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Alchemy, Imagination, and Hawthorne's "The Birth-mark"

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Abstract

Critics tend to read Hawthorne's "The Birth-mark" as his concern about his contemporaries' overbelief in science, and Aylmer, the protagonist, is repeatedly regarded as a "mad scientist." In my paper I argue that the story is not just about Hawthorne's reaction against beliefs in humans' power to control nature or ability in "spiritualizing the material." More importantly, alchemy should be read as a trope to signify a writer's imaginative power to transmute "lead or baser metals" into "gold."

This paper also aims to re-contextualize Hawthorne's story and situate it in its intellectual and cultural moment when literary professionalism was only beginning to emerge and when literature as imaginative work had yet to attain its sanctified status. It was in this context that Hawthorne's idea of the "truth of the human heart" took shape. I argue that in "The Birth-mark" Hawthorne puts forth great effort to elevate the status of a writer's imagination and that he regards it as a genuine transformative power. Furthermore, by placing Hawthorne's alchemistic/artistic figure within a transatlantic context, I argue that Hawthorne was deeply engaged in transatlantic or transcultural encounters through which to fertilize his romance outside of his native soil. He constantly inscribes his tales in transnational events in order to imagine the U.S. present.

Keywords: Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Birth-mark," alchemy, imagination

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Shortly after his marriage to Sophia Peabody, Nathaniel Hawthorne published in the March 1843 issue of the *Pioneer* "The Birth-mark"—a tale presumably about the simple surgical removal of a birthmark.[1] Yet, the scientific imagery in it is so suggestive in religious overtones that later critics tend to read the tale as Hawthorne's anxiety over his contemporaries' overbelief in science, as exhibited by the protagonist Aylmer's confidence in his power to "lay his hand on the secret of creative force" and his faith in "man's ultimate control over nature" ("Birthmark" 36). Although this is without doubt an important theme of the story, I argue that this is not Hawthorne's primary concern. Michael Colacurcio has rightly asked: "What does 'The Birth-mark' symbolize more essentially than the Swedenborgian-Transcendental problem of 'spiritualizing the material'?" (30) The story is not just about Hawthorne's reaction against beliefs in humans' power to control nature or ability in "spiritualizing the material": beliefs such as Neo-Platonism, Swedenborgianism, or hermeticism. More importantly, science, or more accurately alchemy—the art of transmutation—should be read as a trope to signify a writer's imaginative power to transmute "lead or baser metals" into "gold." Ideally, then, Aylmer the alchemist is "imaginative artist as well as scientist," as Richard Harter Fogle contends (125). Unlike Fogle, however, I argue that in the story Aylmer is rendered as a figure who *fails* as an alchemist/artist, not only because he falls far short of "spiritualizing the material," but also because his ultimate concern is the material or the physical, not the spirit or the heart. Therein lies Hawthorne's trenchant critique of science or alchemy. Moreover, my paper also aims to re-contextualize Hawthorne's story and situate it in its intellectual and cultural moment when literary professionalism was only beginning to emerge in the United States and when literature as imaginative work had yet to attain its sanctified status. Reading the story in this context, we can be more appreciative of Hawthorne's work, understanding his painstaking effort to elevate the status of a writer's imagination and treat of it as a genuine transformative power. Furthermore, by placing Hawthorne's alchemistic/artistic figure within a transatlantic or transcultural context, I argue that Hawthorne was deeply engaged in transnational encounters through which to fertilize his romance outside of his native soil. Hawthorne, as John Carlos Rowe contends, constantly imbeds his tales in transnational events in order to imagine the U.S. present.[2]

[1] In the title, "birthmark" is the spelling used in most editions of Hawthorne's works and most critical essays. Here I follow the spelling adopted in the Centenary Edition ("Birth-mark") because it accentuates the fact that it is, in the tale, not simply a skin blemish but also signifies the mortality of humankind. Unless quoting from this edition, however, I use "birthmark" in the paper.

[2] See John Carlos Rowe, "Nathaniel Hawthorne and Transnationality," especially pp. 88-89.

