hand of Nature," his thirsting spirit, and his confidence in his skills motivate his attempt to remove the mark so "that the world might possess one living specimen of ideal loveliness, without the semblance of a flaw" (pp. 37, 38).[8] Desirous too of an altar to supernal beauty, the artist will

[8]A further clue to Aylmer's valuation of the birthmark appears in "The Christmas Banquet," in which one of the most miserable of people is a woman "who had fallen short of absolute and perfect beauty, merely by the trifling defect of a

not accept less than everything. Georgiana lauds the nobility of his refusal to compromise:

> Her heart exulted, while it trembled, at his honorable love, so pure and lofty that it would accept nothing less than perfection, nor miserably make itself contented with an earthlier nature than he had dreamed of. She felt how much more precious was such a sentiment, than that meaner kind which would have borne with the imperfection for her sake, and have been guilty of treason to holy love, by degrading its perfect idea to the level of the actual. (p. 52)

More responsive to his superhuman commitment than she is to the ideal, she resolves to "satisfy [the] highest and deepest conception" of a man whose "spirit was ever on the march—ever ascending—and each instant required something that was beyond the scope of the instant before" (p. 52).

Scholars who notice Georgiana's worshipful submission to her supposedly manipulative husband do not credit her definition and estimation of his objective. Yet the portrayal of Aminadab and the narrative commentary validate her perception. Aminadab's height and bulk, his shaggy hair and smoke-begrimed face, his coarse and triumphant laughter are the brutish extremes that sanction Aylmer's extreme, which is the only compelling alternative that the story offers after Hawthorne dismisses off-stage admirers who react reasonably to Georgiana's flawed beauty and before he presents a moralistic interpretation as the conclusion of the fiction. Morally stronger than either these critics or Aylmer realize, Georgiana calmly and knowingly accepts her husband's point of view. Doing so, she endorses Aylmer's and the narrator's original protest against existence, which she, Aylmer, and the narrator judge according to their intuition of the ideal.

She first consents to removal of the birthmark simply to secure her sanity and Aylmer's peace. But she awakens to the limits of existence and becomes as discontent as her husband with actuality: "Life is but a sad possession to those who have attained

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slight cast in her left eye. But this blemish, minute as it was, so shocked the pure ideal of her soul, rather than her vanity, that she passed her life in solitude, and veiled her countenance even from her own gaze" (*Mosses From an Old Manse,* p. 289).

precisely the degree of moral advancement at which I stand. Were I weaker and blinder, it might be happiness. Were I stronger, it might be endured hopefully. But, being what I find myself, methinks I am of all mortals the most fit to die" (p. 53). This statement, a variation of Aylmer's recognition of her near perfection, implies that she too sees the birthmark as a symbol of the fatal flaw that is antipathetic to the proper perfection for which the spirit thirsts. The narrator's scorn for Aminadab, his recognition of the impediments to spiritual gratification, and, of course, the philosophical posture of the conclusion—all validate Georgiana's perception of Aylmer's objective.

The Neoplatonist, then, aims "highly and holily"—only to profane his quest almost from the moment that he conceives of it. The negative elements and consequences of human attempts to embody the infinite begin to emerge soon after Aylmer becomes fully aware of and assigns meaning to the birthmark. A fallible seeker of the infallible, he cannot sustain the intially selfless and worthy motive—worship of divine beauty, a specimen of which he wishes to bestow on humanity—that is rooted in humility before the transcendent and in a fundamentally noble conception of human potential and worth. Hawthorne is as ardently critical of the artist's approach to creativity as he is defensive of the artist's desire to realize the envisioned ideal. Hawthorne conveys his negative reaction through dramatization.

Anticipating Septimius Felton's rebellion against death's degradation of humanity, Aylmer renders the birthmark "the symbol of his wife's liability to sin, sorrow, decay, and death," an expression of "the ineludible gripe, in which mortality clutches the highest and purest of earthly mould, degrading them into kindred with the lowest, and even with the very brutes, like whom their visible frames return to dust" (p. 39). Blinded by this affront to humanity, he does not heed his acknowledgement of the indelibility of the fatal flaw. He casuistically interprets its import in a manner that will permit him to conquer nature and create a living and holy artifact. The birthmark, he reasons, testifies to *either* the temporality and finitude of nature's creatures *or* the painful toil required to effect their perfection. Temporality and finitude, in this context, are not the logical opposites of painful toil that Aylmer makes them. The specious opposition, however, allows him

to find in nature a justification for using his science to acquire an absolute that nurtures spirit. At this point the pure vision and the (illicit) quest begin to separate, and Aylmer appropriates full responsibility for his *modus operandi.*

