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“The Minister’s Black Veil”

Symbol, Meaning, and the Context
of Hawthorne’s Art

W. B. CARNOCHAN

THE MINISTER’S BLACK VEIL,” one of Hawthorne’s early tales (1836), has a reputation as one of his best. It has had less attention than, say, “Rappaccini’s Daughter” or “My Kinsman, Major Molineux,” no doubt because it is in some ways less problematic and is a less bravura piece than are they. Still the story presents its own kind of difficulties, and there is no critical unanimity among its readers. On one view the Reverend Mr. Hooper is a saintly figure, calling his people to repentance in the manner of an old testament prophet;¹ on another view he is a victim of monomaniac obsession, one of Hawthorne’s unpardonable sinners or, even, a type of antichrist.² Between these extremes, opinion shades off to a less monochromatic center.³ But interpretation of the story generally rests on some moral assessment or explanation of the minister’s symbolic self-veiling. The mystery is conceived as one to be *solved*, just as Poe conceived it when he argued that the minister had committed a “crime of dark dye” against the “young lady”

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¹ See Gilbert P. Voigt, “The Meaning of ‘The Minister’s Black Veil,’” *CE*, XIII (March 1952), 337–338; also Robert W. Cochran, “Hawthorne’s Choice: The Veil or the Jaundiced Eye,” *CE*, XXIII (Feb. 1962), 342–346. “The Reverend Mr. Hooper,” says Cochran, “has been permitted to cross over beyond the veil of mystery to achieve the ultimate in human knowledge” (p. 345).

² See E. Earle Stibitz, “Ironic Unity in Hawthorne’s ‘The Minister’s Black Veil,’” *AL*, XXXIV (May 1962), 182–190; William Bysshe Stein, “The Parable of the Antichrist in ‘The Minister’s Black Veil,’” *AL*, XXVII (Nov. 1955), 386–392; also Nicholas Canaday, Jr., “Hawthorne’s Minister and the Veiling Deceptions of Self,” *SSF*, IV (Winter 1967), 135–142; and Frederick C. Crews, *The Sins of the Fathers: Hawthorne’s Psychological Themes* (New York, 1966), pp. 106–111.

³ E.g., R. H. Fogle, “‘An Ambiguity of Sin or Sorrow,’” *NEQ*, XXI (Sept. 1948), 342–349.

whose burial is described.⁴ What Poe calls a defect—“that to the rabble its exquisite skill will be *caviare*”—he surely thinks a virtue: he is happy in the discovery of concealed evidence, from which he infers a romantic solution more congenial to his taste than the merely generalized didacticism of the “moral” that the minister pronounces at his death. I shall argue, to the contrary, that neither solutions, like Poe’s, nor moral estimates, like many a critic’s and even the minister’s own, are essential.⁵ The story, I believe, is concerned above all with the veil as a symbolic object, pointing toward questions that cluster about the notion of a symbol itself. Beside these questions the moral character of the minister who wears the veil is relatively a minor matter.

If so, this early story has a more important place than it is usually given in Hawthorne’s canon: like *The Scarlet Letter*—which is about the letter of its title, just as this story is about the veil—“The Minister’s Black Veil” has to do with the materials of Hawthorne’s own art in proportion as it has to do with the nature of symbolic meaning. Thinking about this story, we need to remember all the while the abortive history of Hawthorne’s last romances and the altogether desolate end of his literary life—where we get, as Hyatt H. Waggoner has said, “no merely technical failure, and no turning to new subjects that he did not know how to handle, but a failure at the very center, a failure of meaning.”⁶ This failure of meaning is a failure of the symbolic process: the relationship, always for Hawthorne a difficult matter, between symbol and reference breaks down entirely, and the course of his artistic life can be roughly plotted in terms of this disintegration.⁷ “The

⁴ *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. John H. Ingram (London, 1901), IV, 218. For “The Minister’s Black Veil,” see *The Complete Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, ed. George Parsons Lathrop (Boston, 1883), I, 52–69. Quotations from Hawthorne’s works are identified in the text by volume and page reference to this edition.

⁵ George Monteiro comes near my sense of the story by emphasizing Hawthorne’s recurrent use of the word “mystery”; *Explicator*, XXII (Oct. 1963), no. 9. So does Frederick W. Turner, III, who says that the veil is “to be interpreted as ignorance or that which divides men from the true knowledge of things”; *SSF*, V (Winter 1968), 187.

⁶ *Hawthorne: A Critical Study* (rev. ed.; Cambridge, Mass., 1963), p. 236.

