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TS English

9 June 2021

Socrates' Contradiction and Love Tragedy in "The Birthmark"

Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birthmark" has lent itself often to explicit allegorical interpretations of the alluring but hopeless pursuit of perfection. Unsatisfied and eventually maniacally disturbed by the sole taunting and unbearable imperfection of the birthmark on his wife Georgiana's cheek, Aylmer – the scientist – toils towards attaining the great powers of science and nature to remove it. His fervent toil culminates in a scientific success, for the birthmark fades, but Georgiana ceases with it. Another strand of criticism employs a feminist approach, arguing that Georgiana's treatment as an object to be operated upon, punished, or "remedied" for her defect stems from a gender hierarchy. As Judith Fetterley famously wrote of "The Birthmark", "It is a demonstration of how to murder your wife and get away with it" (485). As meaningful and rich these explicit allegorical interpretations are, a question must be asked – this question is well articulated by Jules Zanger, who asks: "Once certain particulars have been identified as the significant ones and incorporated into a general thematic proposition, what shall be done with the leftovers?" (364). Zanger posits two pathways through which these 'leftovers' of Hawthorne's work, the remainders of the more explicit themes and allegorical interpretations of scientific pursuit and gender domination, can be addressed: either as elements of a new critical formulation, or as background supports for details considered to be of greater meaning.

They [the 'leftovers'] 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. (364)

Although both of these pathways are presented in a somewhat pejorative light – Zanger continues his essay on "The Birthmark" not in exploration of any particular theme, but instead in focus on the meta-involvement of seemingly insignificant details in dramatizing and making meaningful the work – this essay is an attempt to, at least in spirit, capture the first pathway, to be Zanger's "corrosive critical formulation" of the "leftovers". Hawthorne's writing is rich with depths of human emotion and thought beyond what an explicit allegorical interpretation would return. The "leftovers" are not so much "corroded" as they are unified.

The dramatic premise and somber conclusion of "The Birthmark" elicits interpretations of the work as cautionary in nature and bleak in spirit. Few have thus interpreted love as a central current. However, tragedy and suffering are not exclusive towards love; it is amidst agony and pain in which love is heightened in its profoundness and meaning. Indeed, the framework of love furthers the depth of understanding the pursuit of knowledge. Although Hawthorne is sparse with explicit references to love and romance in comparison to that of science, love is the premise that unites Aylmer and Georgiana and that fuels the motion of "The Birthmark". Aylmer begins captivated by "a spiritual affinity more attractive than any chemical one. He had left his laboratory to the care of an assistant ... and persuaded a beautiful woman to become his wife" (1). Yet, it is noted that "it was no unusual for the love of science to rival the love of woman in its depth and absorbing energy" (1). A deep, passionate love for science and the pursuit of knowledge, in this framing, emerges in conflict with the visceral, romantic love; Aylmer's love for Georgiana "could only be by intertwining itself with his love of science, and uniting the strength of the latter to his own" (1). These loves are inextricably linked such that the relationship between Aylmer, Georgiana, and the pursuit of science can only be understood first

by understanding how love functions in "The Birthmark". Moreover, this intertwining poses questions as to how the grand abstractions of science seemingly beyond 'earthly' desires and operations interact necessarily with the inherent humanness of love.

At the height of his elation when Aylmer conceives of a design to remove Georgiana's birthmark, he declares, "Even Pygmalion, when his sculptured woman assumed life, felt not greater ecstasy than mine will be" (19). In book 10 of Ovid's Metamorphoses, Pygmalion – a Cypriot sculptor – falls in love with an ivory sculpture of a woman. Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty, grants Pygmalion's wishes for the sculpture to assume a living spirit. To characterize Aylmer merely as a sculptor of science driven by a rapacious pursuit of knowledge, thus, artificially obscures the intertwined relationship between notions of scientific creation and love as desire. Like Pygmalion, these dynamic entities cannot exist independently of one another. The dramatic juxtaposition of the rosy myth of Pygmalion, a story of the creation of beauty and its manifestation via the processes of the heavens as love, with the tragic death of Georgiana as a tragically failed Pygmalion experiment, moreover, suggests that the relationship between love and science is turbulent and violent, heaving in great sighs from the peaks of elation to the valleys of death. The character of this turbulence and violence, however, is not one that necessarily tends towards separation, of forcing two repellent entities towards each other. Rather, this turbulence is the necessary and inevitable result of this mode of love and science tightening in every moment with an attraction that trumps the prior, from initial contact. "The Birthmark" is a visceral, vivid exploration into this self-tightening turbulence.

