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Black Magic vs. White Magic in Hawthorne's 'Birthmark': The Science of Control vs. the Poetics of Imagination

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Abstract

In his landmark *Science and Poetry* (1926), critic I. A. Richards suggested that science is inherently subversive of “the Magical View” of the universe which he believed to be essential to poetry. Careful readers of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short story “The Birthmark,” however, may wish to qualify Richards’ suggestion by contrasting two quite different magical views, both depicted in this iconic story. For Hawthorne depicts the magic of poetic imagination (practiced by the beaux who view Georgiana’s birthmark as a sign of a delightful enchantment) as something quite different from the sorcery of technocratic control (practiced by the perfection-seeking Aylmer). Thorough analysis reveals that the magic of poetic imagination is of the sort that W.H. Auden has in view when he acknowledges that in the physical world “poetry makes nothing happen.” However, Hawthorne helps readers see that in the world of the spirit, this poetic magic works marvels as it helps us to cherish the world as it is. This non-manipulative magic is central to the contemplative leisure that philosopher Josef Pieper recognizes as essential to literary culture. As a benign magic that “makes nothing happen,” this non-controlling magic suggests something like what Taoists refer to as *wu wei* or “wise passivity,” a contemplative posture manifest in the poetry of China’s two greatest poets, Du Fu and Li Bai. In contrast to this magic of appreciative contemplation, the manipulative sorcery of Aylmer’s science does make things happen in the physical world, though—as Hawthorne’s story makes clear—with perilous side effects.

Keywords: science, poetry, magic, leisure, *wu wei*, Hawthorne

In his landmark study *Science and Poetry*, critic I. A. Richards (1926) suggests that science is inherently destructive of “the Magical View” of the universe which he believes to be essential to poetry. Richards’ view on the incompatibility of science and poetry certainly seems credible when we hear the prominent 21st-century scientist Robert L. Park (2008) declare dogmatically, “Science is the only way of knowing—everything else is just superstition” (p. 215). A thoroughgoing scientism of this kind does appear antithetical to poetry. However, careful study of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short story “The Birthmark” raises doubts both about whether a “Magical View” of the universe always supports and nourishes poetry and whether science always threatens a magical view of the universe. For in this haunting tale, Hawthorne depicts two very different kinds of magical thinking, one of them actually aligned with and amplified by modern science, the other clearly outside of and even athwart the scientific impulse. As the narrative unfolds, readers come to realize that the magic aligned with science is a black magic which promises technocratic control of the world. This dark magic quite antithetical to—and destructive of—the white magic of poetic imagination that Hawthorne depicts as an enchantment that fosters acceptance of and love of the world as it is.

First published in 1846, Hawthorne’s “The Birthmark” (1846/1983) introduces both kinds of magic relatively early in its compelling narrative. In the opening paragraph, the reader meets

Aylmer, “a man of science, an eminent proficient in every branch of natural philosophy,” who has just “persuaded a beautiful woman [namely, Georgiana] to become his wife” (p. 3). But the narrator quickly informs us that “in those days when the comparatively recent discovery of electricity and other kindred mysteries of Nature seemed to open paths into the region of miracle, it was not unusual for the love of science to rival the love of woman in its depth and absorbing energy” (pp. 3-4). In invoking the possibility of science that opens “paths into the region of miracle,” the narrator suggests something very much like magic, very potent magic. Indeed, something like the magical powers sought by alchemists come into view when the narrator depicts the scientific enterprise to which Aylmer is deeply committed as one that its votaries hope will enable them to “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” (p. 4). This enterprise, the reader learns, even fosters “faith in man’s ultimate control over Nature” (p. 4). To be sure, in these opening passages, the narrator claims to be ignorant as to whether Aylmer was among those fully possessed of this faith. But the whole course of the events that follow sweep away that ignorance, revealing Aylmer as a man obsessively committed to claiming such control over nature, especially as nature is manifest in the body of his doomed wife.

Hawthorne’s depiction of modern science as an effort to find “the secret of creative force” and so to claim “ultimate control over Nature brings to mind—as Hawthorne surely intends—the efforts of alchemists to find the magical “Philosopher’s Stone,” a powerful talisman capable of turning lead to gold, of curing human ailments, and even perhaps of conferring immortality. Hawthorne explicitly links Aylmer’s science with the alchemists, noting that when Georgiana begins to poke about in her husband’s library, she encounters “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,” works reflecting an insatiable desire to achieve “from the investigation of Nature a power above Nature” (p. 23).

