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THE ARTIST'S BLACK VEIL

VICTOR STRANDBERG

"The Minister's Black Veil" is probably the most ambiguous of Hawthorne's short stories. Following one line of clues, we must judge the Reverend Mr. Hooper to be an ecclesiastical version of Young Goodman Brown, who, having penetrated the forbidden mystery of sin in the hearts of his fellows, is condemned to live in isolation and despair forever after. It would appear that a recurrence of Goodman Brown's subtle pride has brought the minister to the area of the unpardonable sin, that which Hawthorne has described as a cold intellectual prying into the secret guilt of others. Certainly, Hooper's sermons linger powerfully over this topic, until each listener feels uncomfortably open to the minister's stealthy eye. "The subject had reference to secret sin," says Hawthorne of one such sermon. "A subtle power was breathed into his words. Each member of the congregation . . . felt as if the preacher had crept upon them, behind his awful veil, and discovered their hoarded iniquity of deed or thought." This sounds strongly similar to the forbidden knowledge that brought Goodman Brown to damnation, his lust "to penetrate, in every bosom, the deep mystery of sin . . . which inexhaustibly supplies more evil impulses than human power . . . can make manifest in deeds." \(^1\)

Nor does the case against the Reverend Mr. Hooper stop here. A series of unnaturally bad omens follows the man in the veil through his clerical undertakings. Observers could have sworn that during the funeral at which Hooper officiated the corpse shivered slightly when he bent over the coffin, revealing his face to the body beneath. That same night, the minister cast a dreadful pall over a marriage ceremony with his black veil. "A cloud seemed to have rolled duskily from beneath the black crape, and dimmed the light of the candles. The bridal pair stood up before the minister. But the bride's cold fingers quivered in the tremulous hand of the bridegroom. . . ." Mr. Hooper's toast to the newlyweds does

\(^1\) All quotations from Hawthorne's short stories are taken from *Hawthorne: Selected Tales and Sketches*, edited, with an introduction, by Hyatt H. Waggoner (New York, 1964).
little to lift this atmosphere: "Mr. Hooper raised a glass of wine to his lips, wishing happiness to the new-married couple. ... At that instant, catching a glimpse of his figure in the looking-glass, the black veil involved his own spirit in the horror with which it overwhelmed all others. His frame shuddered, his lips grew white, he spilt the untasted wine upon the carpet, and rushed forth into the darkness." The effect of the veil on the minister himself, then, is as appalling as it is to others. Like Hawthorne's most wretched sinners, Mr. Hooper has surrendered all joy of life to his obsession; the veil's effect, Hawthorne says, is "to give a darkened aspect to all living and inanimate things."

Above all, the black veil brings about that extreme isolation which Hawthorne visited upon the worst of his unpardonable sinners, such as Goodman Brown, Roger Chillingworth, and Ethan Brand. This separation begins the day he dons the veil, when "old Squire Saunders, doubtless by an accidental lapse of memory, neglected to invite Mr. Hooper to his table, where the good clergyman has been wont to bless the food, almost every Sunday since settlement." It culminates with his broken relationship with his betrothed, when the minister rejects what seems a very small request on her part:

"... You do not know how lonely I am, and how frightened to be alone behind my black veil. Do not leave me in this miserable obscurity forever!"

"Lift the veil but once, and look me in the face," said she.

"Never! It cannot be!" replied Mr. Hooper.

"Then farewell!" said Elizabeth.

It would seem a most perverse pride that thus places the black veil above his wife-to-be in the minister's reckoning. To be sure, the veil does give his ministry a greater efficacy; "its gloom, indeed, enabled him to sympathize with all dark affections," making Mr. Hooper "a man of awful power over souls that were in agony for sin." But the same might be observed of Mr. Dimmesdale in The Scarlet Letter, whose ministerial eloquence increased with his continued hypocrisy, until his Election Sermon seemed touched by the Pentecostal Tongues of Fire. The efficacy of either minister was not enough to prevent them both, Dimmesdale and Hooper, from living in a solitary confinement normally reserved for Haw-
thorne's most lost and damned souls. If anything, Father Hooper seems the more lost and damned of the two, to judge by their deathbed dramaturgy whereby Mr. Dimmesdale is taken back into the magnetic chain of humanity, while Father Hooper's end remains as lonely and gloomy as Goodman Brown's unhallowed death hour: "All through life that piece of crape had hung between him and the world: it had separated him from cheerful brotherhood and woman's love, and kept him in that saddest of prisons, his own heart; and still it lay upon his face, as if to deepen the gloom of his darksome chamber, and shade him from the sunshine of eternity."

