THE ARTIST'S SYMBOL AND HAWTHORNE'S VEIL: "THE MINISTER'S BLACK VEIL" RESARTATUS

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Decades of discussion of Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil" have inevitably brought the question of the author's attitude toward the minister—whether he is a heroic martyr, a virulent anti-Christ, or some hybrid form between—to a point of diminishing critical returns. The tale was happily revitalized, its interpretive possibilities expanded, by W. B. Carnochan in 1969. In his essay, which offers a reading of the veil as a symbol of symbols, a paradoxical emblem of both revelation and concealment inherently resistant to fixed meanings, Carnochan opened a wide door into this parable and into Hawthorne's practice generally. But there have been surprisingly few visitors. A trifle overwhelmed by Carnochan's reading, Elaine Barry concludes her summary of his conclusions with the awed observation that "Surely, little more can be said about this" (Barry 15), and judging from the relative silence of recent criticism, her reticence has found an echo. Carnochan's essay, however, is as valuable as it is largely because it raises to the surface an element of both the veil and the "Veil" about which a great deal more can and should be said. I will try to say some of that here and in a way that addresses both the question of Hawthorne's views of symbolism and the artist and the controversy over the (im)propriety of the minister's act.

In Carnochan's revisionary view, "The Minister's Black Veil" is less a parable of hidden guilt than an exercise in the complex employment of the artistic symbol, and, ultimately, a tale about the nature of such symbols. The principal effect of the veil is "to avert explicit statements of what it stands for." Creating meaning and simultaneously hiding it, inviting

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1Lea Bertani Vozar Newman's survey of "Veil" criticism turns up 24 entries between 1969 and 1985, none of which makes even passing use of Carnochan's observation or approach (Newman 5-12). My own survey of criticism since 1985 likewise turned up empty, though readers of other Hawthorne fictions have been more enterprising. For example, Millicent Bell identifies The Scarlet Letter as "an essay in semiology. Its theme is the obliquity or indeterminacy of signs" (Bell 9). Bell suggests Hawthorne "may have been at the threshold of . . . our loss of confidence in the sacred grounding of signs" (12). But if so, his approach to the threshold does not begin in The Scarlet Letter. Literature does not work by natural selection. Such innovations are not born, fully formed, in major works. This one, I will argue, is richly presaged in "The Minister's Black Veil."
speculation and resisting it, the veil not only “conceal[s] what is behind it, but is a sign of that concealment.” It is, in short, a “symbol of symbols” (Carnochan 185-87):

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 recreation of that experience, so does the veil. (Carnochan 186)

These are Carnochan’s points about the veil and they are, in my view, extremely well taken. But they are also brief and partial, leaving much to be said, because Carnochan is more interested in the veil as a clue to Hawthorne’s ultimate disintegration as a symbolist, hence as a writer, than in the veil-as-artistic-symbol in the tale. His observations must be extended and many others added if we are to grasp not only the full richness of this symbol of symbols, but also its implications for the artist who so isolatingly wears it. My view of the parable is that it carries autobiographical import more for the artist’s dubious present than for his declining future, that it speaks of Hawthorne’s adoption of the symbolic method (the donning of the veil), of the power of that alteration of his literary “face,” and of its price. Appearing first in The Token for 1836, “The Minister’s Black Veil—A Parable” is one of Hawthorne’s earliest symbolic tales. It speaks, I think, of the nature of the symbol he had begun to explore after his earlier failure with Fanshawe (1828) and other relatively or baldly realistic fictions, and of its effects not only on his real and imagined readers, but on the artist as well.

The veil, like the artistic symbol it represents, invites a round of tentative interpretations, all based inevitably on surmise. But its chief significance lies not in these “readings,” surely not in its “ultimate meaning,” which may or may not be revealed, but in its power to stimulate such efforts and in the still more potent emotional effects it produces in those who behold it. Some of the townspeople are amazed, others awed; some are fearful or intimidated, others perplexed or