Hawthorne’s linkage between modern science and the dubious power-seeking magic of pre-modern alchemists may offend twenty-first century readers convinced that science is a purely rational endeavor, entirely uncontaminated by a craving for magical power. But the linkage Hawthorne makes between modern science and the quest for magical power of the sort that impelled the alchemists is very real. Historian of science Bill Newman (2005) notes that “many of [the] very, very seminal figures in the Scientific Revolution [including, Boyle, Leibniz, and especially Newton] were heavily involved in alchemy” (par. 5), explaining that the draw to the quasi-magical realm of alchemy was “a sort of limitless power over nature” (par. 12). In the same vein, historian of science W.C. Dampier (1971) has conceded that “magic had something to do with the origins of science” (p. 52), even going so far as to assert that as an attempt “to compel outward things to obey man’s will magic seems to be the primitive matrix out of which both religion and science emerged” (pp. 362-363).

But the dubious semi-alchemical magic of science is only one type of magic to emerge in the opening paragraphs of Hawthorne’s tale. When Aylmer first suggests to his new wife, Georgiana, that through the magic of his science “the mark upon [her] cheek might be removed” (4), she responds, astonished, that mark—a crimson birthmark on her left cheek—had “so often called a charm that [she had been] simple enough to imagine it might be so” (p. 5). The narrator then explains that this birthmark, which in “shape bore not a little similarity to the human hand, though of the smallest pygmy size” (p. 6) had often drawn comment from the young men who had sought Georgiana’s favor. “Georgiana’s lovers,” the reader learns, “were wont to say that 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. Many a desperate swain would have risked life for the privilege of pressing his lips to the mysterious hand' (p. 6).

In suitors' imaginative characterization of Georgiana's birthmark as a fair hand, a charm carrying magic endowments making all around Georgiana love her, we see a kind of magic entirely different from the alchemical magic of control that Aylmer is eager to apply in order to make his wife "one living specimen of ideal loveliness without the semblance of a flaw" (p. 7). This is, as it were, a white magic that does not change nature into something new, something under our human control, but changes our attitude toward those features of nature we cannot control or change. This white magic, which clearly operates through the figurative and imaginative language of poetry, not only reconciles us to the world as it is; it actually fosters in us a love and appreciation for that world. Such love and appreciation is manifest in the words and behavior of Georgiana's unsuccessful suitors. The beneficent effects of this white magic are also evident in the healthy, not narcissistic, self-love and self-acceptance that define Georgiana's attitude toward her birthmark before Aylmer stuns her by characterizing it as "the visible mark of earthly imperfection" (p. 5) and by suggesting that she allow him to use his science to remove it.

Considered as a force affecting the physical world, the poetic imagination is nugatory. Even poets acknowledge as much. "Poetry," W.H. Auden (1940) famously declared, "makes nothing happen" (Section II, line 5). Yet as powerless as the poetic imagination may be in the physical world, Hawthorne's tale makes quite clear its remarkable influence upon minds and spirits. In the minds of Georgiana's unsuccessful suitors and in the mind of Georgiana herself, the poetic imagination exerts a non-manipulative, non-controlling magic that is central to the contemplative leisure that philosopher Josef Pieper defines as essential to literary culture—and to human flourishing. Pieper (1963) observes,

Leisure is a form of silence, of that silence which is the prerequisite of the apprehension of reality For leisure is a receptive attitude of mind, a contemplative attitude, and it is not only the occasion but also the capacity for steeping oneself in the whole of creation.

Furthermore, there is also a certain serenity in leisure. That serenity springs precisely from . . . our recognition of the mysterious nature of the universe; it springs from the courage of deep confidence, so that we are content to let things take their course. (p. 41)

Because he lacks the confidence to let things take their course, Aylmer is determined to be a scientific worker who *does something* about his wife's birthmark, Aylmer is *quite* blind to benign white magic of the poetic imagination that does *not* change that birthmark but changes the perception of the eyes that view it. Armed with the tools of his scientific-alchemical magic, Aylmer *goes to work* on his wife. But his much wiser albeit less intelligent assistant, Aminadab, mutters a protest: "If she were my wife, I'd never part with that birthmark" (p.15). Aminadab understands the value of the appreciative *inaction* fostered by the poetic imagination of those who could see in Georgiana's birthmark a wonderful, even magical charm. In other words, as Aylmer industriously starts his scientific labors to—as he believes—perfect his wife's physical condition, Aminadab voices a far more prudent perspective with links to what T.S. Eliot strikingly labeled the "necessary receptivity and necessary laziness" of the poet (p. 2).