In his letter to G. S. Hillard, a friend and an editor for the *Token*, an annual gift book, Hawthorne said that "stories grow like vegetables" and that his stories "all sprung up of their own accord, out of a quiet life" (qtd. in McIntosh 302). Actually Hawthorne kept a journal, and he jotted down sketches and ideas for future stories. The idea for "The Birth-mark" came to him early. It probably originated with an 1836 entry in *The American Notebooks*: "Those who are very difficult in choosing wives seem as if they would take none of Nature's ready-made works, but want a woman manufactured particularly to their order" (*American Notebooks* 20). Then, in an October 16, 1837, entry, he wrote: "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" (*American Notebooks* 165). Another entry, dated December 6, 1837, follows immediately the above-mentioned one: "A person to spend all his life and splendid talents in trying to achieve something naturally impossible,—as to make a conquest over Nature" (*American Notebooks* 165). Later, in a January 4, 1839, entry he developed the idea further: "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" (American Notebooks 184). As the "something" in the earlier entries evolves into the man's beloved in the later entry, much more is at stake and the former vague idea could now develop into a more intriguing story. Furthermore, the man's ambition now crystallizes into an attempt to attain mortal perfection by "conquest over Nature" and hence an aspiration toward achieving immortality.[3] Nevertheless, later critics would disagree as to whether the man has "aimed so highly and holily."

When Hawthorne fleshed out the idea, the man who occasions the death of his beloved becomes Aylmer, an "eminent proficient in every branch of natural philosophy" in the latter part of the 18th century. Having decided to put aside his scientific passion and "cleared his countenance from the furnace-smoke" of his laboratory, he persuades a beautiful woman, Georgiana, to marry him, thereby precipitating the conflict between his love of science and his love for his young wife. After their marriage, Aylmer finds his wife perfect except for one thing: a tiny crimson birthmark—in the shape of a human hand—on her left cheek.

[3] Critic Lea Bertani Vozar Newman cites another source, in which Hawthorne paraphrased a case he had read about in Andrew Combe's *The Principles of Physiology*: "The case quoted in Combe's Physiology, from Pinel, of 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 & &. Eight days thus passed, when he was seized with a fit of frenzy, which terminated in mania" (Newman 30; *American Notebooks* 235). Hawthorne may have borrowed some detail from Combe's case, but the dénouement and the thematic emphasis are obviously very different.

According to Georgiana's lovers, "some fairy, at her birth-hour, had laid her tiny hand upon the infant's cheek, and left this impress there, in token of the magic endowments that were to give her such sway over all hearts" ("Birth-mark" 38). Nevertheless, the birthmark becomes Aylmer's obsession because he considers it "the visible mark of earthly imperfection." For Aylmer the monomaniac, it is enough proof to convince him that "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" ("Birth-mark" 39), and a mere skin blemish becomes "the symbol of his wife's liability to sin, sorrow, decay, and death" ("Birth-mark" 39). Aylmer's insistence to remove the birthmark, therefore, bears the full burden of secular salvation. He would go to any lengths to get rid of the physical—and hence mortal—flaw even if it should "take refuge" in Georgiana's heart. He succeeds in taking out the "birth-mark," but at a price. She dies when her "birth-mark" is removed. She is perfect but dead.

Of all the earlier criticisms on "The Birth-mark," Robert B. Heilman's essay is probably the most influential. In "Hawthorne's 'The Birthmark': Science as Religion," Heilman argues that in this tale "the immanent story is about man's conceptions of evil" (421). Seeing the birthmark on the left cheek of his wife Georgiana as a flaw to her nearly perfect beauty, Aylmer the scientist also conceives of it as a symbol of humankind's earthly imperfection. It is a symbol of his wife's—and humankind's—"liability to sin, sorrow, decay, and death." The birthmark is therefore "original sin in fine imaginative form" (Heilman 424). In an attempt to immortalize Georgiana by removing her birthmark through scientific procedures, Aylmer deals a mortal blow to her instead. His error, according to Heilman, is his "mistaking of science for religion." A "romantic perfectibilitarian," Aylmer does not "regard evil as real" (423). His faith becomes: "improve the body, and you save the soul" (424). Science, thus apotheosized, takes on the colors of religion, and "the end is the secular salvation of mortal man" (422). Heilman's "Science as Religion" sets the tone for future studies on "The Birth-mark." Aylmer is repeatedly regarded as a "mad scientist" type or a Faustian figure.[4]

[4] Two conspicuous examples are William Bysshe Stein's *Hawthorne's Faust* (1968) and Taylor Stoehr's *Hawthorne's Mad Scientists* (1978). Citing Aylmer as one of the preliminary models of Ethan Brand, the eponymous protagonist of another of Hawthorne's "mad scientist" tale, Stein argues that "Hawthorne criticizes the external manifestations of the ideal of his age, visible in science and in a materialistic economy" (103). Similarly, Stoehr considers Aylmer a "Faustian scientist" or a "mad scientist," and he concludes that "the solitary researches of genius unfit the scientist for human companionship, so that he is doomed to destroy the very persons whom he intends his work to benefit. This is the ultimate alienation of the 'mad scientist'" (74).