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2 Carnochan’s point is that Hawthorne’s failure of faith in the meaningfulness of the symbol, first exemplified in “The Minister’s Black Veil,” was the primary cause of his later failure as an artist. “The vain hope of lifting the veil and the fears of what might be found there (or, really, what might not be found there) becomes obsessive and, in the long run, paralyzing to the imagination” (188).
defensively wise, while yet others are inspired or made hopeful. For all the emphasis on interpretive hypotheses—and there is much—there is as much or more on the accompanying emotional impact. And both, of course, are characteristic of the symbol, the latter more profoundly than the former. Symbols, as D. H. Lawrence remarks, "don't 'mean something.' They stand for units of human feeling, human experience. A complex of emotional experience is a symbol. And the power of the symbol," like the power of the minister's veil, "is to arouse the deep emotional self, and the dynamic self, beyond comprehension" (Lawrence 158). The "strangest part of the affair," remarks a physician, "is the effect of this vagary, even on a sober-minded man like myself" (Hawthorne 41).

The emphasis on this effect, I believe, reflects Hawthorne's larger concern with the literary symbol as he had begun to employ it in this and other short works. He is preoccupied here with the question of interpretation and effect, tantalized, it seems, by the radiant power of his new instrument. Like ideal readers or critics in relation to a story, the townspeople are obsessed with the veil, intrigued by its possible meanings, overwhelmed by its spiritual and emotive power. Like readers cut off from the author or intimidated by him, "not one ventured to put the plain question to Mr. Hooper, wherefore he did this thing" (44). But eventually, like naive readers unable to control their curiosity and simplistically trustful that the author is the final arbiter of his own meanings (a trust, by the way, that, if we share it, finally reduces the rich tale to the shallowness of the minister's own death-bed fulmination), a few approach him. Futilely, of course, for the creator will not reveal his intentions.

The ultimate naive reader, however, is the minister's fiancée. A simple literalist who perceives none of the symbolic import that perplexes and mortifies the others, Elizabeth "could discern nothing of the dreadful gloom that had so overawed the multitude": to her "it was but a double fold of crape . . ." (45). Such a reader would have the author renounce his symbol and return to the realist's simpler perception of the world (which she has never transcended), undarkened and uncomplicated by the veil. Rejecting her entreaty, the minister echoes the sentiment of Carlyle's Professor Teufelsdröckh in Sartor Resartus, a work written but two years earlier than "The Minister's Black Veil," and one whose views on symbolism, so close to that of the parable, may suggest an influence. "Small is this which thou tellest me," declares the Professor,

that the Royal Sceptre is but a piece of gilt-wood; that the Pyx has become a most foolish box, and truly, as Ancient Pistol thought, 'of little price.' A right Conjurer might I name thee,
couldst thou conjure back into these wooden tools the divine virtue they once held. (Carlyle 225)3

Hawthorne is such a conjurer, of course, as is Hooper. Both conjure back into the simple materials of literature and earth a power beyond. They do so, as Teufelsdröckh recommends, by planting "into the deep infinite faculties of man, his Fantasy and Heart" (Carlyle 225)—Hooper by means of the veil, the artist by means of the symbol the veil represents. And it is here that Elizabeth, experiencing what both the minister and the artist hope for, feels its effects at last, as its terrors fall around her. Only now does she sense what the physician's wife had remarked earlier: the power with which person and context can invest the otherwise barren tools of art's ministry. "How strange," the wife had mused, "that a simple black veil such as any woman might wear on her bonnet, should become such a terrible thing on Mr. Hooper's face!" (41). The observation is crucial, for it suggests that, like the symbol—indeed like all language—the veil has no detachable or intrinsic significance. The meanings it carries and the impact it generates, finally to Elizabeth as well, are dependent on the user, on the context, and on the inferred intentions of its use. It is when the minister rejects the invitation to removal and literal rendering and, offering evocative symbolic hypotheses for her to ponder, returns the burden of feeling and reflection to this "reader," that she becomes aware of these forces and feels the shuddering impact of the symbol.4

"In a symbol," remarks Carlyle, "there is concealment and yet revelation." And the veil, both as symbol and as symbol of . . . , is a concealment that is a revelation of concealment. To the minister and the sinners who become his disciples, it is a concealment revelatory of the universal masking of secret sin ("lo! on every Visage a Black Veil!"). For the reader it is a concealment that reveals concealment as the only viable meaning. In this tale, in all of Hawthorne's best symbolic work, perhaps in all fiction and language, the veil as veiling or veiledness is itself the message. The ambiguity and mystery of the concealing veil become themselves the meaning, suggesting the inaccessibility of determinate meaning or truth. The meaning of a (Hawthorne) story is found not