⁷ Rudolph von Abele has done so in *The Death of the Artist: A Study of Hawthorne’s Disintegration* (The Hague, 1955). His argument in part is this: “My contention here is that so far as Hawthorne failed to work by the method of presenting things as ‘lived experience,’ he failed completely, which in practice means that he failed almost every time his symbolism was overt and deliberate” (p. 19). He thinks “The Minister’s Black Veil” a success, essentially because it is “realistic”: “Hawthorne sometimes resorted to symbols that required no rationaliza-

Minister's Black Veil" stakes out the ground on which Hawthorne was to struggle with the angel of destruction.

Even to ask the bald question, "What does the veil stand for?" implies the difficulty of giving any answer. Perhaps it is just as well, however, to frame the question in a way that makes the difficulties apparent. In any case, the Hawthornian business of false leads and doubtful clarifications is under way from the very start of the tale. In an introductory note, we hear about "another clergyman in New England, Mr. Joseph Moody, of York, Maine, who died about eighty years since" and who "made himself remarkable by the same eccentricity that is here related of the Reverend Mr. Hooper." Then, still with an air of being helpful and direct, Hawthorne offers what seem to be distinctions: "In his case [Moody's], however, the symbol had a different import. In early life he had accidentally killed a beloved friend; and from that day till the hour of his death, he hid his face from men." But what sort of distinctions are these? And how precisely are Moody and Hooper different cases? The explanation, on a closer look, turns out not to be an explanation at all. Of what is Mr. Moody's veil a "symbol"? Grief, surely; but we do not know the "accidental" means by which he killed his friend, nor do we know except in a general way why he hid his face from men. We are faced with an "ambiguity of sin or sorrow," as much as in Hooper's case. Hawthorne's note—like the veil itself—obscures as much as it reveals. Still, despite the falseness of its reassurance, there is something of the genuine in it, too; it is in keeping, as I want to show, with the whole point of the tale that Hooper's mysterious veil has a counterpart in reality. Here again it is like the scarlet letter with its counterpart that Hawthorne finds in the custom house and is at such pains to be precise about ("By an accurate measurement, each limb proved to be precisely three inches and a quarter in length" [V, 50]). Each fictional symbol is attached to a fact in the real world.

We can try another question, a little less blatant: what does Hooper's veil stand for in its own context? Because the minister's

tion to be seen in a normative naturalist context. The veil worn by Father Hooper in 'The Minister's Black Veil' is a case in point, and an interesting one. The only problem in connection with it is of motivation, but this problem is satisfactorily solved on a number of different levels—Hawthorne's, Hooper's, the reader's. The gesture may be eccentric, but it is not miraculous, and it is not explained away" (p. 29).

dying speech sounds a dominant note, or seems to, it is easy to go there first of all:

“When the friend shows his inmost heart to his friend; the lover to his best beloved; when man does not vainly shrink from the eye of his Creator, loathsomely treasuring up the secret of his sin; then deem me a monster, for the symbol beneath which I have lived, and die! I look around me, and, lo! on every visage a Black Veil!”

Coming as it does at the end, this looks like summary and conclusion. But that is as deceptive as the authoritative air of the opening footnote. If we throw caution aside and take this last pronouncement as conclusive, the story is that parable of hidden guilt which it is usually supposed to be—and also, I think, a less interesting story than it really is. Hooper’s final piety, his deathbed utterance with its implied confession, all this needs to be taken dramatically—as a formal setpiece—and with the reservations appropriate to so pat a gesture. It is the end, or almost the end, of the story—but not the whole of it. We need not, in fact cannot, let it go as a drama of clandestine sin. Granted that Hawthorne was concerned, deeply so, with that theme; but here it is concealment and mystery, not guilt, that concerns him most, and that makes the difference.

The very nature of the veil itself is to avert explicit statements of what it stands for, or at least to throw them immediately in doubt. It is not just that “the meaning of the symbol is ambiguous”; that would tell us little we did not always know. Rather the strange quality of the veil is that not only does it conceal what is behind it, it is a sign of that concealment; it both symbolizes and generates what is symbolized, is its own symbol—and, in its self-containment, is in one sense beyond interpretation, i.e., beyond any rendering in referential terms. But to “mean” is a function of the human, to “be” a function of the divine; a symbol, humanly speaking, implies something symbolized that is not only itself. So the veil, creating meaning and simultaneously hiding it, invites speculation and resists it. No one ever dares ask Hooper why he wears the veil. The deputation from the church, sent to “deal with Mr. Hooper about the mystery”—how obviously inappropriate is the commercial dealing with mystery—never comes to the point: “Were the veil but cast aside, they might speak freely of it, but not

till then." Because the meaning of the veil consists only in what is hidden, meaning is lost in the very act of revelation. It is in this that the veil serves as "type" and "symbol" of types and symbols in their general nature. As language gives a meaning to experience but also comes between the subject and any direct perception or re-creation of that experience, so does the veil. "In a Symbol," says Carlyle (as Professor Teufelsdröckh), "there is concealment and yet revelation."⁸ Hooper's veil embodies the paradox.