Plato's *Symposium*, written around 385 BCE, has persisted as a profound philosophical text on love. The text details the gathering of several notable men, including Socrates, attending a banquet honoring the writing success of Agathon, a tragic poet. Phaedrus, an Athenian aristocrat, suggests that the participants of the banquet deliver speeches on the god Eros: "I think

that at the present moment we who are here assembled cannot do better than honor the good Eros" (7). Each of the figures follows by celebrating Eros in a unique light, often reflecting their profession. Eryximachus, the physician, asserts that medicine is "knowledge of the loves and desires of the body, and how to satisfy them or not" (16); the most skilled physician "is he who is able to separate fair love from foul, or to convert one into the other" (16). Aristophanes, the comic, tells a story in which humans began originally as two-bodied, growing to become too ambitious and prideful. Zeus crippled these two-bodied creatures by splitting them in half; love is thus the primal pursuit of the other half, a desire to be made whole. Agathon, however, criticizes the previous speakers for their inadequacy in praising the god Eros.

Instead of praising the god Eros, or unfolding his nature, [the previous speakers] appear to have congratulated mankind on the benefits which he confers upon them. But I would rather praise the god first, and then speak of his gifts; this is always the right way of praising everything. (23)

Agathon follows with a rhetorically elaborate worship of Eros as the fairest, youngest, and most beautiful, as capable only of instilling virtue into man, and of being the originator of the great works of wisdom and knowledge. Socrates ensues, noting Agathon's masterful rhetoric but questioning the truth of Agathon's grand and romanticized conception of Eros. Socrates begins by identifying a logical contradiction: love is a desire directed towards a want or need, for love is a love for something as a father is a father of someone; thus, love is a love of the beautiful and the good. Yet, one cannot be said to possess what one desires, as one who has attained an ultimate principle need not desire it, and hence Eros, the embodiment of love and desire, is not beautiful, good, or wise as Agathon has portrayed it to be. Rather, love exists neither as beautiful nor ugly, Socrates pronounces, neither wise nor ignorant, but instead as a continual pursuit.

Aylmer's love and desire for wisdom is Agathon's worship of Eros –enthralled by the illusion of love as heavenly, beautiful, and wise, a grand path towards ultimate knowledge. His

love for Georgiana is does not deteriorate or vanish – it remains an honest love, albeit one that metamorphizes from a love of being to a love of principle. Aylmer's love detaches from the grounds of being and instead aims towards abstract principle and concept in the same flourish as Agathon's romanticization and idealization of Eros. He thus exists at Agathon's contradiction – his desires to attain lofty visions of principle via the medium of love presupposes his attainment of those visions; they are self-referential and self-contained. Thus, Socrates' logic is the tragedy of "The Birthmark": Aylmer's conceptions of love force a contradiction that strengthens itself, strangling the possibility of reconciliation. This is contradiction initiates and fuels the violent development of turbulence between Agathonian conceptions of love and of science. Georgiana's death is the grim but inevitable conclusion of Agathonian idolization of love. Ultimately, "The Birthmark" illustrates an ironic truth Aylmer fails to capture: love is not romanticized into principle nor concerned with worship or godly ideals.

Elizabeth R. Napier suggests that Aylmer embodies a Scheidekünstler, or an "artist of separation", in the German tradition of alchemy. "Counterpointing Georgiana's images of mystic union," Napier writes, "are Aylmer's images of removal and separation" (33). Georgiana exists as an embodiment of spiritual union; the birthmark is "the center of her reconciliatory nature, which joins her simultaneously to the world of men and the realm of the fairies" (32). It is this union, Napier argues, that Aylmer seeks to separate, to remove the juxtaposition of opposites; he wishes for Georgiana to be physically perfect, a manifestation of his desire to "eliminate the last trace of the psychic opposite he abhors" (34). In Napier's interpretation, as Scheidekünstler, Aylmer is motivated by a maniacal hatred and vile impulse against Georgiana's birthmark. Indeed, Aylmer's fascination with the birthmark as a sole disturbing imperfection to Georgiana's embodiment of perfection lend themselves to such interpretations of Aylmer's character and

relationship to Georgiana. Yet, such interpretations overlook the role of love in establishing and structuring Aylmer and Georgiana's relationship.