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3Carnochan mentions Carlyle's discussion of symbols, but only briefly in a single context: "'In a Symbol,' says Carlyle (as Professor Teufelsdrockh), 'there is concealment and yet revelation.' Hooper's veil embodies the paradox. (Carnochan 186). Teufelsdrockh, as we will see, has much more that is relevant to say about 'The Minister's Black Veil' than this, much that may have influenced it as well.

4Elizabeth is the only witness who must be informed that "This veil is a type and symbol. She is a naive interpreter indeed.
behind its signs or symbols, but in the fact and experience of impenetrability, the realization that no interpretation will suffice. The veil again is a symbol of symbols, more broadly a symbol of the symbolistic resonance of signs. "Speech," as Teufelsdröckh affirms, "is great, but not the greatest." For "Speech is of Time, Silence [like the symbol and the veil] is of Eternity" (Carlyle 219). The Professor's point about the silent power of the symbol—that "Thought will not work except in Silence"—is the parable's point about the veil: namely, that speech, the minister's earlier sermons unaccompanied by the veil, is relatively effete as a stimulant of profoundest thought and recognition. In the symbol, on the other hand, "in many a painted Device or simple Seal-emblem, the commonest Truth stands out to us proclaimed with quite new emphasis" (Carlyle 220). As it does for Hooper, whose sermons assume unprecedented power.

What we see in Hawthorne's tale, of course, is that the moral message of the veil, if indeed there is one, is not disclosed until the minister's death, if even then. The power and consequently the point of the veil lies not in its meaning, its "common Truth," for were it so, Hooper would surely have proclaimed it sooner. Rather, by refusing revelation and provoking an endless battery of possible interpretations and responses, the minister carries Hawthorne's message that the only truth that stands affirmed in the veil is the truth of the artistic symbol's boundless resonance and evocative force. The important truth of the veil is not the universality of concealed sin, for that revelation is too long postponed to be of consequence to most of its observers. The veil speaks far more eloquently of what Carlyle calls "The in calculable influences of Concealment" that account for "the wondrous agency of Symbols" (Carlyle 220).

That the meaning of the veil is in the veil itself and not in any hidden referent seems confirmed by the pointlessness of the Reverend Mr. Clark's last-minute effort to raise the veil in search of its meaning. "'Before the veil of eternity be lifted,'" urges Clark at Hooper's bedside, "'let me cast aside this black veil from your face!' . . . And thus speaking [he] . . . bent forward to reveal the mystery of many years" (51). If Elizabeth is the naive literalist who believes at first that the veil is a mere object rather than a sign or symbol, the Reverend Clark is the simple allegorizer who looks for single meanings directly behind the given sign. The effort is futile, of course, not because Hooper resists it, but because the raising of the veil would reveal only a face and nothing of the veil's meaning. The minister clasps the veil to his face not because its removal would reveal the hidden meaning behind it, but because such an act would remove veil and all meaning together.

Hawthorne emphasizes the point in a fine ambiguity that introduces and casts doubt on the minister's death-bed revelation, which has too
often been accepted as the "true meaning" of the veil. "What, but the mystery which it obscurely typifies has made this piece of crape so awful?" asks the minister. Readers have assumed—and been led to assume—that the mystery he speaks of is revealed in the ensuing tirade on the loathsome treasuring up of secret sin. But there is another way to read the minister's question, one that seals the concealed meaning of the veil as artist's symbol, hence as essential mystery, as tightly as Hooper's disclosure seems to shut the door on further queries into what this sign signifies. For what has made this piece of crape so aw[eful] is precisely "the mystery" it obscurely typifies. The veil, in other words, typifies not a mystery to be disclosed, but mystery itself, and it does so by typifying obscurely, in a way that perpetually tempts and frustrates the assignation of all meaning beyond itself.