In this setting the common Hawthornian tactic that F. O. Matthiessen calls "the device of multiple choice" and Yvor Winters "the formula of alternative possibilities"⁹ works to special advantage. The tactic is uncomplicated: merely that of offering several explanations of events or symbolic circumstances and apparently leaving the reader, according to his own lights, to accept the one that suits him best. "The reader may choose," says Hawthorne, among the several theories proposed to explain the mark (if there was one) "imprinted" in the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale's flesh (V, 305-306). But the formula is really designed to prevent, not to encourage, speculation. We are intended *not* to choose; it is difficult to suppose that Donatello has furry ears, but it is damaging to suppose that he doesn't. And, by the same token, it is damaging to limit the extensions of the veil to this one or to that. It is not one veil but every veil. It is the glass through which we see darkly; Hooper appears in the pulpit "*face to face* [my emphasis] with his congregation, except for"—a grim irony—"the black veil." Elsewhere it is associated with the darkness of night that obscures the visible world, or with "the veil that shuts in time from eternity." Sometimes it turns Hooper away from the mirrors of self-knowledge: "In truth, his own antipathy to the veil was known to be so great, that he never willingly passed before a mirror, nor stooped to drink at a still fountain, lest, in its peaceful bosom, he should be affrighted by himself." He resists the last knowledge that he is hidden even from himself. But, still elsewhere, the veil itself becomes a magic mirror, reversing the world of normal experience in its transfiguring presence: the funeral of the young woman is transformed to a marriage ("I had a fancy," says one observer—giving Poe the lead he was looking for—"that the

⁸ *Sartor Resartus*, ed. Charles Frederick Harrold (New York, 1937), p. 219.

⁹ Matthiessen, *American Renaissance* (New York, 1941), p. 276; Winters, *Maule's Curse* (Norfolk, Conn., 1938), p. 18.

minister and the maiden’s spirit were walking hand in hand”), and the “cold fingers” and “deathlike paleness” of a bride at her wedding change the ceremony into a dance of death. For the veil all things are possible; its extensions come naturally from its primary character as a symbol of symbols, hence capable of all their protean changes. If we cannot eliminate the human fact of reference, still we need not commit ourselves to other versions of the absolute and insist on singleness of reference; since a single correspondence cannot be finally established, that way lies either delusion or skepticism and despair.

To insist on a single meaning or explanation is in fact to be like the townspeople of the story, who speculate upon the reasons for Mr. Hooper’s veil: “A few shook their sagacious heads, intimating that they could penetrate the mystery; while one or two affirmed that there was no mystery at all, but only that Mr. Hooper’s eyes were so weakened by the midnight lamp, as to require a shade.” In this case we are specifically not asked to choose—the technique has not yet crystallized into a “formula” of alternative possibilities—and we do well to profit from the absence of advice. The alternatives available are each intended to be unacceptable: on one hand, to be identified with the “sagacious” few who think they can penetrate the mystery; on the other, to deny the mystery altogether. Either choice is self-defeating. But “sagacious” readers have not been wanting.

In truth, however, they have better reasons than any we have seen so far. Misguided prying into the mystery by “all the busybodies and impertinent people in the parish” is one thing; the case of Elizabeth, betrothed to Mr. Hooper, looks more doubtful. Her plea that Hooper take off the veil and reveal his secret to her is a sympathetic one; probably it is her presence that accounts for the view of Hooper as a malevolent spirit: “As his plighted wife, it should be her privilege to know what the black veil concealed.” The scene that follows between Elizabeth and Hooper is a strange one, however. To her request that he “lift the veil but once,” he answers that it cannot be. The feeling aimed at seems to be that the veil in literal fact *cannot* be removed; it is not, we are made to think, a volitional matter. But Elizabeth bids Hooper farewell, and the strangeness is especially in Hooper’s response: “But, even amid his grief, Mr. Hooper smiled to think that only a material

emblem had separated him from happiness, though the horrors, which it shadowed forth, must be drawn darkly between the fondest of lovers." On one hand it is "only a material emblem," on the other it seems to be everything; but symbol and thing symbolized, however (other than itself) that may be interpreted, are felt as concordant with one another. And there seems to lie the motive for Elizabeth's reappearance to nurse Hooper at his death—"no hired handmaiden of death, but one whose calm affection had endured thus long in secrecy, in solitude, amid the chill of age, and would not perish, even at the dying hour." The long endurance of a "calm affection" comes unexpectedly after Elizabeth's abrupt farewell in the earlier scene; the assertion of fidelity in the presence of mystery is no easy one for Hawthorne to make, and the narrative lacks cohesion at the point of greatest strain. An assertion, nonetheless, there is: to keep faith is to accept the fact of human meaning behind the veil—even though that meaning, in the nature of things, is hidden to the eye.