Since the publication of Heilman's essay in 1949, several other critics—Alfred S. Reid, David M. Van Leer, John Gatta, Jr.—have also commented on this tale in more or less the same vein.[5] They also highlight Hawthorne's humanism and his concern about the rapid advancement of science. Unlike Heilman, however, they specifically identify Aylmer's practices to spiritualize matter with alchemy and point out Hawthorne's anxiety over the prevalence of magical/spiritualist movement at that time. Their essays seem to have exhausted the study on Hawthorne's use of (pseudo-)scientific or spiritualist material. Recently, however, Samuel Chase Coale has struck out a different path in Hawthorne criticism in this respect. In the "Preface" to his *Mesmerism and Hawthorne: Mediums of American Romance*, Coale points out the "similarities between descriptions of mesmerists' trances and performances and Hawthorne's process of writing and structuring his romances" (xiii). Coale argues that for Hawthorne "mesmerism became a medium for writing fiction, a medium he manipulated through the use of his own mesmerist-like strategies" (3). In my paper, I follow Coale's lead in his work on mesmerism and treat of alchemy as a trope, a figure of thought, with which Hawthorne plots and structures the story. I revise his argument, however, with Richard Harter Fogle's reading.[6]

Alchemy figured prominently in the story. At first sight, to assign alchemy a significant role in a story set in the latter part of the eighteenth century would seem out of sync with its historical context because alchemy, as a proto-science or pseudo-science, had its heyday in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe. "It was during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe," so Lyndy

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[5] Feminist critics read the story along a different line. In *The Shape of Hawthorne's Career* (1976), Nina Baym argues that in this story "Hawthorne examines more specifically than he had done before the sexual problems that underlie the protagonist's social alienation, as well as the sexual reasons for his inability to take the help offered by the woman. . . . Hawthorne identifies the male obsession overtly with a revulsion against women and specifically with a revulsion against her physical nature" (109-10). In "Thwarted Nature" (1982), Baym again maintains: "Specifically, some aspect of the woman is the obsession: some aspect of her body. The hero attempts to purify the woman by separating her in some way from her body. This, as Hawthorne recognizes, is murder: sex-murder" (65). Similarly, Judith Fetterley argues, in "Women Beware Science: 'The Birthmark'" (1977), that "The Birthmark" is about the great American dream of eliminating women; the story is a "demonstration of how to murder your wife and get away with it" (22). She, like Baym, maintains that the story is "a parable of woman's relation to the cult of female beauty (26). Alison Easton, likewise, has argued in "Hawthorne and the Question of Women" (2004) that in many of Hawthorne's stories "female dissent, whether in dreams, adultery, or preaching, becomes muted, fruitless reproach, or metamorphoses into a self-sacrifice that, particularly in Georgiana's case, sounds like a desperate quotation from a manual on wifely submission" (87).

[6] Although Coale argues that for Hawthorne "mesmerism became a medium for writing fiction," he never sees a mesmerist or an alchemist as an artistic figure. "The Birth-mark," for him, "extensively treats the mesmeric gaze and its power to transform objects into icons, thus fetishizing these objects which, in this instance, leads another Rappaccini-like scientist, Aylmer, to kill his wife Georgiana" (62). In this respect, his reading of the story does not differ significantly from earlier critics'.

Abraham enlightens us, "that the deep intellectual interest in alchemy and other occult thought reached its peak" (2). In her book on Andrew Marvell and alchemy, Abraham demonstrates to us the currency of alchemical thought in Britain and Europe and its presence in the works of such poets as Shakespeare, Jonson, Donne, Herrick, Milton, Dryden, and especially Marvell.[7] Alchemy afforded Hawthorne an occasion to imaginatively join the ranks of those writers on the other side of the Atlantic. By the time Hawthorne wrote the story, however, alchemy no longer enjoyed its former prestige. Why, then, did Hawthorne revive a subject that would seem to be little more than an occult tradition, like hermeticism, cabbalism, etc., to his contemporary readers? Is it simply due to Hawthorne's "propensity for the arcane and remote"? As Frank Kermode informs us, the later interest in alchemy "was inspired by a Romantic hatred for 'positivist science'" (ix), and Hawthorne was certainly no friend of positivist science. Therefore, his resurrection of alchemy implies his critique of positivist science. That, however, is only part of the answer. To answer the question more satisfactorily, it is necessary to explore in more detail how alchemy is examined in the essays mentioned earlier and what significance it had for Hawthorne.

