HAWTHORNE'S Enoch: Prophetic Irony in
THE SCARLET LETTER

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"A prophet or magician skilled to read the character of flame" must fathom the mystery of The Scarlet Letter's little Pearl, a secret first read by Roger Chillingworth, a practitioner of black arts, whose subtle torture forces the Rev. Mr. Dimmesdale to take up his principal prophetic office: the public admission that the child is his daughter. In confessing to his startled flock that he has put on "the mein of a spirit, mournful because so pure in a sinful world!—and sad, because he missed his heavenly kindred" (p. 255), the minister accurately presents the effect of his anguished hypocrisy upon the congregation: they have seen him as angelic. In his study, Dimmesdale himself had observed in his glass mocking devils and "a group of shining angels, who flew upward heavily, as sorrow-laden, but grew more ethereal as they rose" (p. 145). These unhappy angels provide a significant pattern of dramatic irony for interpreting Dimmesdale's role as prophet in the romance.

During the minister's Election sermon, the community is affected "as if an angel, in his passage to the skies, had shaken his bright wings over the people for an instant,—at once a shadow and a splendor,—and had shed down a shower of golden truths upon them" (p. 249). So impressed are they, that it would not "have seemed a miracle too high to be wrought for one so holy, had he ascended before their eyes, waxing dimmer and brighter, and fading at last into the light of heaven" (p. 252). The people's apparent blurring of the distinction between what were traditionally two separate orders of creation, men and angels, is suggested earlier in the book when the sexton remarks to the minister that the great celestial letter betokens Governor Winthrop's being "made an angel" (p. 158). That Hawthorne may be accurate in presenting popular belief is supported by Puritan tombstone carving—a sample of which provides the book's striking final image—making no distinction between saved souls and angels. The general mind therefore accorded with a long tradition of Neo-Platonic philosophers (Marsilio Ficino, for example), and with Milton, whose Raphael says to Adam, "Your bodies may at last turn all to spirit, / Improv'd by tract of time, and wing'd ascend / Ethereal" (Paradise Lost, V, 497-499). It also accorded with literature widely read in Hawthorne's day.

Readers of such works as Edward Young's Night Thoughts, which suggested that,

Angels are men in lighter habit clad,
High o'er celestial mountains wing'd in flight;
And men are angels loaded for an hour,
Who wade this miry vale, and climb with pain,
And slippery step, the bottom of the steep;

would recognize the plight of Dimmesdale, "the man of ethereal attributes, whose voice the angels might else have listened to and answered," kept from climbing the Puritan patriarchs' "mountain-peaks of faith and sanctity" by a "burden . . . of crime or anguish" (p. 142).

Dimmesdale's identification with angels is given greater ironic force by his prophetic office for the community. While he seems to have attained what the "true saintly fathers" of the Puritan church lacked, "the gift that descended upon the chosen disciples, at Pentecost, in tongues of flame," which enabled them to communicate with "the whole human brotherhood in the heart's native language" (pp. 141-143), the minister
is tortured by his hypocrisy. He responds to Hester’s assurance that he is reverenced: “Canst thou deem it . . . a consolation, that I must stand in my pulpit, and meet so many eyes turned upward to my face, as if the light of heaven were beaming from it!—must see my flock hungry for the truth, and listening to my words as if a tongue of Pentecost were speaking!—and then look inward, and discern the black reality of what they idolize?” (p. 191). Yet as he here presents himself, and as he appears at the Election sermon (XXXII), Dimmesdale does fulfill a prophetic and apostolic role. He may serve, in fact, as a type of Moses (Exod 34:29) or Stephen (Acts 6:15), both of whose countenances are illuminated like those of angels while they discourse on essentially the topic of Dimmesdale’s sermon, “the relation between the Deity and the communities of mankind” (p. 249).