To judge by such evidence, Father Hooper must be classified as one of Hawthorne's morality play villains, a man so conscious of the secret sin in the hearts of others as to be harboring the unpardonable sin in his own. But against this view stands solid evidence of a contrary interpretation. Unlike Hawthorne's unpardonable sinners, Mr. Hooper remains kindly and charitable in his knowledge of secret sin. He does not recoil in horror from an iniquitous world, as Goodman Brown did, but rather, to his regret, the world recoils from him, despite his continuing solicitude, he having "paid due reverence to the hoary heads, saluted the middle aged with kind dignity as their friend and spiritual guide, greeted the young with mingled authority and love, and laid his hands on the little children's heads to bless them." So annealing is the minister's humanity that "dying sinners cried aloud for Mr. Hooper, and would not yield their breath till he appeared." Indeed, Mr. Hooper's efficacy with sinners is strikingly anticipatory of a reminiscence that Hawthorne's wife provided in an interview concerning her late husband, saying that "men who had committed great crimes or whose memories held tragic secrets would sometimes write to him or would even come great distances to see him, and unburden their souls." This happened, she said, "after the publication of The Scarlet Letter, which made them regard him as father-confessor for all hidden sins."²

Even Hooper's willful life of isolation may be seen at last as a sacrifice made not in pride but in service of truth, if his deathbed

² Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "An Evening with Mrs. Hawthorne" in Contemporaries (Boston and New York, 1899), 104.
testimony—"I look around me, and lo! on every visage a Black Veil!"—is sincere. The broken engagement, too, may be seen as part of this sacrifice, resulting not necessarily from his sin of pride but as likely from a defect in her love for him, in her refusal to accept absolutely the integrity of his life and character, committed as they are to bespeaking the truth of the black veil.

Thus the Reverend Mr. Hooper seems the object of a mixed judgment on the part of his maker. But this contradiction or ambiguity can be resolved by regarding Mr. Hooper not as a minister but as an artist figure. In Mr. Hooper we see Hawthorne’s mixed judgment toward himself as an artist. Here he defined his paradoxical position as an immoral writer of moralities, as an anti-Transcendentalist nourished by Transcendentalism, and as an ideological recluse preaching the importance of community. No one can doubt that the minister would be, in Hawthorne’s case, an appropriate guise for the artist. Just as Spenser and Milton assumed a shepherd’s role for their pastoral verse, and William Butler Yeats saw himself as a goldsmith, and Wallace Stevens, a clavier player—all appropriate guises for their theory of poetry—so Hawthorne, who was fond of subtitles like “A Parable” (in “The Minister’s Black Veil”), “An Apologue” (in “The Man of Adamant”), and “A Morality” (in “Fancy’s Show Box”), was most clearly the artist-preacher, full of subtle warnings about sin and its psychological consequences.

If we see Hooper as a stand-in for Hawthorne the artist, comparable in his own way to that more obvious stand-in, Owen Warland in “The Artist of the Beautiful,” then a number of seeming contradictions resolve themselves accordingly. In essence, what these observations amount to is the idea of the artist’s license: deeds and attitudes that would be grave sin to ordinary mortals—to any other Hawthorne characters—are freely indulged or even endorsed as virtues in the artist. Thus in figures like Owen Warland and Father Hooper, Hawthorne reverses his ideology concerning a number of basic issues.

The unpardonable sin, to take one instance, is quite pardonable when it is an artist who is prying into the secret guilt in the hearts of others. As a writer, Hawthorne did little else but penetrate the inner hearts of people both real and fictitious. He was not above using his memories of real people at Brook Farm in
The Blithedale Romance, or caricaturing his fellow freeloaders in the Customs-House, in some small violation of their sanctity. What sets the artist apart from the unpardonable sinner is his charity; hence, in taking the veil Mr. Hooper is merely, like any artist, sacrificing all to his vision of truth. As long as he retains his warmth and humanity, his loneliness and gloom are the stigmata not of a sinner but of a heroic spirit.