In "Hawthorne's Humanism: 'The Birthmark' and Sir Kenelm Digby," Alfred S. Reid suggests that Aylmer is probably modeled after Sir Kenelm Digby, the seventeenth-century English courtier and diplomat, who was also, as Reid terms him, "the virtuoso-Platonist-scientist." In his later years Digby spent an enormous amount of time and effort on astrology and alchemy and was highly regarded among the scientific circle. It was rumored, however, that he accidently killed his beautiful wife with "viper-wine." Digby had been experimenting with "miracle waters" and encouraged his wife to drink "viper-wine" to improve her health and preserve youth and beauty. Digby acquired a dubious reputation because of this and other incidents, such as those related in his *Powder of Sympathy*. His alliance of science with magic aroused much suspicion. At a time when scientific inquiry had not established a rigorous methodology and when science and pseudo-science were often indistinguishable and magical/scientific discourses were often interwoven with philosophical/religious discourses, Digby muddled the scientific with the magical. He paid a costly price for his enthusiasm to experiment with "miracle waters." Likewise, Aylmer pays his price in "The Birth-mark." In undertaking to remove his wife's birthmark—symbol of her earthly imperfection—and achieve immortality, he repeats Digby's fatal error. His endeavor to spiritual-

[7] Taylor Stoehr's *Hawthorne's Mad Scientists* has a chapter on pseudoscience, in which he discusses nineteenth-century Americans' susceptibility to mesmerism, phrenology, physiognomy, and the like, but he mentions nothing about alchemy. For an extensive treatment of alchemical thought in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, see Abraham, "The Alchemical Context," *Marvell and Alchemy*, 1-35.

ize matter, to achieve salvation through physical perfection, proves to be a dismal failure. Reid's essay is illuminating in helping us to understand the "naive credulity" that these alchemists—Digby, Aylmer, or others—exhibited in their "scientific" experiments. Hawthorne's anxiety in "The Birth-mark" is not so much the rapid advancement of science as the confusion between science and pseudo-science. In the story, when Georgiana has a chance to enter her husband's library, she turns over the volumes in it and notes the names of the natural philosophers of the middle ages: "All these antique naturalists stood in advance of their centuries, yet were imbued with some of their credulity, and therefore were believed, and perhaps imagined themselves, to have acquired from the investigation of nature a power above nature, and from physics a sway over the spiritual world" (48). The narrator, through Georgiana, admires these "antique naturalists" because they "stood in advance of their centuries," and yet critiques them for their "credulity": their belief that they had acquired "a power above nature" and "a sway over the spiritual world."

David M. Van Leer adds more insight to Reid's essay. In "Aylmer's Library: Transcendental Alchemy in Hawthorne's 'The Birthmark,'" Van Leer cites Henry Stubbe, a hostile critic of the "new science," and further testifies to Digby's credulity or gullibility. Stubbe discredited Digby because Digby championed some dubious alchemical practices. Stubbe proceeded to read Digby's failing as symptomatic of the problems of the Royal Society as a whole. In their obituary notice of Digby, the Royal Society could not help but regret Digby's "credulity or want of veracity" which had by association also hurt the Society's own credibility. Digby's alchemical practices hurt the credibility of the Royal Society because he was a founding member of the Society and a member of its governing council from 1662 to 1663. Moreover, Van Leer asks the important question: "if the story is in some significant way *about* the alchemists, what motivated such an interest in mid-nineteenth-century America?" (211; original emphasis). In the conclusion, Van Leer answers his own question: "To take up pen in 1843, then, and turn to an alchemical tradition of spiritualized matter, of transfigured lead, is not to create effete allegories but to cry out against the follies of yesterday and tomorrow" (218). Although the setting is transposed to the latter half of the eighteenth century, Van Leer maintains that Hawthorne really has his eyes on the contemporary U.S.

"Aylmer's Alchemy in 'The Birthmark'" sheds more light on Hawthorne's real concern about magical/scientific practices.[8] In this essay, John Gatta, Jr.,

[8]Taylor Stoehr probably would disagree on this point. He observes in *Hawthorne's Mad Scientists*: "Hawthorne's considerable personal experience of the pseudosciences affected his fiction in crucial ways, but his attitude toward such materials remained hesitant and ambiguous to the end, at least so far as