Although Aylmer does make Georgiana an object of experimentation, it is of a more complex nature not resemblant of the sinister manner as Napier and others has suggested Aylmer embodies. Aylmer's love for Georgiana is great, but his love is intricate, unique, and detached from Georgiana's being. Aylmer's love aims at principle and concept, abstractions beyond Georgiana's physicality. Georgiana becomes a means, not an end, to Aylmer's love, and thus Aylmer's love is diffuse and vague, grasping towards high principle. It should be noted that the colloquial associations of love as beautiful, right, just, and compassionate must be temporarily deserted, for our understandings of love must broaden to accommodate its context in "The Birthmark". After Georgiana tells Aylmer that she is willing for him to remove the birthmark "at whatever risk" (18), Aylmer responds with great zeal and flourish:

'Noblest, dearest, tenderest wife,' cried Aylmer, rapturously, 'doubt not my power. I have already given this matter the deepest thought – thought which might almost have enlightened me to create a being less perfect than yourself... I feel myself fully competent to render this deer cheek as faultless as its fellow; and then, most beloved, what will be my triumph when I shall have corrected what Nature left imperfect in her fairest work!' (19)

Georgiana becomes a proxy, a mortal body, a vessel for Aylmer's desires and twofold love. Aylmer desires to attain principle, and he loves Georgiana as a mortal, physical connection to such principle. Georgiana's self-sacrifice and dismissal of risk positions herself as the vessel or the template through which Aylmer creates faultlessness and perfects imperfection. It is a visceral and tangible connection to abstracted principle of Nature. The narrator describes of Aylmer – "He handled physical details as if there were nothing beyond them; yet spiritualized them all, and redeemed himself from materialism by his strong and eager aspiration towards the infinite" (51). Georgiana is the material proxy of redeeming through which Aylmer manifests his

spiritualized aspirations, abstracted into the infinite. When Georgiana proclaims that the "horrible stigma" on her cheek must be removed despite the risk for the sake of both Georgiana and Aylmer's sanity, Aylmer responds grimly, "Heaven knows your words are too true" (70). Georgiana offers herself as an association with heavenliness and principle. When Georgiana again submits her life to Aylmer, calmly declaring that "I shall quaff whatever draught you bring me" (65), Aylmer is deeply moved, responding — "My noble wife … I knew not the height and depth of your nature until now" (66). Aylmer's emotion tenderly blooms in response to Georgiana offering herself wholly and in her entirety as a link towards the grand abstraction of Nature and the Heavens. For her role as such a link, Aylmer holds a great love for Georgiana; that such love may perhaps be a perverse one, defecting from traditional normative understandings of what love ought to be, does not detach from it being a sincere form and demonstration of love.

Agathon and Aylmer mutually indulge a worship of love as possessing the ultimate conceptions of principle. An explicit theme channeling throughout Agathon's speech is that of beauty and purity; Eros is young, tender and swift, aesthetically flexible and symmetric in his grace, of the gods the "most blessed because he is the fairest and best" (23). Similarly, Aylmer's troubles, as explicitly presented, stem from reconciling Georgiana's beauty with her birthmark, the singular flaw on a canvas of perfection. Beauty is a visual and visceral manifestation of completeness and perfection. In "Hawthorne's 'The Birthmark': Science and Romance as Belief," Barbara Eckstein argues that Aylmer's romanticized pursuit of an ultimate beauty pushes Georgiana towards death as a martyr of the abstracted principle. "It is, according to this code [the religion of romance]," Eckstein writes, "better for Georgiana to die for love and perfect beauty, ... than to live beyond the romance plot – in marriage where her flaws are acknowledged" (514). The institutionalization of romance, and its associated idolizations and

idealizations – the patterns of worship and romanticization Agathon engages vigorously in – solidifies the "code of romantic heroines" (514). This code abstracts beauty into a principle or concept for which love is and must concern, and thus dictates an ultimate worship in perfecting or attaining it. Indeed, it is Georgiana's beauty that first attracts Aylmer to her. While Eckstein's argument of perfecting beauty supports the model of Georgiana and Aylmer each as "a victim who participates in her [or his] own destruction" (515), though, Agathon's exposition demonstrates that more lies in the worship of love beyond abstracted beauty and purity.