As he himself recognizes, the minister’s “apostolic” gifts are linked to his passion for Hester and his guilt in hiding his parentage of Pearl. In the forest Dimmesdale, seemingly a failed Puritan prophet, is strengthened by Hester, whom he calls “my better angel”—perhaps in a parody of Kings 19:4—and whose resolution to run away with him makes him feel “made anew, and with new powers to glorify Him that hath been merciful” (pp. 201-202). When he delivers his sermon, he is indeed taken up by “a spirit as of prophecy” which constrains “him to its purpose as mightily as the old prophets of Israel were constrained” (p. 249), but his final revelation is not of God’s relationship to men, but of his relationship to his daughter. Throughout The Scarlet Letter, the tensions between the minister’s earthly emotions and the biblical types through which they are perceived by Dimmesdale himself and by his Puritan congregation are particularly amplified in his role as prophet transformed to angel.

Dimmesdale is supposed to belong naturally among the elders “whose faculties had been elaborated by weary toil among their books, and by patient thought, and etherealized, moreover, by spiritual communications with the better world, into which their purity of life had almost introduced these holy personages, with their garments of mortality still clinging to them” (p. 141). Since, as has been seen, the public view is that Dimmesdale might be miraculously translated to heaven, he may be likened to Elijah, a prophet so removed. But another figure is more explicitly suggested.

The Puritan imagination was enough affected by the matter of prophets lifted to heaven to have included in The New England Primer, the substance of which little Pearl is said to have mastered (pp. 111-112), its fifth question, “Who was the first translated?” The answer is Enoch, with whom Dimmesdale contrasts himself in a sermon he dare not deliver: “I, in whose daily life you discern the sanctity of Enoch—I, whose footsteps, as you suppose, leave a gleam along my earthly track, whereby pilgrims that shall come after me may be guided to the regions of the blest,—. . . . I am utterly a pollution and a lie” (p. 143). Even Chillingworth makes reference to Enoch in his comment on “saintly men, who walk with God” (p. 122), echoing Genesis 5:24. Enoch, however, is a figure who transcends the bounds of orthodoxy, and to understand him better we must consult “the lore of the Rabbis” (p. 126), which occupies a place in the minister’s study.

The pseudographical Book of Enoch, based on Genesis 6:1-4, contains the prophet’s visions of heaven, including the punishment of the fallen angels. It enjoyed popularity in Europe in several versions, may have influenced Milton, and appears to have been on Pico della Mirandola’s reading list; in discussing man’s potential to make himself “an angel, and a son of God,” Pico writes, “metamorphoses were popular among the Jews. . . . For the more secret Hebrew theology at one time reshapes holy Enoch into an angel of divinity.” Romantic thought also inclined toward such metamor-
phases, and the figure of Enoch naturally attracted its attention, as did those fallen angels with whom he is associated.¹

New translations of *Enoch* were subjects of critical discussion in Hawthorne’s day. In addition to striking chords of Neoplatonism, they also raised questions about the nature of revelation and focused attention on archetypal readings of the world’s religious literature. A compendium of Romantic uses of *Enoch’s* themes is an 1833 review in *Fraser’s Magazine*, which discusses literature and inspiration. After quoting Lycidas, it takes up Hawthorne’s favorite symbol of revelation, the heart: “Home! sweet home! Look homeward!—there lies the crypt, the ark, the chest!” or whatever other ‘receptacle’ in which inspired writings shall be found. Home! Let each man place his hand on his heart, and find it there. There is the place of mystery, both of godliness and iniquity. Thence must come every revelation worthy of the name.”¹⁹ Certainly Dimmesdale’s characteristic gesture of putting his hand to his heart indicates his withholding of his inner secret from the community; and after his confession of his pose as a mournful spirit, he does in fact display “what he bears on his own breast, his own red stigma,” which “is no more than the type of what has seared his inmost heart!” (p. 255). This final revelation links him to Hester and Pearl, the living embodiment of the scarlet letter.