cites one of Hawthorne's letters, which helps to illuminate this matter. The letter was dated October 18, 1841, from Brook Farm. In the letter Hawthorne urged Sophia, his fiancée at that time, not to seek relief from her persistent headaches in the "magnetic miracles" of the mesmerist: "I am unwilling that a power should be exercised on thee, of which we know neither the origin nor the consequence. . . . Supposing that this power arises from the transfusion of one spirit into another, it seems to me that the sacredness of an individual is violated by it" (*Letters* 588). Here mesmerism is conceived of as having the power to provide ready access for the "transfusion of one spirit into another," leading to Hawthorne's anxiety over the encroachment of unknown forces on one's soul. With the access to the soul wide open, Hawthorne worries, one's sacredness will be violated. Furthermore, Hawthorne feared that Sophia was not the only one that subscribed to mesmerism. Mesmerism, alchemy, and other similar practices, it seemed, were very much alive in mid-century America. And if many people still invested great faith in such magical/spiritualist movements, that would be Hawthorne's genuine worry. In *The Blithedale Romance*, one character may well have said the following for Hawthorne: "If these phenomena have not humbug at the bottom, so much the worse for us. What can they indicate, in a spiritual way, except that the soul of man is descending to a lower point than it has ever before reached while incarnate?" (*Blithedale* 199) For Hawthorne, when people began to take these things seriously, it is the degradation of the human soul. In the same letter to Sophia he declared: "And what delusion can be more lamentable and mischievous than to mistake the physical and material for the spiritual? What so miserable as to lose the soul's true, though hidden, knowledge and consciousness of heaven, in the mist of an earth-born vision?" (*Letters* 589). In light of this, Gatta asserts that "Hawthorne had his doubts about the efficacy and final authenticity of enterprises like alchemy and animal magnetism [that is, mesmerism]" (Gatta 411). But Hawthorne was then in love and experienced something of a radical interior transmutation, so he was, Gatta concludes, "in no position to take a wholly scornful view of the alchemist's search for a marvelously transforming quintessence" (411). Hawthorne obviously believes in mystery, something that can transport us beyond the petty, mundane existence, but it cannot be done through alchemy, mesmerism, and such like. A little further in the aforementioned letter Hawthorne

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formal statements of opinion are concerned" (30). At the end of this paragraph, he again comments that "as far as his public voice can be identified *in his fiction*, he withheld final judgment" (30; my emphasis). Nonetheless, Stoehr relied on Hawthorne's fictional works, *The American Notebooks*, and *The English Notebooks* for his sources. He did not consult Hawthorne's letters, in which Hawthorne spoke in his own voice, though not publicly.

again exhorted Sophia: "And thou wilt know that the view which I take of this matter is caused by no want of faith in mysteries, but from a deep reverence of the soul, and of the mysteries which it knows within itself, but never transmits to the earthly eye or ear. Keep thy imagination sane—that is one of the truest conditions of communion with Heaven" (*Letters* 589-90). Like a true Romantic, Hawthorne has the deepest reverence of the soul and the mysteries it knows. And how does the soul transmit the mysteries to the earthly eye or ear? The answer should be clear from the context: through imagination.

Let us return to the question posed earlier: the reason for Hawthorne's revival of the subject of alchemy. Each of these essays—Reid's, Van Leer's, and Gatta's—is helpful in answering the question: exposing the credulity of the alchemists (and hence of those who believe they can spiritualize matter), directing our attention to Hawthorne's interest in contemporary events (such as his contemporaries' subscription to alchemistic and other such practices), and enlightening us about Hawthorne's belief in the power of imagination to lend mystery to our drab existence. "The Birth-mark," like most of Hawthorne's tales, is a "parable." Hawthorne's purpose in reviving the subject is, first of all, to call into question the belief in "(pseudo-)science as religion" because it degrades human souls. More importantly, he suggests replacing alchemy with imagination as the real transformative power. In so doing, he elevates the status of the artist's imagination and regards it as the highest of human faculties. Significantly, he did this as he was about to enter the major phase of his career when his major works—*The Scarlet Letter* (1850), *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), and *The Blithedale Romance* (1852)—would come out in successive years. It is also significant that he promoted the image of the artist to convince an American reading public who was generally skeptical about imaginative writing in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Richard Harter Fogle suggests the idea of Aylmer as an artist. In his *Hawthorne's Fiction: The Light and the Dark*, he comments on Aylmer: "Aylmer is figuratively an artist and a practitioner of the imagination, who has created an artistic world for his beloved to dwell in; but it is false" (124). The "artistic world" Fogle refers to is the apartment next to Aylmer's laboratory in which Aylmer secludes Georgiana to prepare her for the upcoming treatment. Upon entering the room, Georgiana feels that the scene around her "looked like enchantment." For all she knows, the room "might be a pavilion among the clouds" ("Birthmark" 44). In order to soothe Georgiana, Aylmer provides a variety of optical illusions to divert her. Although these illusions are entertaining, they are, for Georgiana, "airy figures, absolutely bodiless ideas, and forms of unsubstantial beauty." There are, however, two passages in "The Birth-mark" that associate