But the phantom lure of knowing the unknowable is not so easily set aside. Mr. Hooper's veil and the efforts—Elizabeth's well-intentioned ones, the townspeople's vulgar and impertinent ones—to discover what lies behind it anticipate the veils and masks and efforts to "penetrate their mystery" that are so important in Hawthorne's later fiction. They make a large subject, beyond the reach of this paper.¹⁰ Also beyond the reach of this paper are the details of Hawthorne's decline. But this generalization may be risked: it is the possibility of faith—by that I mean a habit of mind more crucial than any specifically religious belief, the failure of which is sometimes supposed to account for Hawthorne's fate as an artist—that is for him ever more in doubt. The vain hope of lifting the veil and the fears of what might be found there (or, really, what might not be found there) become obsessive and, in the long run, paralyzing to the imagination. A brief and very selective glance ahead will throw a last light on Mr. Hooper's story. Elizabeth, in her enduring affection, is an image of what Hawthorne would, but in the event could not, be.

A good place to look first is Zenobia's legend, in *Blithedale*, of

¹⁰ The subject becomes even more far-reaching as soon as one looks to other writers contemporary with Hawthorne. Robert Edward Goodfriend raises some of the issues in a master's thesis, "Transformation of the Gothic: A Study of the Veil in the Works of Poe, Hawthorne and Melville" (Stanford, 1965).

the veiled lady—that odd amalgam of folklore and pure Gothic claptrap (“undeniable nonsense,” says Coverdale, “but not necessarily the worse for that”)—where the situation is identical, in its essentials, with that of “The Minister’s Black Veil.” The outcome has changed, however, and the Gothic terrors are real enough as things, this time, are forced to their conclusion. The prying Theodore refuses to kiss the lady unless he see her face unveiled; she rebukes him for coming “not in holy faith” but in “scornful scepticism and idle curiosity”; he lifts the veil, still fearing lest he kiss “the lips of a dead girl, or the jaws of a skeleton, or the grinning cavity of a monster’s mouth,” and the lady vanishes. If Hooper’s story and Elizabeth’s good faith intimate the presence of meanings behind the veil, even diabolic meanings, Zenobia’s fable raises another possibility that is more sinister: “But what, in good sooth, had become of the Veiled Lady? Had all her existence been comprehended within that mysterious veil, and was she now annihilated?” (V, 442; 448; 449) The fears that are buried deep and never (unless, we shall see, at the very end) allowed to emerge in “The Minister’s Black Veil” are explicit here: that existence is comprehended only in veils and masks, liable to annihilation and revealing then the nothingness behind them.

These fears are the stuff of nightmare, and the carnival scene at the end of *The Marble Faun*, where the masks of the revellers are not just veils that conceal but grotesque images that haunt and mock the observer, marks another critical point on the long downward line. Kenyon, waiting information about Hilda, clings desperately to a lamppost lest he be swept away by the crowd (the allegory is plain enough) and searches the faces about him: “He looked at each mask,—harlequin, ape, bulbous-headed monster, or anything that was absurdest,—not knowing but that the messenger might come, even in such fantastic guise. . . . At times, his disquietude took a hopeful aspect; and he fancied that Hilda might come by, her own sweet self, in some shy disguise which the instinct of his love would be sure to penetrate.” To observers on a balcony above the crowd, detached epicurean spectators of the chaos, Kenyon’s search for the messenger (intelligence and meaning) and for Hilda (love and requital) makes him ludicrous. His behavior looks “unutterably absurd” as he pores “into this whirlpool of nonsense so earnestly, in quest of what was to make his life dark or bright.”

The moral of the nightmare scene: "Earnest people, who try to get a reality out of human existence, are necessarily absurd in the view of the revellers and masqueraders." They are absurd because perhaps no "reality" is to be "gotten out" of human existence at all. But then comes the extraordinary sequel, in which the strength of doubt is compensated by an extravagance of rhetoric and event, marking a conviction, surely, that it is now a case of all or nothing. A shower of confetti makes Kenyon look upward to the balcony where he sees the priest to whom Hilda has made confession. He fails to associate him with Hilda, looks back to the crowd, and is immediately struck from one side by a cauliflower, from the other by "a single rose-bud, so fresh that it seemed that moment gathered. It flew from the opposite balcony, smote gently on his lips, and fell into his hand. He looked upward, and beheld the face of his lost Hilda" (VI, 508; 510) The laughing epicurean gods are replaced by Hilda in her white domino; memories of the ridiculous cauliflower, cancelled out by the mystical rose.