Such a reading of "The Minister's Black Veil" raises again the familiar question of Hawthorne's view of the role and power of the artist and, through that, the nearly threadbare controversy over his attitude toward the minister's donning and wearing the veil. For if the veil is the artist's symbol, then Hooper is a kind of symbolizing artist, the author himself perhaps. Like Hawthorne before he discovered the awesome power of the literary symbol, Hooper was a good but "not an energetic" preacher who "strove to win his people . . . by mild persuasive influences, rather than to drive them thither [to heaven], by the thunders of the Word" (39). When he adopts the symbolic method by donning the veil, however, a telling change is felt in his oratory. The sermon he now delivers is marked by "the same characteristics of style and manner," the same unthundering quietness.

But there was something, either in the sentiment of the discourse itself, or in the imagination of the auditors, which made it greatly the most powerful effort that they had ever heard from their pastor's lips. . . . A subtle power was breathed into his words. (40)

As it was into Hawthorne's own written words, and it is not too much, I think, to suggest that "The Minister's Black Veil—A Parable" is itself the fictive equivalent of the minister's sermon. Its subject too "had reference to secret sin"; it too is "tinged rather more darkly than usual with the gentle gloom" of its author's temperament; and it too, Hawthorne may well have felt, was his most powerful effort to that time.

That "The Minister's Black Veil" is, as the full title indicates, "A Parable," places it in the same category with Hooper's sermon on secret sin—a veiled reference to the veil—and with the veil itself as a bearer of veiled messages. Hawthorne and the minister, in other words, are
identified as preacher/artists. Both deliver texts whose subject is the veil and whose parabolic meaning is concealed until the deathbed "revelation," which at once retroactively casts at least putative meaning on both the minister’s sermon and the tale that contains it. It is only here that we encounter the allegorical message of the veil and recognize the veil as the hidden referent of Hooper’s dark sermon. Hawthorne as artist offers the symbol in search of single meaning. Hooper, the double craftsman, presents a similar challenge in his veil while offering in his sermon-as-veiled-parable meaning in search of attachment to the floating symbol of the veil.

By donning the veil, Hooper becomes what Hawthorne would come to feel himself, more and more strongly as he developed and perfected his symbolic art: a removed and judging observer who felt he could penetrate the mystery of other souls while remaining invisible. The veil conceals the minister’s face as effectively as a tale, particularly a veiled symbolic tale, conceals its author and his intent. It hangs before his face, covering everything but the mouth and chin, leaving free, in other words, the speaking organ only. It enables him to preach far more effectively than before, and it causes the members of his magnetized congregation to shrink uneasily from his eye, "which they felt to be fixed upon them with an invisible glance" (45). Passing from the uninspired realism of his earlier work to the eerily suggestive power of the symbolic tales, we feel, with Elizabeth and his congregation, the effects of the veil that is a symbol of symbols.

For Hawthorne, we know, there is a price to be paid for the artist’s mission and his remotely scrutinizing insight: the price of personal isolation, the punishment as well as the privilege of the seer who sees and remains himself unseen. The minister, of course, pays the artist’s price for his power. He has "changed himself into something awful . . . by hiding his face" and peering, like Hawthorne, through his obscure and somber tales, through a veil that gave "a darkened aspect to all living and inanimate things" (38). Like the poet Coverdale in The Blithedale Romance, where the veil is again a focal symbol; like the scientific researchers of the soul that darken his fiction; and like Hawthorne’s guilty conception of the writer that these figures typify, Hooper is "a man apart from men," separated from the world by his "dismal shade" (49). He is separated too, and as a result, from happiness, lonely and frightened behind his black veil, where he gropes "darkly within his own soul [and gazes] . . . through a medium that saddened the whole world" (48). Like Hawthorne’s image of the minister "gazing darkly within his own soul," the Hawthorne given us by critics and biographers experienced "the perpetual turning in of the mind upon itself, the long introspective
brooding over human motives" that probed the soul’s secret impulses and laid bare its dark workings (Parrington 437). "I have made a captive of myself and put me into a dungeon," he wrote to Longfellow in 1837,

and now I cannot find the key to let myself out—and if the door were open, I should be almost afraid to come out. ... [T]here is no fate in this world so horrible as to have no share in either its joys or sorrows. For the last ten years, I have not lived, but only dreamed about living. ("To Henry Wadsworth Longfellow")