Beauty is the base structure in Agathon's worship of love, but Eros' greatest glory,
Agathon proclaims, is his virtue; "he can neither do nor suffer wrong to or from any god or man"
(24), for the universality and strength of his craft ignites only courage and bravery in all. Eros
inspires the most eloquent wordcraft in and makes poets and artists of all that he touches. The
love Eros diffuses fuels enlightenment, for "He whom Eros touches not walks in darkness" (24).
The Muses' melodies, Hephaestus' metallurgy, Athena's weaving, and Zeus' empire were
formed from Eros as the originating light and inventor. Agathon's conception of Eros and his
craft of love is not merely concerned with beauty and purity, but of love's greatest essence as the
abstracted, ultimate origination of knowledge. Georgiana's self-professed relinquishment of the
constraint of risk is constitutes herself as a vessel towards this ultimate principle, the origin of
knowledge and Aylmer's love; it is this manifestation of love that, Aylmer declares, leads him
"deeper than ever into the heart of science" (19). Aylmer's love for Georgiana transcends beyond
the fulfillment of beauty, but seeks to manifest itself as the origination of great knowledge.

Agathonian conceptions of love are strongly shaped by the notion of Eros and his craft of love as capable only of instilling virtue. Likewise, Aylmer's desire and love for the principle and abstraction of beauty and knowledge is fueled by an insistence that such a pursuit is unquestionably good and can bring only the gifts of Eros. After Georgiana faints, Aylmer kneels

"by his wife's side, watching her earnestly, but without alarm; for he was confident in his science, and felt that he could draw a magic circle round her within which no evil might intrude" (28). His science, framed through love and desire of the great principles, is a fending of the evil that may prey upon the weakened Georgiana. Agathonian conceptions of love have distorted Aylmer's understanding of virtue, for here Aylmer frames the very tool that symbolizes his convulsive fear – the cause of Georgiana's fainting – as one of virtue. When Georgiana comments on how terrible the power to "produce a discord in Nature which all the world ... would find cause to curse" (38) would be to possess, Aylmer assures her, "Oh, do not tremble, my love, ... I would not wrong either you or myself by working such inharmonious effects upon our lives" (39). In a similar instance not distant from the prior interaction, Georgiana, horrified by Aylmer's possession of the 'elixir of immortality', asks, "Why do you keep such a terrific drug?" (45), to which Aylmer responds, smiling and at ease: "Do not mistrust me, dearest... its virtuous potency is yet greater than its harmful one" (46). When Aylmer has accomplished the liquid that will remove Georgiana's birthmark, Aylmer declares, "You are fit for heaven without tasting death! But why do we speak of dying? The draught cannot fail" (75). Aylmer's confidence is not quite the surety of wise scientific knowing – the narrator informs that he has not had a significant history of attaining his aspirations – but is a product of Agathonian romanticism and faith in the ultimacy of love. The bond of love must be just and right, and thus Aylmer derives a confidence he never found prior from Georgiana as the vessel towards the greater.

This confidence, however, is tragically misplaced. Aylmer's subscription to Agathonian conceptions of love forces his existence at a contradiction. Socrates' logic of desire and of possession is not merely an esoteric witty quip, but manifests itself in visceral and tragic embodiments in "The Birthmark". The very nature of Aylmer's love for Georgiana – as a mortal