these optical illusions or alchemy with arts or poetry. One of them describes Georgiana's impression of these illusions: "The scenery and the figures of actual life were perfectly represented, but with that bewitching, yet indescribable difference, which always makes a picture, an image, or a shadow, so much more attractive than the original" ("Birth-mark" 45). Here the effects that the optical illusions create are compared to those by arts. The other passage appears when the bored Georgiana leafs through the volumes in her husband's library: "In many dark old tomes, she met with chapters full of romance and poetry. They were the works of the philosophers of the middle ages, such as Albertus Magnus, Cornelius Agrippa, Paracelsus, and the famous friar who created the prophetic Brazen Head [that is, Roger Bacon, one of the "philosophers of the middle ages"]" ("Birth-mark" 48). The philosophers referred to are alchemists of the Middle Ages, and their works are said to be "chapters full of romance and poetry." These two passages seem to confirm Fogle's reading: that Aylmer, in addition to being a scientist, is an artist figure as well. But optical illusions are, in the end, nothing but illusions. The alchemists' enterprises are scarcely more than pseudo-science, and their claim to provide access to spiritual reality through material means proves to be specious. Aylmer is no real scientist; neither is he a genuine artist. In comparison with the alchemist, the romance writer's art is, Hawthorne believes, the genuine art of transmutation, the art that renders it possible to have "communion with Heaven." Aylmer is a foil, so to speak, for the romance writer, and alchemy is used as a metaphor for romance writing, or, as Samuel Chase Coale would have it, as a "medium of romance." Aylmer's mind succeeds where his heart fails. Imagination cannot work with a cold heart. If Aylmer is an artist, as Fogle argues, his callous heart so incapacitates him that he is unable to achieve self-knowledge or an artistic vision. His imagination is, as Nina Baym argues, "obsessional imagination" (*Shape* 109). True imagination belongs to the romance writer. Hawthorne, like other Romantic writers on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, believed imagination to be the highest of human faculties, and for him, the *real* art of transmuting "lead and baser metals" into "gold" is not alchemy, but imagination.

Like Hawthorne, English Romantic writers, especially William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, considered imagination as the highest faculty of human mind. Imagination is, for Wordsworth, "that intellectual lens through the medium of which the poetical observer sees the objects of his observations, modified both in form and colour; or it is that inventive dresser of dramatic *tableaux*, by which the persons of the play are invested with new drapery, or placed in new attitudes, or it is that chemical faculty by which elements of the most different nature and distant origin are blended together into one harmonious and homogeneous whole" (Grosart, III, 465). "Chemical faculty" of course refers to imagina-

tion in this context. It is worth noting that a chemist derives his/her name from modern Latin *chimista*, which is a shortening of medieval Latin *alchimista*, "alchemist" (*Encarta World English Dictionary* 1999). Wordsworth elaborated on how imagination works on another occasion: "When the Imagination frames a comparison . . . a sense of the truth of the likeness, from the moment that it is perceived, grows—and continues to grow—upon the mind; the resemblance depending less upon outline of form and feature, than upon expression and effect; less upon casual and outstanding, than upon inherent and internal, properties: moreover, the images invariably modify each other" (qtd. in Wimsatt and Brooks 387-88). Therefore, William K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Cleanth Brooks argue that for Wordsworth, imagination is the ultimate creative or poetic principle.[9] They proceed to summarize the significance of imagination for Wordsworth in Charles Lamb's words since both seem to corroborate each other's views. For Lamb, imagination is "that power which draws all things to one,—which makes things animate or inanimate, beings with their attributes, subjects, and their accessories, take one colour and serve to one effect. Everything in the print . . . *tells*" (Lamb 312; Lamb's emphasis). But it is, of course, Coleridge that is most articulate about the theory of imagination. One of the most well-known passages derives from Chap. XIII of the *Biographia Literaria*, in which he discusses the primary and secondary imagination. He holds the primary imagination to be "the living power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM" (Vol. I, 202). He considers the secondary imagination as "an echo of the former," yet it "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead" (Vol. I, 202). For Wordsworth and Coleridge, imagination is the creative power that unifies and integrates, the power of "joining and coalescing the otherwise separated parts of our self" (Wimsatt and Brooks 392).