Unintentionally funny as the scene may in some ways be, the urgency of it all is underlined by the tortuous and unsatisfying explanation of events that Hawthorne "reluctantly" added to his romance. He has failed, he thinks, "in throwing about this Romance the kind of atmosphere essential to the effect at which he aimed." That is, he has failed to avert questions on the order of: had Donatello furry ears? "As respects all who ask such questions, the book is, to that extent, a failure." But he goes on, even so, to "throw light upon several matters in which some of his readers appear to feel an interest," and he admits that "he was himself troubled with a curiosity similar to that which he has just deprecated on the part of his readers." This is disastrous, for here is poor Hawthorne as an unspiritualized Paul Pry, a meddling and impotent questioner who cries out finally "with intense earnestness," "Did Donatello's ears resemble those of the Faun of Praxiteles?" and gets the only possible answer: "'I know, but may not tell,' replied Kenyon, smiling mysteriously. 'On that point, at all events, there shall be not one word of explanation.'" (VI, 522; 523; 527) Of course the failure to strike a balance between romance and reality might be set down as a failure of craftsmanship, just as Hawthorne seems to prefer, so dark is the alternative. But in fact all relationships have been shattered—between romance and reality,

symbol and reference, cause and effect. For one thing Hawthorne has failed to establish adequate connections between events and failed equally to establish conditions in which these connections could be accepted as present, though concealed. Elizabeth's reappearance at the close of "The Minister's Black Veil," though a little startling, is psychologically plausible—and nothing at all like Hilda's miraculous incarnation on the balcony, an assertion of meaning that is felt only as an isolated event, one with no antecedent cause. For another thing Hawthorne has failed to endow Donatello's ears with the symbolic range, the manifold possibilities of reference, that he imparted to Hooper's veil. Even for Hawthorne, it seems, Donatello's ears require somehow to be one thing or another, to be furry or not; indeed the symbol here has dwindled into a thing. And Hawthorne never had much confidence in "mere" things.

The case of Donatello's ears brings us very close to the last, unfinished fragments where the nature of the disease is defined by symbols or things—who is really to say?—that point nowhere. This is Winters' diagnosis: "We have the symbolic footprint, the symbolic spider, the symbolic elixirs and poisons, but we have not that of which they are symbolic."¹¹ Or to put it another way: Hawthorne has no assurance that symbols are symbolic of something, and that in turn is to say (with Waggoner) that meanings have failed. Perhaps symbols are no more than things; events, perhaps without explanations; the present, without an identifiable past. In Hawthorne's futile search, while he was in England, for the facts of his own ancestry, he had found that the veil separating him from his origins could not be lifted. He would not have missed the typological possibilities of his failure. It was as though (an American neurosis) he had no origins at all.

From this bleak vantage, we can look back to "The Minister's Black Veil," now in a fuller perspective. Despite Elizabeth's fidelity and despite the wan hope in that "faint, sad smile, so often there, [that] seemed to glimmer from its obscurity, and linger on Father Hooper's lips" as he dies, no one is likely to mistake the mood of the tale. Elizabeth's affection, revealed so late, scarcely relieves the gloom, and the last word is still the veil: "The grass of many years has sprung up and withered on that grave, the burial stone is

¹¹ P. 19.

moss-grown, and good Mr. Hooper's face is dust; but awful is still the thought that it mouldered beneath the Black Veil!" The veil survives the changes of time after its meanings have turned to dust. Acceptance was not Hawthorne's lot, nor was the unreflective life, whose matter-of-factness he sometimes catches sight of with a touch of longing and reproduces here in the accents of the village, at the beginning of the tale:

"Are you sure it is our parson?" inquired Goodman Gray of the sexton.

"Of a certainty it is good Mr. Hooper," replied the sexton. "He was to have exchanged pulpits with Parson Shute, of Westbury; but Parson Shute sent to excuse himself yesterday, being to preach a funeral sermon."

"Certainty" is for the unthoughtful, acceptance for the faithful; for Hawthorne, there will be only the gathering pressure of questions not to be answered and meanings not to be found. In its fine rhetorical adjustment of means to ends, "The Minister's Black Veil" is among Hawthorne's best stories; in mood and substance it is grimly prophetic of what was to come.