link to attaining great abstraction – is fraught, usurped by the irony of love as a desire. The removal of the birthmark is not an attainment, but a demonstration of attaining the abstractions of beauty and knowledge. Aylmer's love for Georgiana, formulated as a desire to attain these abstractions, is thus tragically self-circular; his love seeks to demonstrate attainment, but his desire suggests he cannot. The design of such a demonstration – of a love for Georgiana as a vessel to the greater concept – is the quiet admission of one's failure, for love will remain eternally a desire, and thus Aylmer's connection to the great abstractions through the medium of love can never manifest in the actuality of attainment. Socrates' logic is fatal and definitive: one cannot have what one desires. Aylmer's love for Georgiana, thus, is tragically fallacious from its conception. Georgiana, wandering through Aylmer's scientific library, finds a large folio detailing Aylmer's scientific career, and "could not but observe that his most splendid successes were almost invariably failures, if compared with the ideal at which he had aimed" (51). This disparity results from Aylmer's Agathonian worship and spiritualization of principle into abstraction, separating itself from the realities of material accomplishment. It is this disparity that Aylmer hopes to reconcile with Agathonian conceptions of love, in which love serves as the mortal bridge towards the Good. His formulation of such reconciliation through his love of Georgiana, by Socrates' logic of love, cannot hold. It is this struggle of contradiction that Aylmer manifests in his erratic behavior and which provides "The Birthmark" its sense of motion.

Aylmer's subscription to an Agathonian conception of love, in which love is celebrated not as a gift upon the being of humans but instead of abstracted principle and concept, is dynamic. The contradiction of love as worship of and means to high principle is self-strengthening, strangling the possibility of reconciliation in a perpetually expanding vortex.

Thus, Aylmer's love is dynamic in nature – the gradual strangling of the possibility of reconciliation the powers the movement of the story. Aylmer begins, troubled, by asking

Georgiana, "has it never occurred to you that the mark upon your cheek might be removed?" (3), to which Georgiana is startled and slightly embarrassed. Some night later, after Georgiana asks Aylmer the possibility of removing of the birthmark, Aylmer hastily tells Georgiana that "Dearest Georgiana, I have spent much thought upon the subject ... I am convinced of the perfect practicability of its removal" (17). Aylmer's thought at this moment is one of a caged anxiety, a design constrained to the realm of the mind by deprivation of communication. Georgiana frees the anxiety from the cage of the mind by fulfilling the deprivation: "If there be the remotest possibility of it [the removal of the birthmark], ... let the attempt to be made at whatever risk ... You have deep science ... Cannot you remove this little, little mark?" (18). Aylmer's love blossoms, for the beauty that was the basis for sparking their attachment has become the basis for attaining higher principle of knowledge, as Agathon's worship of Eros flourishes in the pinnacle of its romanticism and fervor at the culmination of abstracted beauty in arrival to something greater. It is at this moment at which Aylmer demonstrates the first and only romantic physical gesture – a tender kiss. The following day, Aylmer sustains his excited passion and sets to work; Aylmer begins to devolve into a turbulent simultaneous dualism of exhaustion and invigoration. In the presence of Georgiana, Aylmer emanates a "boyish exuberance of gayety" (56); in the following moment, in his furnace, Aylmer "was pale as death, anxious and absorbed" (58). The narrator notes of Aylmer's erratic behavior, quipping, "How different from the sanguine and joyous mien that he had assumed for Georgiana's encouragement!" (58). After Aylmer believes he has finally demonstrated principle, has reconciled desire with attainment, he is thrust in a bizarre frenzy, laughing in the deranged ecstasy of success; to Aminadab, his assistance, Aylmer cackles, "Ah, clod! Ah, earthly mass! You have served me well! Matter and spirit – earth and heaven – have both done their part in this! Laugh, thing of the senses!" (85). Aylmer's erratic behavior and turmoil is not merely the result of the intensity or fervor naturally

associated with great scientific minds, nor merely from the disparity between aspiration and accomplishment, as in his prior scientific endeavors. Rather, it is a distress that love – the embodiment of ultimate concept – has not remedies such disparity; it has not formulated and followed cleanly the attainment of such great principle as "trifling" (40) as it seemed to have suggested.

