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Speaking of the Unspeakable: Hawthorne's "The Birthmark"

Jules Zanger

Most criticism has accepted the rather forthright and explicit allegorical interpretation of Hawthorne's "The Birthmark" that regards the mark on Georgiana Aylmer's cheek as the external sign of her human, imperfect condition and understands Aylmer's attempt to remove it as the expression of either scientific, rational, reformist presumption, or of too aspiring an idealism.¹ This reading of the tale is suggested by the narrator's comments and supported by similar ideas expressed in other of Hawthorne's works: "Ethan Brand" and "Earth's Holocaust" immediately suggest themselves.

Other interpretations suggest with some plausibility that the theme of the story might be "the ruthless course of the nineteenth century," or the relationship between maturity and immaturity, or that between Platonism and Christian authoritarianism.² These giant steps from particular narrative to universal propositions, appended to the tale like black-letter aphorisms accompanying children's fables, are encouraged, of course, by Hawthorne's narrator's solemn assurance that the tale contains a "deeply impressive moral." Even granting the correctness of these general thematic interpretations of "The Birthmark," I would raise questions having to do with the fictive particulars from which those generalizations are distilled—the dross left behind in the leap to universal abstraction.

Once certain particulars have been identified as the significant ones and incorporated into a general thematic proposition, what shall be done with the leftovers? They can, of course, be regarded as the temporarily indigestible bones and buttons of the tale, awaiting some ultimately corrosive critical formulation to dissolve into general meaning, or they can be simply dismissed as the necessary mechanical adjuncts of verisimilitude having no function beyond propping up those truly significant details—like Jesus' elbows and knees—undoubtedly there, but of no particular significance.

The problem with the thematic approach is that most of the themes extracted from "The Birthmark" are undistinguished truisms and could have been embodied in an endless variety of alternative fictions. Hawthorne, it is conventionally argued, anticipated his story in two quite contradictory entries in *The Notebooks*. These suggest the distance between theme and its concrete realization in the story. In the first entry, he wrote, "A person to be in 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." A refinement of this written two years later reads, "A person to be the death of his beloved in trying to raise her to more than

1/Among the many critics who accept this view, some of the most influential have been Austin Warren, *Nathaniel Hawthorne*, in the American Men of Letters series (New York, 1934), p. 367; Cleanth Brooks, Jr., and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Fiction* (New York, 1943), pp. 104-5; Randall Stewart, *Nathaniel Hawthorne: A Biography* (New Haven, Conn., 1948), p. 249; Edward H. Davidson, in the headnote to "The Birthmark," in *Major Writers of America*, ed. Perry Miller (New York, 1962), 1:730; Arlin Turner, *Nathaniel Hawthorne: A Biography* (New York, 1980), p. 164.

2/See, respectively, W. B. Stein, *Hawthorne's Faust: A Study in the Devil Archetype* (Gainesville, Fla., 1953), p. 91; Melvin W. Askew, "Hawthorne, the Fall, and the Psychology of Maturity," *American Literature* 34 (1962): 335-43; Alfred S. Reid, "Hawthorne's Humanism: 'The Birthmark' and Sir Kenelm Digby," *American Literature* 38 (1966): 337-51.

mortal perfection; yet this should be a comfort to him for having aimed so highly and holily."³ Between the first and the second entry, the "person" has been particularized into man and lover, the "mansion" to be perfected has become "his beloved," and the straightforward disapproval of the first entry has significantly changed. There is nothing in the first statement of the theme that makes inevitable either the second statement, or the final transformation of "person" into Aylmer the scientist/husband or of "his beloved" into Georgiana Aylmer of the marked cheek. Yet, of course, it is precisely in those contingent details of incident, character, and setting—that is, in its representational aspect—that Hawthorne's art lies.

The question "The Birthmark" presents to us might be, How shall we understand Hawthorne's choice to embody his abstract theme in a story about two people who are married and whose whole existence, as far as we are permitted to see it, is represented exclusively within the confines of that marriage? How shall we understand that Hawthorne chose to make Georgiana's imperfection a tiny red hand on her cheek rather than, say, the inability to weep, or eyes of different colors, or a black streak in her otherwise golden hair, or even a hand on her cheek of brown or purple? What is communicated by presenting Aylmer as a sooty scientist rather than an impeccably clean doctor of medicine? How does the abstract theme explain these images; how do the images, regarded in the light of that theme, flesh it out and extend its illumination of the tale?