As a benign magic that "makes nothing happen," one that makes a life-saving virtue out of laziness, the poetic spells invoked by Georgian's suitors may even reflect something like what Taoists refer to as *wu wei* or "wise passivity," a contemplative posture manifest in the poetry of

China's two greatest poets, Li Bai and Du Fu. We see this contemplative letting-be in, for example, Li Bai's "Dialogue in the Mountains" (1990). Li Bai writes,

I am completely at peace

A peach blossom

sails past

on the current

There are worlds beyond this one. (p. 69; lines 5-10)

Or again, in his "Sitting Alone in the Face of Jingting Peak" (2007), where Li Bai says,

All birds have flown away, so high;

A lonely cloud drifts on, so free.

We are not tired, the Peak and I,

Nor I of him, nor he of me. (p. 177; lines 1-4).

Again, we see the white magic of benign passivity—a world away from Aylmer's perilous persistence on *changing* the world—when in his "Two Impromptus" (1989), Du Fu says, "Under the bright, limitless country air / Sun, spring's water flows clear and steady/ . . . It is here, in idleness, I become real" (p. 62; lines 1-2; 2, line 8).

Arguably, the white magic of poetic imagination, a magic that allows Georgiana's unsuccessful suitors and Aminadab to appreciate her the way she is, before she becomes an object for scientific reworking, may even reflect something like what John Keats (1817) famously defined as "negative capability," that is, as the capacity "of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (par. 1). For Hawthorne makes it quite clear that Aylmer is quite *incapable* of being at peace with his doubts about his wife's birthmark but must irritably reach out with his science to *create* the fact of a remade face.

Even before the malign side-effects of his attempt to use science-alchemy to remove his wife's manifest themselves, Georgiana has read enough in his journals of his past experiments to realize that "his most splendid successes were almost invariably failures" (p. 24). And in an episode that darkly foreshadows what Aylmer's science alchemy will finally mean for Georgiana, Aylmer finds his wife reading his journal and irritably warns her, "It is dangerous to read in a sorcerer's books . . . [T]here are pages in that volume which I can scarcely glance over and keep my senses. Take heed lest it prove as detrimental to you" (p. 25). Tragically, Aylmer's scientific sorcery finally costs Georgiana her life.

But Georgiana's death is only part of the monitory message about science that Hawthorne's tale delivers. For Hawthorne's narrative repeatedly shows readers that even if their own lives of risks are not at risk, those who practice the sorcery of science run the risk of losing their humanity. We see this process of dehumanization in Aylmer as "he f[inds Georgiana's] one defect grow[ing] more and more intolerable with every moment of their united lives" (p. 7). Of course, Aylmer considers Georgiana's birthmark less and less acceptable largely because he believes his scientific sorcery gives him the power to remove it. As he explains to his troubled wife, "I feel myself fully competent to render this dear cheek [carrying the birthmark] as faultless as its fellow; and then . . . what will be my triumph when I have corrected what Nature left imperfect in her fairest work. Even Pygmalion, when his sculptured woman came to life, felt not

greater ecstasy than mine will be" (p. 12). Because of his overweening faith in his scientific sorcery, Aylmer is becoming ever less human as he loses his capacity to appreciate and love imperfect people—most clearly his wife—in an imperfect world.

A deep irony thus inheres in Aylmer's warning to his laboratory assistant as he labors over his chemical furnace: "Carefully now, Aminadab; carefully thou human machine; carefully, thou man of clay!" (p. 27). For Aminadab—who appreciates Georgiana just as she is and only reluctantly assists in the scientific project of perfecting her by removing her birthmark—is clearly more human, less of a machine, less of a senseless figure of clay, than is the more brilliant Aylmer, who is losing his human capacity to appreciate and love his wife as she is.