His unguided fallibility quickly erodes his noble posture, for he is far from disinterested and dispassionate. None of Poe's maniacs is more obsessed than Aylmer, whose morbid imagination reifies the woman whom he would deify. Erroneously concentrating her totality in the horror-inspiring birthmark, he delusively believes that fidelity to holy love and to unflawed beauty is the sole cause of his discontent. His haunted imagination, however, reveals an overriding concern. When Georgiana reminds him of a dream in which he inexorably determines to remove the mark at the cost of her life, he becomes conscious "of the tyrannizing influence acquired by one idea over his mind, and of the lengths which he might find in his heart to go, for the sake of giving himself peace" (p. 40). His psyche and his imagination thus distorted, he elevates peace over the realization of human potential; he allows selfish desire for serenity to displace altruistic bestowal on humanity of a specimen of supreme beauty; he gives more weight to the symbol of imperfection than to the platonic idea. The fallibility of the finite spirit, Hawthorne reasons, may corrupt the unadulterated motive force on which the transcendental aesthetic is predicated. The transcendentalists, of course, recognized that the inspired artist could not concretize pure vision, that the artifact is not free of the medium through which it is channeled. More pessimistic than they, Hawthorne questions whether pure vision is a major inspiration of artistic creativity, whether the artist's creative urge is unavoidably profaned prior to the creative act.

Aylmer further sullies his originally humanistic protest against the essence of existence when he deliberately places himself in an adversary relation to nature. He unqualifiedly accepts the Emersonian notion that nature is subservient to humankind, whose will may be imposed upon it, and mistakenly divorces nature from the infinite, of which it is a reflection and to which it is a means. He works not with but rather against the creative force.

During an early study of the physical and spiritual media through which the life force produced humanity, he reluctantly recognized that "our great creative Mother . . . permits us indeed, to mar, but seldom to mend, and, like a jealous patentee, on no account to make" (p. 42). As if this earlier recognition of nature's secrecy had been an erroneous perception, the erstwhile scientist now applies a strictly empirical methodology to a partially non-empirical enterprise. Without full knowledge of its essence and methods, and ignorant of the full meaning of the birthmark (the essential and necessary imperfection that bonds body and spirit), he pits his intellect against nature and tries to subvert it. As he unabashedly tells Georgiana, he has engaged in "thought which might almost have enlightened me to create a being less perfect than yourself" (p. 41). While he does not attempt the homunculus, he is confident that he can correct nature's imperfection. His intellectual pride, which prohibits appropriate humility before and cooperation with nature and the transcendent, dooms him to pay dearly for his success.

Aylmer opposes himself also to the equivalent of his aesthetic material, Georgiana herself. Although "Drowne's Wooden Image," composed after "The Birth-mark," is Hawthorne's first full exploration of an artist's medium, "Passages from a Relinquished Work" (1834) indicates his consistently held belief that aesthetic materials are organic. The young Story Teller and Drowne, an artisan-turned-artist, respect the demands of the potent and autonomous material that will substantiate their fluid preconceptions in a form that the material influences. Aylmer, to be sure, is cognizant of Georgiana's spiritual perfection and of her minutely flawed physical beauty, yet he is well into the transformation before he gains knowledge of her character. He recognizes her moral strength and fearlessness only when his wife protests his concealment of the threat to her life. "My noble wife," he responds, "I knew not the height and depth of your nature, until now" (p. 51).

A disturbing fact is that Georgiana does not actively assert her autonomy and thus requires nothing of the artist except regard for her physical attractiveness, with which the result of the

eradication is congruent. Strongly sensing that the mark signifies an inextricable part of her essence, she suggestively questions the wisdom of destroying it:

> "I know not what may be the cost to both of us, to rid me of this fatal birth-mark. Perhaps its removal may cause cureless deformity. Or, it may be, the stain goes as deep as life itself. Again, do we know that there is a possibility, on any terms, of unclasping the firm gripe of this little Hand, which was laid upon me before I came into the world?" (p. 41)

Despite the wisdom of the last query especially, Georgiana, whose morale Aylmer's monomania has undermined, too readily abets his disregard for the demands of her constitution—imperfection—and too readily surrenders to imposition of a preconception that is not organic to existence. Compelled to preserve her own and her husband's sanity, she permits Aylmer to create the equivalent of a mechanical art object. Her later intuition of a discord between her moral stature and existence is an effectual endorsement of Aylmer's endeavors. The endorsement, however, can in no way alter the inorganic relation between preconception and "aesthetic material."