Pearl’s role is parallel to that of Noah in *The Book of Enoch*. Like Noah, she is one of those strange children more suited to be among angels than among men (p. 90). In *Enoch*, Lamech laments, “I have begotten a son, unlike to other children.” He worries that, “He is not human; but resembling the offspring of the angels of heaven, is of a different nature from ours, being altogether unlike us. His eyes are bright as rays of the angels.”¹⁰ Hester raises similar questions about Pearl. “What is this being,” she asks, “which I have brought into the world!” (p. 96). Though Enoch is able to foretell great things of Noah, however, Dimmesdale can only assure his daughter a human future by admission of his own passion in fathering her.

An admission of passion by the community’s “angel” puts him in the company of those angels in *Enoch* who fell for “the daughters of men” (Genesis 6:2). Carl Jung’s discussion of Byron’s “Heaven and Earth,” which treats the union of angelic and human, summarizes well some of the themes Hawthorne develops in the case of Dimmesdale: “The power of God is menaced by the seductions of passion; heaven is threatened with the second fall of angels. If we translate this projection back into the psychological sphere from whence it came, it would mean that the good and rational Power which rules the world with wise laws is threatened by the chaotic, primitive force of passion.”¹¹ Throughout the romance, especially in the forest scene, passion is linked with lawless nature (p. 203). The *via media* of passion and reason is domestic. The home for which each of the characters strives ought to be a means of keeping passion in bounds. Pearl, because she is the embodiment of adulterous passion, in her final domestication signals the resolution of the tension between passion and law.

Unlike Enoch, Dimmesdale can neither translate nor see into the next world. Hester, who seems to hope for some reunion there with the minister, asks him, “Thou lookest far into eternity, with those bright dying eyes! Then tell me what thou seest?” He can only respond with the injunction to trust in God (p. 256). He is an Enoch who ends up in the graveyard, where he shares with Hester the single tombstone indicative of the community’s acceptance of their bond in the stigma of the letter; however, this union is also found in the living letter, Pearl. For “their earthly lives and future destinies were conjoined” in Pearl, who is “at once the material union, and the spiritual idea, in whom they met, and were to dwell immortally together” (p. 207). Dimmesdale is
brought to reveal his relationship to the organic world in Pearl, and his prophetic office points to the values of the human heart and the domestic circle.

NOTES


2 Chillingworth's black arts are treated in my Hawthorne's "Chillingworth: Alchemist and Physiognomist," TWA, 72 (1984), 8-16.


4 For an analysis of how this distinction disappeared in Ficino, see Michael J. B. Allen, "The Absent Angel in Ficino's Philosophy," Journal of the History of Ideas, 36 (1975), 219-40. The backgrounds of Romantic thought show a distinct movement in this direction; angelic transformation is a favorite theme in its occult sources especially. See Auguste Viatte, Les Sources Occultes du Romanticisme (Paris: H. Champion, 1928).


6 The New England Primer (Hartford: Ira Webster, 1843).


8 Consider Wordsworth's comment: "I used to brood over the stories of Enoch and Elijah, and almost to persuade myself that, whatever might become of others, I should be translated, in something of the same way, to heaven," in his notes in "Ode" Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood, Complete Poetical Works (London: Macmillan, 1913), p. 358.

9 J. A. Heraud and William Maginn, "The Book of Enoch," Fraser's Magazine 8 (November, 1833), 513-14. The passage from Young previously cited is included in this article, p. 530. This review concerns itself with the Romantic use of the angel lore of Enoch, principally by Byron and Moore.

10 Fraser's, p. 528. Though Dimmesdale's role as Enoch and angel is ironic, elsewhere in Hawthorne's work he suggests that the capacity to link man with the angels is a poetic gift. Hawthorne's ideal preacher seems to be Ernest in "The Great Stone Face." In his simple communion with nature Ernest seems to be a companion of the angels, and he fulfills the role ascribed to the poet who says "the golden links of the great chain that intertwined them with an angelic kindred; he brought out the hidden traits of celestial birth that made them worthy of such kin" (The Snow Image Vol. XI, Centenary Edition (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1974) pp. 43-44. In creating such images for people, Dimmesdale can be seen as reminding them of their better nature; unlike Ernest, he is not in harmony with himself.