Such questions of particularity suggest levels of meaning beneath the thematic, meanings that have to do with the images of the story. They lead to questions concerning the reservoirs of real experience, attitude, and valuation the author drew on in making the story. If we accept the formulation that writers write about those aspects of their lives and culture that interest them, they lead necessarily into biographical concerns and onto the queasy ground of unintentional selection. The images that Hawthorne employs in "The Birthmark" reveal his connection with many of the quotidian concerns of the common culture, from popular superstition, to the social dislocations occasioned by industrialization, to the sexual taboos of the time.

Accepting as the general thematic statement of "The Birthmark" the proposition that the tale concerns the striving for perfection beyond the human and the recognition that such striving can be fatal, what seems most immediately evident about this story is that the metaphoric arena selected to dramatize such striving was the marriage union. From the first paragraph, in which Aylmer takes a bride, to the very last, in which he loses her to death, all the incidents and details of the story chronicle for us the decline of a doomed marriage. Unlike the marriage in "Young Goodman Brown," the marriage in "The Birthmark" exists in complete isolation from society, totally filling the screen.

Unlike other Hawthorne characters who must sooner or later come to terms with the world, the Aylmers never leave, indeed, have no existence outside of the laboratory and boudoir that are the physical bounds of their marriage. This

³The first quotation appears in its entirety in *Hawthorne's Lost Notebook, 1835-1841* (University Park, Pa., 1978), p. 56. The second is in Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The American Notebooks*, ed. Claude W. Simpson (Columbus, Ohio, 1972), 8:184.

hermetic marriage is absolutely dominated by Aylmer, who first identifies his wife's birthmark as an imperfection and then, in striving to improve her, kills her. The most telling expression of his dominance is the ease with which he convinces Georgiana, after her momentary futile flush of resistance, that the mark on her cheek, which she, until that time, had regarded as charming, is, indeed, a terrible imperfection, so that she completely accepts his valuation of her. This acceptance suggests dramatically how total is Georgiana's commitment to what J. S. Mill, describing the role of women in the nineteenth century, called the mentality of submission.⁴ But Georgiana is more than the properly submissive wife. Donna Julia, in Byron's *Don Juan*, complains that "man's love is of man's life a thing apart, / 'tis woman's whole existence." By becoming the willing, even enthusiastic subject of his experiment, Georgiana unifies Aylmer's life and his love; she becomes central to his existence rather than "a thing apart."

Aylmer, in turn, may be said to have transformed himself into a perfect, uxorious husband by elevating his wife into a scientific problem to be solved. The result is, if not marital happiness, at least a feverish compatibility, a temporary symbiosis that finally degenerates into vampirism. It is important to recognize, in this regard, that the purity of Aylmer's quest for perfection is seriously compromised by his desperate need for a sustaining success. His experiment with Georgiana is only the climax of a lengthy procession of failures, "as melancholy a record as any mortal hand had ever penned," as Georgiana well knows. His attempt to remove her birthmark is no disinterested esthetic quest; it has much of the desperation of a gambler's last cast. Seen this way, Aylmer may be regarded as related to one of the most influential archetypes of nineteenth-century romanticism—the vampire—sustaining himself as he does on Georgiana's devotion and leaving her, finally, "the crimson tint . . . faded from her cheek," as white as "statuary marble." As is traditional in the vampire myth, the victim has been an active participant in the procedure that destroys her. If we regard vampirism as a metaphor for a relationship in which one partner gains life at the expense of the other, Aylmer and Georgiana's marriage may be described in those terms.⁵

Aylmer's dominance over Georgiana is dramatically particularized in the major settings of the story, the laboratory and the boudoir. At first glance, they appear to suggest the male and female polarities of marriage, but a closer look reveals that they are no such thing: the boudoir, in fact, is little more than an extension of the laboratory, disguised by hangings and colored lights, and both are completely dominated and maintained by Aylmer. In the boudoir Georgiana is enshrined and encapsulated, cut off from sunlight and air, and from reality itself: "Airy figures, absolutely bodiless ideas, and forms of unsubstantial beauty" entertain her in the "magic circle" Aylmer has drawn around her. But if the boudoir is not precisely what it appears to be, neither is the laboratory. The descriptions we are given of Aylmer's projects, of his exercise of "the higher intellect, the

4" "All women are brought up from their earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; not self-will, and government by self-control, but submission and yielding to the control of others" (John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women* [Cambridge, Mass., 1970], p. 16).