Hawthorne implies here and elsewhere that full knowledge of another's nature is not a necessary condition of proper regard for the sanctity of his or her being. Like Giovanni, who eventually limits Beatrice's selfhood to her poisonous body, Aylmer profanely circumscribes Georgiana's selfhood to her physicality—more precisely, to her marred cheek. No longer mindful of other qualities that symbolize the absolute, as he guides her to the chambers in which he will re-create that ideal he observes the highlighted mark and suffers "a strong convulsive shudder" (p. 43). Later when he impulsively kisses the defect, his spirit recoils. In spite of the obvious distance between Aylmer's spirituality and the unmitigated corporeality of Aminadab, Aylmer is here a materialist who ironically holds in disdain the very medium upon which the ideal is dependent. He is at odds with the material that is to make the absolute available for sensory perception. The implication of his attitude surfaces in a comparison with Drowne's attitude toward the block of oak that contains his masterpiece and Kenyon's interaction with the clay that becomes a bust of Dona-

tello. Hawthorne, fabricating radically organic aesthetic materials—Georgiana is, after all, a human being—for a romantic artist, is at this point in his career most suspicious of an aesthetic that defines the creative process as an interaction between artist and organic material. Although we are told that Aylmer handles material objects in a manner that spiritualizes them, we are also told that Aminadab, his "man of clay" and "human machine," his cloddish "earthly mass," executes all of his experiments (pp. 51, 55). Aylmer's often intense disdain of matter forces the reader to question his capacity to penetrate seemingly opaque material to discern its essence, which is related to transcendent forms.

Thus alienated from nature and from Georgiana, the scientific artist in his laboratory tries to mediate between spirit and matter so that the result will, as Neoplatonic art should, reconcile humanity to temporal existence. However, his hostility toward matter, his lack of interest in Georgiana's physical and spiritual welfare, and his disregard for those faculties that must be brought to bear upon attempts to capture the transcendent further profane his labor. Hawthorne does not specifically make the Coleridgean distinction between fancy and imagination; however, his limiting the exercise of Aylmer's imagination to trivial creations (optical illusions) that are by-products of a search for profounder wisdom constitutes yet another reason to challenge the claims of the romantic aesthetic. Similarly, the employment of merely empirical means to realize a perceived absolute calls into question the efficacy of the intuitive faculty.

The separation of the laboratory and the boudoir in which Aylmer sequesters Georgiana symbolizes the fallacious separation of intellect from imagination and the intuitive faculty. The decorated chamber is, I believe, an emblem of the fatal lure of the beautiful that his marriage effects. For prior to wedlock the man who now believes that an aspect of nature is perfectible was content to inhabit the dingy and barren apartments that he converts into fantastically elegant quarters suggestive of those rooms that Poe's heroes inhabit when they give free rein to the imagination. The full curtains that hide straight lines and sharp angles, the perfumed lamps, the "soft, empurpled radiance" that replaces sunshine—all define a realm of enchantment apart from actuality. Georgiana's imagining the chamber "a pavilion among the clouds"

(p. 44) hints at the folly of the artist's insufficient cognizance of actuality. But to enter the self-contained boudoir is, for ill-equipped Aylmer, to withdraw into his imagination in order to formalize supernal beauty. Still, as his optical illusions and other experiments attest, he has not committed himself to the life of the imagination. The majority of his experiments do not admit of intuition and imagination except as alchemy itself is based on them.

The laboratory, with its fiery furnace and soot, its machines and oppressive odors, its unadorned walls, is the realm of the intellect and the empirical in which Aylmer and Aminadab distill concoctions of increasing potency. Because intellect and imagination are not mutually influential, Aylmer reverts in full force to the mere scientist and, in a telling scene, values means as an end. At a crucial point in his distillation of a potentially deadly draft, Georgiana innocently enters the laboratory. Aylmer, verbally and physically violent, dismisses her in part because he fears that the mark will blight his labor. Acting without the guidance of nature, of the divine idea that he wishes to concretize, and of the imagination, acting, in short, without immediate inspiration other than a need to find peace, he is a victim of his emotions and his intellect. The insufficiency of the intellect Hawthorne has shown through allusions that link Aylmer to medieval alchemists and to the Royal Society, through the graphic prefigurative dream, and through the abortive demonstrations designed to entertain Georgiana. Blind to the meaning of his experimental failures, Aylmer erroneously brings only his intellect to bear upon a singly empirical methodology and thus perverts what should be primarily an imaginative, intuitive, and spiritual activity.

After he administers the draft that he believes is efficacious for a human being because it is efficacious for vegetation, Aylmer again displays his insensitivity to the non-empirical. Georgiana offers a rather transparent hint of her fate: "My earthly senses are closing over my spirit, like the leaves round the heart of a rose, at sunset." The narrator implies that the sight of the fading mark is another hint of her death: its disappearance is as awful as its presence. "Watch the stain of the rainbow fading out of the sky," he states, "and you will know how that mysterious symbol passed away" (p. 54). Both cues appeal to a non-logical faculty, and ap-

propriately so in that they refer to cessation of "the mystery of life." Yet Aylmer, the man of intellect, recognizes no mystery despite his flawed idealism. Myopic, he simultaneously delights in his triumph and declares "But she is so pale!" He later notices in Georgiana's eyes "a trouble and anxiety that he could by no means account for" (p. 55).