Aylmer values the 'cure' for the birthmark as either the "draught of immortal happiness or [of] misery" (58). The liquid is the manifestation of the reciprocal love and romance that has bound Aylmer and Georgiana, and hence guarantees the binding of Aylmer and the heavenly principle. Moreover, it is the purported remedy to Aylmer's history of disparity between aspiration and accomplishment, the force that will finally reconcile desire and attainment. Aylmer's faith and embedding of Agathonian conceptions of love deep within this attempt at reconciliation, thus, taunts him; for love as a desire promised the heavens, to be the originator of great knowledge. Aylmer, deeply touched by Georgiana's gestures of institutionalized romance through self-sacrifice as the vessel to attain higher principle, becomes exhausted by love's tantalizing self-offerings. It is this circular motion of a dog chasing its tail, of Aylmer exhausting himself in pursuit of fulfilling the promise of Agathon's love worship, through which "The Birthmark" derives its own movement; Aylmer's slender figure chases desperately after the mirage, binding himself closer to Georgiana through Agathonian love and romance, tightening the contradiction.

Science has been associated with enlightenment and there has always been a romanticization of discovery and attainment via the modes of scientific inquiry and toil. On an immediate level, Agathonian conceptions of love as the means or possessor of the great qualities and principles pose problematic implications for its relationship to science and the discovery of knowledge. Throughout "The Birthmark", this conception of love functions as a technology in

the sense of existing both as an honest emotion Aylmer and Georgiana express towards one another and as a medium through which Georgiana is made a mortal vessel towards attaining greater principle. Moreover, Aylmer is driven towards the deployment of this technology of love as a method through which he can unify his strivings and his aspirations in a way he never could with only his scientific labors. "The Birthmark", thus, in its framing of love, acts as a refutation of the romanticist myth of the "lone madman scientist" – the lone scientist toils in their laboratory, investing heavy quantities of time and emotional effort, and at last culminates their toils in the victory of some great achievement of knowledge and discovery. This myth relies upon the romanticized nobility of the dark and mysterious individual's dedication towards an abstracted knowledge and eureka. Aylmer's strivings far surpassed what he could attain with his scientific capabilities, and he turns towards Georgiana and love as a linkage between two human minds and bodies in remedying such deficiencies. Yet, Aylmer's embodiment of the Agathonian rendition of love as possessing ultimate abstraction and principle drives him to retain the spirit of the lone scientist, toiling in his laboratory excitedly, fixating upon great abstraction and principle. Although the lone scientist has found love and a lover through which said love can be channeled through, the scientist has retained the romanticization. Moreover, Georgiana, held under the code of romanticism, as Eckstein terms it, fuels the rigid endeavor towards an abstracted vision of perfection and beauty. It is within the individual mind in which the romanticized nobility of the lone scientist flourishes, accompanied by the abstractions and codes of romanticization. Yet, "The Birthmark" pushes further into understanding romanticization not merely as a function of scope, but also as a deeply permeated and perhaps inescapable aspect in institutions of knowledge production. It is a provocative irony that Aylmer sought out the most explicit representation of romanticization – unbridled, direct love – in attempting to address the

failures of his pursuits for ultimate and grand knowledge, in which such romanticization resides as structural to the integrity of the attainment-aspiration discrepancy that characterizes Aylmer.

Love, in the course of literary criticism on "The Birthmark", is an unlikely subject, but it nevertheless cannot help but embed itself – explicit or implicitly – in an exploration of Aylmer's pursuit. Aylmer's subscription to Agathonian ideals of love as a means to accomplish what he never could with science is tantalizing and self-strengthening in its allure. The distress of a man enveloped irreconcilably in the vortex of contradiction, and his attempts to hopelessly reconcile such contradiction by strengthening it, invigorates and agitates the motion of "The Birthmark", culminating in the death of Georgiana, the subtly violent manifestation of the ultimate irony of Agathon's worship. The agitation and invigoration of the story's diegesis, moreover, is a projection of Socrates' Socratic questioning method – associated with its seeming formality and superfluousness in contrast to Agathon's romanticist, sophist worship – into a coexistence of the viscerality and the logic of love in "The Birthmark". Aylmer's love for Georgiana is distorted and turbulent, but it is governed by the oracular logic of Socrates, and in predictable tragedy. Georgiana, the vessel of love through which Aylmer invested his hopes and nearly touched the sun, ceases, and so does the link. Tragedies are often defined by a certain dreadful inevitability; it is this quality of inevitability and the persistence of Socrates' logic with which an honest love can contort disquietingly and profoundly into a costly irony.

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