5For a discussion of the vampire motif in Hawthorne's works, see James B. Twitchell, *The Living Dead* (Durham, N.C., 1981), pp. 189–90.

imagination, the spirit and even the heart" in "his strong and eager aspiration towards the infinite" do not prepare the reader for the reality of the laboratory, and we are shocked, as is Georgiana, to discover it to be no rarified, book-lined eyrie of the intellect, but what looks remarkably like a nineteenth-century factory:

The first thing that struck her eye was the furnace, that hot and feverish worker, with the intense glow of its fire, which by the quantities of soot clustered above it seemed to have been burning for ages. There was a distilling apparatus in full operation. Around the room were retorts, tubes, cylinders, crucibles, and other apparatus of chemical research. An electric machine stood ready for immediate use. The atmosphere felt oppressively close, and was tainted with gaseous odors which had been tormented forth by the processes of science. The severe and homely simplicity of the apartment, with its naked walls and brick pavement, looked strange accustomed as Georgiana had become to the fantastic elegance of the boudoir.

Furnace, soot, smoke, bricks, stink, and machinery are the particulars, not of Dr. Faustus's study, but of contemporaneous technology, of Dickens's Coketown in *Hard Times*: "It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever." These images of industrialism are further realized in the physical nature of Aylmer, the pale, slender philosopher, and of Aminadab, Aylmer's uncouth, shaggy, brutish "underworker," in whom are objectified the division of roles that is the social product of the factory system. Hawthorne's Aylmer and Aminadab prefigure by a half-century H. G. Wells's creation of the Eloi and the Morlocks, the two "races" generated by industrialization in his *The Time Machine*. This factory/laboratory, with "its naked walls and brick pavement" is the reality that lies beneath the fantasy, the "pavilion in the clouds," that is the boudoir. By placing Coketown and cloud pavilion literally under the same roof and next door to each other, Hawthorne has erased the physical and social distance that conventionally separates the genteel lady from the noxious factory and disguises their organic relationship and the dependence of one upon the other.

Hawthorne's particularizing of his theme—the futility of striving for perfection—looks toward and links together two conventionally distinct areas of human experience, marriage and technology, and employs them as what might be called reciprocal metaphors. Marriage is, of course, the primary metaphor used to embody and illuminate the "impressive moral" of the tale. But this moral—the theme of the dangers of seeking for unattainable perfection—can also be regarded as illuminating Hawthorne's attitude toward marriage—particularly in light of the fact that he had been married barely six months at the time of the story's publication. In the same way, the theme of the futility of supernal striving, which is made vivid by images taken from contemporary technology, in turn suggests Hawthorne's own skeptical perception of America's faith in technology and industrialization and especially in the machine as an instrument of transcendence.

It is in the context of the marriage metaphor that the mark on Georgiana's cheek is most richly revealed. It is called, at various times in the story, a "crimson stain," a "crimson hand," and, most strikingly, a "bloody hand." This mark, we

are told, is "the bond by which angelic spirit kept itself in union with a mortal frame." In breaking this bond, Aylmer violates not merely the marriage injunction, by putting asunder what God had joined together, but also denies the original unifying act that was creation: "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." Of this primal birth, the hand is the divine signature, the mark of the hand of the maker. Hawthorne further identifies this divine sign when he links it to another signature of divinity, comparing the fading of the crimson hand from Georgiana's cheek with "the stain of the rainbow fading out of the sky."

The mark is identified with blood directly by kennings and indirectly by its linkage to the flush of blood in Georgiana's cheeks "when she blushes or grows angry." Both F. C. Crews and Simon Lesser, in rather conventional Freudian interpretations, identify the birthmark with Georgiana's sexuality,⁶ but neither makes any attempt to relate the particularity of the image to that theme. I suggest that the image of the bloody stain on Georgiana's cheek has its source in Hawthorne's recent marriage, in the intimacy that marriage permitted him with Sophie, his wife, and in his consequent direct exposure to menstruation as an element in the sexual life of marriage. In this regard it should be observed that Aylmer is disturbed by Georgiana's birthmark only after they are married.

Menstruation in nineteenth-century America was perhaps the best kept secret of sexual life for the male half of the population, especially among the upper classes, where a degree of personal privacy was possible. Pornography avoided the subject altogether, and health and marriage manuals ignored it, or treated it so euphemistically as to make it even more mysterious than it was otherwise.⁷ The young man who had acquired some sexual experience in the brothel or with some compliant young woman would have still remained remarkably innocent of menstruation. There undoubtedly existed a body of male folklore on the subject, but, by its nature, it remained unrecorded. We can assume at least two sources of attitudes toward menstruation with which Hawthorne was probably familiar. Certainly he knew the biblical passage in Lev. 15:19 ff., in which the Judeo-Christian attitude toward menstruation is codified:

And if a woman have an issue, and her issue in her flesh be blood, she shall be put apart seven days: and whosoever toucheth her shall be unclean until the even.