Hawthorne is clearly linked to English Romanticism, and he is not alone in placing the highest importance on imagination. He, like Wordsworth and Coleridge, recognizes imagination as the creative power that can transform and transcend the routine, the ordinary. Like the English Romantic writers, too, he likes to use the imagery of light to illuminate readers about the subtle effect imagination produces. In "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," the protagonist Robin, unable to find the whereabouts of his kinsman Major Molineux, roams the streets

[9] For a discussion of the nuances of imagination in Wordsworth's and Coleridge's works, see Wimsatt and Brooks, "Imagination: Wordsworth and Coleridge," Chap. 18 of their *Literary Criticism: A Short History*, pp. 384-411.

in the moonlight: "And first he threw his eyes along the street; it was of more respectable appearance than most of those into which he had wandered, and the moon, 'creating, like the imaginative power, a beautiful strangeness in familiar objects,' gave something of romance to a scene, that might not have possessed it in the light of day" ("Kinsman" 221). Imagination defamiliarizes and creates beauty out of familiar objects. And like the poet in "Tintern Abbey" who hears oftentimes "The still, sad music of humanity," Hawthorne appeals to the human heart for truth. In his famous "Preface" to *The House of the Seven Gables*, he expounds his theory about the romance and pleads "latitude" for romance writers: "When a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a Novel" ("Preface," *House*, 1). Although Hawthorne cautions against immoderate use of this "privilege," he adds that a romance writer "can hardly be said . . . to commit a literary crime, even if he disregard this caution," as long as he does not "swerve aside from the truth of the human heart" ("Preface," *House*, 1). "The truth of the human heart" serves as the moral guide of the creative imagination.

How important is this "truth of the human heart" for Hawthorne in terms of the moral message the story is supposed to dispense? Further down in the "Preface," Hawthorne discusses contemporary writers' stress on "moral purpose": "Many writers lay very great stress upon some definite moral purpose, at which they profess to aim their works." The tone here ("very great") is a disapproving, or at least a reserved, one. This does not mean that Hawthorne objects to attaching a moral message to a tale or work of fiction, as he goes on to assure his readers, albeit in a conciliatory manner, that "the author has provided himself with a moral." But if Hawthorne wants to achieve certain moral purpose, he proposes to do it differently: "When romances do really teach anything, or produce any effective operation, it is usually through a far more subtile process than the ostensible one" ("Preface," *House*, 2; "subtile" is Hawthorne's spelling). The surface story delivers the ostensible message, but behind the literal, there is a deeper, more subtle meaning. By inviting readers to look deeper into the story, the author wants them to explore shades of moral sentiments between right and wrong. And this is where "the truth of the human heart" comes in. Hawthorne puts forth this matter metaphorically in the "Preface": "The author has considered it hardly worth his while, therefore, relentlessly to impale the story with its moral, as with an iron rod,—or, rather as by sticking a pin through a butterfly,—thus at once depriving it of life, and causing it to stiffen in an ungainly and unnatural attitude" ("Preface," *House*, 2). Here Hawthorne refers to the story, analogously, as a butterfly—a thing of beauty and with life—and implies that an

ill-placed moral is likely to deprive it of its life: that is, imposing a moral on a story amounts to an act of violence, like impaling ("the heart" of) the story. A romance novel must accomplish more than the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings"; it has to deliver a moral message. But this message, like a ray of light, must be softened, mellowed, so as not to become too harsh. If it does, it stiffens, like rigid moral laws, which would hardly conform to the "truth of the human heart." Although alchemy, as practiced by Aylmer in the story, was subjected to scrutiny or even ridicule for its mistaking the physical and material for the spiritual, for its ambition to spiritualize material, Hawthorne does not portray Aylmer without a touch of sympathy. Locating the origin of alchemical practices in the "questing human heart," Hawthorne does not remove the mystery of the "birth-mark"—symbol of human life, human mortality—through any (pseudo-)scientific experiments; instead, he, through his imagination, re-inscribes the mystery, a mystery which humans appreciate most acutely or agonizingly when they come face to face with mortality. Human mortality or imperfection is thus transformed and woven into a touching story, and alchemy, the "art of transmutation," comes back in a different guise.

And yet, unlike Wordsworth, who "choose[s] incidents and situations from common life" and "throw[s] over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way," Hawthorne was presented with a difficult challenge: the lack of culture in the new country. At a time when pursuing literary nationalism was a national concern, it was Ralph Waldo Emerson who urged U.S. young writers to celebrate the new country with native materials and subjects in "The Poet": "I look in vain for the poet whom I describe. We do not, with sufficient plainness, or sufficient profoundness, address ourselves to life, nor dare we chaunt our own times and social circumstance. If we filled the day with bravery, we should not shrink from celebrating it. Time and nature yield us many gifts, but not yet the timely man, the new religion, the reconciler, whom all things await" (235). For Emerson, "America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres" (235). In contrast, Hawthorne bemoans the barrenness of the new country's cultural soil. He complained about this situation in his "Preface" to *The Marble Faun*: "No author, without a trial, can conceive of the difficulty of writing a Romance about a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything—but a common-place prosperity, in broad and simple daylight, as is happily the case with my dear native land" ("Preface," *Marble*, 3). A tone of irony ("happily") can be detected here as Hawthorne, as a romance writer, laments the condition of his circumscribed imagination in the face of the unpoetic cultural landscape of his "dear native land."