Hawthorne signals his implicit indictment of the black magic of scientific sorcery as a dehumanizing force partly through the narrator's remark that as Aylmer warns Aminadab that he must take care as a human machine and man of clay, he "mutter[s] . . . more to himself than his assistant" (p. 27). But he also signals that indictment through his reference to "a human machine," a clear allusion to the provocative 18th-century book *Man a Machine* (1748) by the physician Julien Offray de La Mettrie, who argues that modern science fully explains human life as a matter of biological and chemical machinery, without an informing mind or spirit.

But "The Birthmark" warns readers of the dehumanizing effects of scientific sorcery not only—perhaps not even chiefly—because modern science dismisses as outmoded superstition all notions of the human mind or spirit. The greater danger of dehumanization is evident in the way Aylmer increasingly obsesses over using his scientific sorcery on Georgiana to make her "sensible frame . . . all perfect" (p. 32). What the readers see in Aylmer's attitude toward his wife is what poet Carol Bly (1990) has described as "the problem-solving mentality," so intent upon turning everything into "discrete solvable problems" that it blocks out "the mystical outlook" of imaginative "contemplation" found in poetry (pp. 202-208).

Carol Bly has described as "the problem-solving mentality," so intent upon turning everything into "discrete solvable problems" that it blocks out "the mystical outlook" of imaginative "contemplation" (202-208). So completely has the practice of scientific sorcery turned Aylmer into an increasingly inhuman problem-solver that by the end of Hawthorne's story he cannot even see his wife as a human being. She is just a problem to be solved. What is even more chilling is the way this problem-solving mentality causes Georgiana herself to lose her conception of *herself* as a human being. From the healthy self-acceptance she evinces early in the tale when readers see her under the beneficent spell of the white magic practiced by those who poetically regard her birthmark as a charm left by a fairy's hand, Georgiana all too swiftly moves—under the sway of Aylmer's black magic of scientific sorcery—to a view of herself as nothing more than a problem urgently needing a scientific solution. So completely does this black magic persuade Georgiana that she is nothing but a problem to be solved that she cries out to her sorcerer-scientist husband, "[L]et the attempt [to remove the birthmark] be made at whatever risk. Danger is nothing to me; for life, while this hateful object makes me the object of your horror and disgust,—life is a burden which I would fling down with joy. Either remove this dreadful hand, or take my wretched life!" (p. 11). And later, when Aylmer belatedly acknowledges the risk of using his scientific sorcery to remove the birthmark, Georgiana still is so fully convinced that she is nothing but a problem to be solved that she insists, "Remove it, remove it, whatever be the cost, or we shall both go mad!" (p. 29).

If a destructive fixation counts as a form of madness, then both Aylmer and his unfortunate wife have already slipped over the edge by this point, their shared animosity for

Georgiana in her natural form the sad consequence of the narrow problem-solving mentality that scientific sorcery fosters. So completely does Georgiana succumb to this dehumanizing fixation that even as she is dying she fails to acknowledge that her death means the loss of her own priceless existence as a human being. Rather, with her dying breath she senselessly praises Aylmer, telling him, “You have aimed loftily; you have done nobly. Do not repent that with so high and pure a feeling, you have rejected the best the earth could offer” (p. 35). Even as it kills an innocent victim, scientific sorcery can rob her of all sense of the value of herself as a human being.

Readers generally recognize that Hawthorne depicts with compelling artistic artistry the sad human consequences of scientific sorcery. Lamentably, however, such consequences may extend well beyond the borders of Hawthorne’s fiction. Political scientist Jean Bethke Elshtain (2008) regards “The Birthmark” as “so prescient it seems as if Hawthorne imagined in advance . . . [the] quest for human genetic perfectibility such as we confront today” (p. 193). Elshtain thus believes Hawthorne’s tale provides a much-needed literary perspective on the twenty-first-century attempt to use medical science to “achieve perfect control over nature, to get our bodies into shape so that we are no longer subject to their failures, frailties, and necessities” (p. 194). Elshtain views Hawthorne’s story as a cautionary tale with much to teach an age intent on using “positive genetic enhancement [for] controlling and shaping exactly the kind of progeny we want” (p. 194). If Elshtain is right, then a generation of designer babies may well feel, as does Hawthorne’s Georgiana, that they must satisfy standards of perfection attainable only through scientific control of nature. Hawthorne’s tale thus shows readers that while science may—just as I.A. Richards supposed—subvert a magical *weltanschauung* conducive to poetry, it actually fosters a very different magical outlook, that of scientific sorcery, destructive of both poetry and life itself.

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