And everything that she lieth upon in her separation shall be unclean: everything also that she sitteth upon shall be unclean.

And whosoever toucheth her bed shall wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and be unclean until the even.

And whosoever toucheth anything that she sat upon shall wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and be unclean until the even.

And if it be on her bed, or on anything whereon she sitteth, when he toucheth it, he shall be unclean until the even.

And if any man lie with her at all, and her flowers be upon him, he shall be unclean seven days; and all the bed where on he lieth shall be unclean.

⁶Simon O. Lesser, *Fiction and the Unconscious* (Boston, 1959), p. 88; Frederick C. Crews, *The Sins of the Fathers* (New York, 1966), pp. 126 ff.

⁷For a detailed account of popular American attitudes toward menstruation, see J. Delaney, M. J. Lupton, and E. Toth, *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation* (New York, 1976).

He probably was also familiar with the passage in Pliny's *Natural History* that describes the effects of menstrual blood:⁸

Contact with it turns new wine sour, crops touched by it become barren, grafts die, seeds in gardens are dried up, the fruit of trees falls off, the edge of steel and the gleam of ivory are dulled, hives of bees die, even bronze and iron are at once seized by rust, and a horrible smell fills the air; to taste it drives dogs mad and infects their bites with an incurable poison. . . . Even that very tiny creature the ant is said to be sensitive to it and throws away grains of corn that taste of it and does not touch it again.

In both, there are expressed those popular attitudes toward menstruation which regard it as unclean and requiring seclusion. It is also regarded as a blight upon growing things and upon male enterprises. The superstition had such popular currency that, as late as 1920, Bela Schick (of the famous Schick test) conducted a series of experiments in which he studied the effects of menstruation on plant life, among other things, giving a menstruating girl a bouquet of roses, which by the following day faded. He concluded that there existed "menotoxins," exuded through the skins of menstruating women, which killed plants and, incidentally, kept dough from rising and beer from fermenting. The experiments were repeated some years later, but without confirming Schick's results.⁹

In "The Birthmark," Hawthorne appears to allude to all of these attitudes. He has Aylmer isolate Georgiana in a "magic circle," cut off from the light of day and from social intercourse until her "imperfection" is cured. Aylmer offers her a magically created flower, "but Georgiana had no sooner touched the flower than the whole plant suffered a blight, its leaves turning coal-black as if by the agency of fire." And, finally, when Georgiana follows Aylmer to his workshop, he turns on her crying, "Would you throw the blight of that fatal birthmark over my labors?"

The three incidents I have described appear to offer corroboration for my suggestion that the particularizing of Georgiana's "imperfection" by the image of a "crimson stain" is linked to Hawthorne's response to the menstrual aspect of woman's biological life. I am, however, not asserting that this connection is demonstrably a product of his conscious literary intention. I am, rather, suggesting that the particular image emerged from an association of ideas that represented a major social and domestic taboo for Hawthorne and many of his readers and was, consequently, especially available for metaphoric treatment.

The particularly tabooed nature of menstruation in nineteenth-century American genteel society, combined with its regular emergence as a phenomenon of married life, made of it a kind of domestic mystery, periodically confronting even the most intimate of couples and affirming their separate sexual identities. Such a phenomenon, neither discussable because of its tabooed nature, nor avoidable because of its real physical manifestation, required a set of euphemisms, which are, after all, only a particular form of metaphoric representation. This form, catachresis, involves giving a thing which lacks a *proper* name a name which belongs to something else. In Hawthorne's society, menstruation might very well

⁸Hawthorne withdrew Pliny's *Natural History* from the Salem Atheneum Library in May 1836. See M. L. Kesselring, *Hawthorne's Reading, 1828-1850* (New York, 1975), p. 38.

⁹Delaney, Lupton, and Toth, p. 11.

be regarded as an outstanding example of a thing which lacked a proper name, since its tabooed nature made the very act of naming improper. The menstrual catachresis emerged then as a necessary functional metaphor derived from social and sexual life rather than as a conscious literary device. It is in this area of habituated domestic evasion, neither consciously intended nor yet completely apart from conscious intention, that Hawthorne's crimson hand had its source. F. E. H. Schroeder suggests many of the nineteenth-century's woman's " 'sick headaches,' 'slight indispositions,' 'vapours,' 'green-sickness,' and 'blues' were results of the social necessity of inventing irregular ailments to hide their regular 'sickness.' "10 All of these "evasions" can be understood as concessions to what the female body privately and personally required and as resistances to what was required of it socially, familiarly, and maritally.