At the end of this passage, he concludes: "Romance and poetry, like ivy, lichens, and wall-flowers, need Ruin to make them grow" ("Preface," *Marble*, 3). Unlike Wordsworth, who chants in "the real language of nature," Hawthorne works with historical ruins. His stories do not "grow like vegetables" or "spring up of their own accord, out of a quiet life." And since his native country fails to provide him with such materials and subjects, he has to borrow from the foreign soil. To navigate out of this imaginative difficulty, Hawthorne steers toward two directions in "The Birth-mark": to employ alchemy as a metaphor for the art of transmutation and to transpose the setting to a neutral ground in the recent past.

The transposition of the setting to a neutral ground in the recent past is an important ploy of Hawthorne's creative imagination. In "The Birth-mark," the locale of the story is not mentioned. The time is moved to an earlier, but not the distant, past: the latter part of the eighteenth century. It is a period when recent scientific discoveries seemed "to open paths into the region of miracle": "The higher intellect, the imagination, the spirit, and even the heart, might all find their congenial aliment in pursuits which . . . would ascend from one step of powerful intelligence to another, until the philosopher should lay his hand on the secret of creative force, and perhaps make new worlds for himself" ("Birth-mark" 36). This passage is richly suggestive. While alchemists may claim to have ascended from one step of their powerful (pseudo-)scientific projects and leap to the "faith in man's ultimate control over nature," the romance writer has no such faith in, nor the ambition of control over nature. His imagination, nevertheless, entitles him to the claim of "lay[ing] his hand on the secret of creative force." Moreover, by casting Aylmer as an alchemist, the story is situated at a historical moment when magic and science were virtually indistinguishable, when alchemical practices and discourses were circulating in a multi-national context. It was also a moment when the concept of authorship or literary professionalism was emerging in the U.S., and Hawthorne, like other Romantic writers on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, was celebrating the creative power of imagination while his countrypeople were deeply engrossed in alchemistic mysteries or material prosperity. Writing romance was, according to Nina Baym, Hawthorne's attempt at "defining a way of writing that could embody the imagination and justify it to a skeptical, practical-minded audience" (*Shape* 8). Read in such a context, "The Birth-mark" can be seen as Hawthorne's effort to fertilize the barren soil of his native land with transnational sources. If "Ruin" cannot be found in a land of "common-place prosperity," the setting of his tale has to be transposed across the Atlantic.

John Carlos Rowe has commented on the significance of Hawthorne studies from a transnational perspective: "What makes Hawthorne especially worthy

of reconsideration in today's debates over globalization is his conflation of the new U.S. nation with its transnational others and of the allegorical transposition of the misty European past into the democratic (and usually U.S.) present" (88-89). Hawthorne, modeling on what Washington Irving had done in "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," fashioned the American romance by conflating the U.S. present with the misty European past. To read his romance in this light is to re-establish Hawthorne at a historical moment of the U.S. cultural scene and to re-connect him with the English Romantic writers. Hawthorne is not a writer who confines himself to his own times and his own country; he inscribes his romance in transnational and transcultural contexts.

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煉金術，想像力，與霍桑的〈胎記〉

摘　要

批評家常把霍桑的〈胎記〉("The Birth-mark")解讀爲他因同時代的人對科學的過度信心而產生的憂慮，而故事的主人翁艾爾瑪(Aylmer)也一直被視爲「瘋狂的科學家」。我的論文則主張該故事不只是有關霍桑對人類有信心控制自然或有能力將物質精神化的反應。更重要的，我們應將煉金術視爲一種轉義、比喻(trope)，用以表示作家運用想像將「鉛或劣等金屬」轉化爲「黃金」的能力。

這篇論文也嘗試重新將霍桑的故事脈絡化，將該故事放置於原來的知識文化時刻，當時文學專業主義正在興起，而作爲想像的文學尚未獲致後來的神聖地位。霍桑的「心的眞理」("truth of the human heart")的概念是在這樣的脈絡裡形成。在〈胎記〉裡霍桑極力提升作家之想像力的地位，視之爲眞正的轉化能力。更進一步的，將霍桑的煉金術士／藝術家放在跨國的脈絡裡，我主張霍桑深爲跨大西洋或跨文化的接觸所吸引，經由跨越國境的途徑去豐饒他的傳奇故事。他不斷將他的故事書寫於跨國事件裡以想像美國的當代。

關鍵字：霍桑，〈胎記〉，煉金術，想像力