Georgiana's approbation—"You have aimed loftily!—you have done nobly! Do not repent, that, with so high and pure a feeling, you have rejected the best that earth could offer" (p. 55)—is a fuller statement of the moral judgment articulated in the climactic germinal idea. By contrast, the conclusion discloses Hawthorne's ambivalent attitude toward Aylmer's achievement and loss, an ambivalence that stems from a tenet of his ethic: although humanity is bound to accept the essential conditions of existence, it is also bound to aspire to the conditions of eternity. Yet the two realms are objectively immiscible. Hence Aylmer's loss and hence too the narrator's advice to radical idealists: be content with mere intuition of the absolute and with perceptual transformation of actuality according to the dictates of the ideal. As the narrator puts it, be content "to look beyond the shadowy scope of Time, and living once for all in Eternity, to find the perfect Future in the present" (p. 56). A 9 July 1843 notebook entry, an anniversary letter to his wife, illuminates the link between the temporal and the eternal that Hawthorne presents here. First celebrating their Edenic happiness, Hawthorne offers a prayer: "God bless us and keep us; for there is something more awful in happiness than in sorrow—the latter being earthly and finite, the former composed of the texture and substance of eternity, so that spirits still embodied may well tremble at it."[9] Without condoning Aylmer's methodology and without condemning his aspiration, Hawthorne's narrator laments Aylmer's unwise destruction of "the happiness, which would have woven his mortal life of the selfsame texture with the celestial" (p. 56).

Georgiana's death, then, is not solely a condemnation of the overzealous scientist and the Neoplatonic artist. It is also an indication of the magnitude of the processes and ends of the transcendental aesthetic, which Hawthorne neither denies nor affirms

[9] *The American Notebooks,* ed. Simpson, pp. 390–91.

in part because he too envisioned a dualistic universe and recognized the soul's yearning for the perfect eternal. He sympathizes with Aylmer's quest and defends it against the mockery of Aminadab: "Thus ever does the gross Fatality of Earth exult in its invariable triumph over the immortal essence, which, in this dim sphere of half-development, demands the completeness of a higher state" (p. 56). Apparently Hawthorne would have the artist be a priest to humanity, a mediator between the imperfect realm of time and matter and the perfect realm of the transcendent. He would have the artist provide symbolic altars before which humanity may worship the divine idea.

Yet he is not certain that human faculties can withstand perception of the divine that the artist is to objectify. Although he jokingly calls himself a sorcerer, Aylmer is not misguided when he tells Georgiana that his portfolio contains passages that threaten to destroy his senses and then warns her: "Take heed lest it prove as detrimental to you!" (p. 49). Aylmer's conduct dramatizes Hawthorne's conception of human faculties. All are so limited that Aylmer cannot recognize "the mystery of life," which is not totally distinct from the mystery of nature and of that being to which Neoplatonic art appertains. The victim of intellectual pride mistakenly divorces matter and spirit, judging the former a passively malleable substance upon which he may impose his vision. Seeming to have done so with impunity, he experiences a frenzied ecstasy that is quite opposed to what should be a selfless and awesome surrender to the sacred absolute.

Nor does Hawthorne trust unqualifiedly the moral capacity of the artist, whose composite nature perhaps inevitably perverts the most sacred of aesthetic aspirations. Aylmer's questionable psychological needs so profane his praiseworthy yet misdirected goal that freedom from agonizing monomania becomes more central to his activity than objectification of the ideal loveliness that merits his holy love. At the most critical moment of the transformation, Aylmer agrees to continue not for the sake of transcendent beauty but rather to avoid psychological ruin. His self-serving and generally fallible finitude speaks against the notion that the artist may give form to the infinite.

Fabricating a type of the romantic artist who has radically creative powers that he exercises on radically organic materials,

Hawthorne creates in "The Birth-mark" an extreme situation that bares the fundamentals of the transcendental aesthetic. He questions the concepts of the correspondence between matter and spirit, the malleability of nature, the organicism of aesthetic materials, the authority of the intellect and the imagination, and the nature of the creative process. Importantly, he challenges the morality and mental capacities of the artist, who does not, as Emerson and others thought possible, prove to be a creator in the finite through whom the creative force puts forth nature. His discoveries do not allow Hawthorne, at this point, to endorse the aesthetic that he finds more acceptable in, for instance, "The Artist of the Beautiful" and "The Great Stone Face." His later acceptance is due less to a change in his conception of human nature than to an increasingly sophisticated approach to art.

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