The Aylmer marriage is dominated, as I have said, by Aylmer. Georgiana consciously resists him only momentarily—" . . . why did you take me from my mother's side. You cannot love what shocks you"—before she succumbs to his will and allies herself with him in his attempt to remove her "imperfection." He would appear to have conquered her completely—except in the physical resistance to his will the birthmark represents. If Georgiana emotionally and intellectually submits to her husband, her body does not. Her "imperfection" remains impervious, as long as she lives, to his technology, his reason, and his love. Aylmer, who would transform her into the objectification of his desire, into, that is, an extension of himself, of his male self, is balked by the crimson stain in which her feminine individuality is expressed. The bloody mark on her cheek represents an aspect of her feminine sexuality that resists conventional male conceptualization and suggests instead an autonomous female nature. Simon Lesser in *Fiction and the Unconscious* suggests that "Aylmer is one of those men, described by Freud, who sharply dissociate heavenly and earthly love, the tender and the sensual."¹¹ But menstrual woman denies both of those male icons, as menstruation conventionally both deters intercourse and denies spirituality. Menstrual woman, unlike the sexual or spiritual woman, both of whom are defined by their relationship to man, is self-defining and representative of those aspects of existence which resist both rationalization and fantasy.

The crimson hand expresses the knot of resistant reality, the absurd mingling of crude and brittle clay with divine breath, of flesh with spirit, that was the creation and that could have been this marriage. This figure of the interweaving of disparate elements into unity is explicitly underlined by Hawthorne when he initially describes the birthmark as "a singular mark deeply interwoven, as it were, with the texture and substance of her face." This initial metaphor is repeated at the conclusion of the story, when the narrator observes that had Aylmer "reached a profounder wisdom, he need not thus have flung away the happiness which would have woven his mortal life of the self-same texture with the celestial." Aylmer, however, in his attempt to spiritualize Georgiana, still pursues the alchemist's dream of a "universal solvent by which the golden principle might be

10/F. E. H. Schroeder, "Feminine Hygiene, Fashion, and the Emancipation of the American Woman," *American Studies* 17 (1976): 103.

11/Lesser, pp. 88-89.

elicited from all things vile and base." He attempts nothing less than the reduction of the universe to its elemental contrarities, the unraveling of creation.

Hawthorne's conception of Aylmer, "in whose grasp the veriest clod of earth assumed a soul," perhaps owes something to his new acquaintance and neighbor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, introduced to him by the adoring Peabody sisters. Emerson, of whom Hawthorne wrote, "he is a great searcher for facts: but they seem to melt away and become insubstantial in his grasp,"¹² possessed more than a passing resemblance to Aylmer, who "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." Certainly Aylmer, who regards the mark on Georgiana's cheek as "the symbol of his wife's liability to sin, sorrow, decay, and death," echoes Emerson's perception of natural facts as spiritual facts.

Aylmer, in his pursuit of absolute transcendence, of exclusively spiritual affinities, emerges from Hawthorne's social and domestic experience as an embodiment of the impulse toward Apollonian order, toward fastidious withdrawal, toward the condition of pure spirit.

"The Birthmark," in its dramatization of the destructiveness of that impulse, serves both as its exorcism and as an admonition. It asserts the life-affirming values that Hawthorne declared to Sophie when he wrote, "I deem a true woman holier than an angel," and the union of physical and spiritual pleasure he described in "The Hall of Fantasy" where he celebrated the earthly joys "in which body and soul would conjoin so heartily." It warns the newly married Hawthorne against the dangers of traditional male domination in marriage. It suggests his resistance to the expansive materialism of America's new technology as well as to the excessive spirituality of its philosophers.¹³ The unexceptionable ambiguities of the abstract notebook themes are resolved firmly in the images, incidents, and associations that Hawthorne employed to embody them. In these are revealed Hawthorne's complex involvement with his world, as the thematic reading of the tale can never hope to do.

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¹²Hawthorne, *American Notebooks* 8:336.

¹³In 1843, Emerson wrote, "Machinery and Transcendentalism agree well" (*Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. E. W. Emerson and W. E. Forbes [Boston, 1909-14], 6:397).