"[W]ithout thy aid," he wrote to his wife Sophia in 1840,

my best knowledge of myself would have been merely to know my own shadow—to watch it flickering on the wall, and mistake its fantasies for my own real actions. Indeed, we are but shadows—we are not endowed with real life, and all that seems most real about us is but the thinnest substance of a dream—till the heart is touched. ("To Sophia Peabody Hawthorne")

This closing phrase, if it is more climax than afterthought, seems to support Malcolm Cowley's hypothesis that Hawthorne's work declined in the final years of his life not, as many have argued, because of his claustrophobic preoccupation with the shadows of his imagination, but because the affections of his heart and his emergence into the too bright world blocked his access to the source of his hermetic inspiration. It was, after all, after his heart was touched by Sophia, his time by the demands of wife and family, his insulated privacy by the demands upon a public figure, that his imagination and his art began to fail. But whatever the cause of his artistic decline, there is a poignant connection between the suspected vacuity of the symbol and Hawthorne's anxiety about the vaporous insubstantiality of the isolated self. In a private world where fantasies are mistaken for human actions and where all that seems most real is but the faint immateriality of a dream, symbol and reality merge in their common lack of substance. The self that wants reality is reflected in the symbol devoid of meaning or reference. Both exist in solitude, draped in the shadow that is all the reality they possess.

While I do not wish to venture into the controversy over the tale's implicit judgment of the minister and his art, whether Hooper is a devoted martyr, an inhuman anti-Christ, or some hybrid form between, I will offer an addendum that touches on the question. The veil, as we have traditionally read the minister’s deathbed translation, is the symbol not of human sinfulness, but of the refusal of its revelation, the “loathsome... treasuring up” that denyingly conceals what should be made manifest.
"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 . . .,“ declaims the minister, “then deem me a monster . . .” (52). There is more to this denunciatory confession than at first appears; implicit self-accusation stirs beneath the seeming self-exoneration and projection. On one level, “then deem me a monster” invites merely nominal condemnation. The minister alone will continue to wear the veil symbolic of sin’s furtive concealment when others have opened their sinfulness to divine and human view. Only at this barely imaginable time will he be monstrous, and then but metaphorically, for his veil is but an emblem of the crime it represents. Indeed, by wearing the veil, the minister exalts himself, becomes, it seems, a kind of Just Man by publicizing on his own face the secretiveness others practice but deny. The minister is as yet no monster, not only because others share his defect but, equally paradoxically, because he achieves in his exposure at least partial absolution from the sin he exposes to view.

And yet, as the minister/artist takes on the character of the symbol he employs, in the very act of exposing the souls and hidden sinfulness of others, Hooper, like the artist, also partakes of the infection he perceives. As the artist falls into isolation in the demanding task of its description, becoming the distanced judge of those whose judgmental detachment he condemns, so Hooper, in the obfuscation of his message, becomes tangled in what he would merely emblematize. Like the power of the purloined letter, hidden by a different sort of minister, the power of the symbol, as of the veil, lies not in its use but its concealment. “With the employment [of the letter],” Poe’s narrator observes, “the power departs” (Poe 978). And similarly, the conclusive ascription of any given meaning to the veil or symbol drains the potency bonded to its mystery. By withholding until the moment of his death the presumed meaning of his symbol, Hooper maintains his lifelong grip upon his “readers,” but at another price. For in concealing from them the secret of his veil, he turns the symbol into the moral reality it allegedly signifies. The minister’s act implicates him in the crime of concealment that the veil symbolizes and condemns. The symbol has become its meaning, the artistic or symbolizing act a patch of the moral as well as existential darkness it illumines. It is in this sense among others that “a preternatural horror was interwoven with the threads of the black crape” (48). And it is for this reason that “the black veil involved [the minister’s] . . . own spirit in the horror with which it overwhelmed all others” (43-44). The minister’s frame, which is also that of the artist and the narrative, shudders when he glimpses his veiled figure in the looking-glass, not merely for its emblematic potency, but because of the enmeshing tangle of doing and being that twines Ahab to the whale. The “Veil” as
fiction, which, like the veil, is a parable finally only of its mystery, weaves the artist into the incriminating veil of his own separating mystification.

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