The sin of pride, even apart from its presence in the unpardonable sin, is always a most dangerous commodity, but again is a necessary indulgence for an artist. A godlike willfulness and pride—most objectionable in Hawthorne's scientists or political reformers—is a sine qua non for the creative genius. The primary Transcendental doctrine of Self-Reliance is a touchstone of Hawthorne's double standard in this matter. Such practitioners of Self-Reliance as Hester Prynne and Rappaccini, living proudly independent of community mores, are judged sternly by their creator. Thoreau's statement, "No man ever followed his genius until it misled him," and Emerson's "In self-trust all the virtues are comprehended," were to Hawthorne an invitation to such Dostoyevskian moral anarchy as we see portrayed in Aylmer, the scientist in "The Birthmark" who boasts, "No king on his guarded throne could keep his life if I, in my private station, should deem that the welfare of millions justified me in depriving him of it." But yet, no one was ever more eloquent than Hawthorne in defense of Emersonian Self-Reliance when it pertained to the figure of the artist. Speaking of Owen Warland, Hawthorne describes the artist as one who "must keep his faith in himself while the incredulous world assails him with its utter disbelief; he must stand up against mankind and be his own sole disciple." Not only the artist of the beautiful must follow this precept, however, but also the moral artist, such as Father Hooper fighting for his truth behind his scandalously unpopular black veil. Thus Father Hooper must resist the community's defamatory judgment of him as conveyed by his mortified fiancée:

"... there may be whispers that you hide your face under the consciousness of secret sin. For the sake of your holy office do away with this scandal."

... [But with] gentle, but unconquerable obstinacy did he resist all her entreaties.
Like Owen Warland, Father Hooper here is "his own sole disciple." In the artist figure, absolute self-reliance is not so pernicious a doctrine, after all.

Similarly, the limitless aspiration of Transcendentalism was usually sinful foolishness to Hawthorne, whose scientist in "The Birthmark" killed his wife in "his strong and eager aspiration toward the infinite," but a similar aspiration toward the ultimate in perfect beauty is grounds for high admiration in "The Artist of the Beautiful." Lesser sins than pride, such as sloth, drunkenness, and despair—all of which Owen Warland commits—are of course to be excused as artistic license, in an authorial generosity not extended to the drunks, loafers, and ne'er-do-wells of the Customs-House essay. Even the judgment of Hester Prynne is lightened partly because of her role as an artist figure, she having created her scarlet letter "with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread . . . so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy, that it had all the effect of a last and fitting decoration to the apparel which she wore." Perhaps her unique creative artistry helps make her the least abused of the three principal sinners in the novel. How could Hawthorne have helped but warm to any character who could make a splendid piece of art work out of her life's chief misery?

We come finally to the issue of Father Hooper's isolation, which is the sure punishment for sin in most of Hawthorne's stories, but which also quite unjustly afflicts the artist in his nonconformity. Father Hooper's loneliness behind the veil falls into the latter category, if we may allow a parallel between Father Hooper's isolation "in that saddest of prisons, his own heart," and Hawthorne's similar self-imprisonment as described in his letter to Longfellow, dated June 4, 1837: "Since we last met . . . I have secluded myself from society; and yet I never meant any such thing . . . I have made a captive of myself and put me into a dungeon; and now I cannot find the key to let myself out. . . ." Hawthorne even applied the image of a secluding veil to his own personal identity at the outset of *The Scarlet Letter*, while discussing the propriety of recounting his Customs-House memories, saying "we may prate of the circumstances that lie around us, and even of ourself, but still keep the inmost Me behind its veil. To this extent and within these

3 From a letter to Longfellow quoted by F. O. Matthiessen in *American Renaissance* (New York, 1941), 227.
limits, an author, methinks, may be autobiographical." Even the
cold chill which Father Hooper imparted to the wedding party is
seen as the artist's burden—not just the sinner's—according to "The
Artist of the Beautiful," in which Hawthorne declares, "To per-
sons... who are either in advance of mankind or apart from it,
there often comes a sensation of moral cold that makes the spirit
shiver as if it had reached the frozen solitudes around the pole."
It follows then that poets and criminals may suffer a similar sep-
aration from community, although of course the artist alone is
heroic in his chosen suffering: "What the prophet, the poet, the
reformer, the criminal, or any other man with human yearnings,
but separated from the multitude by a peculiar lot, might feel,
poor Owen felt." Father Hooper can no more be faulted for isola-
tion from community, then, than can Owen Warland or Haw-
thorne himself, with his inmost Me behind its veil.

To conclude, if "The Artist of the Beautiful" is a portrait of the
artist (Hawthorne) pitying himself, "The Minister's Black Veil"
shows this artist (also Hawthorne) justifying himself. Making his
life a sustained work of art, the minister is doing what Hawthorne
passionately exhorted, in his own editorial voice, in The Scarlet
Letter: "Among many morals which press upon us from the poor
minister's miserable experience, we put only this into a sentence:
'Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your
worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!'" The
Reverend Mr. Hooper, in wearing the veil, does exactly this, show-
ing some trait whereby the worst may be (and is) inferred. As Owen
Warland was the artist of beauty, so Father Hooper is—more im-
portantly—the artist of truth, devoting his whole life to it. At his
best, Hawthorne was both Owen Warland and Father Hooper, the
artist of both truth and beauty, but the artist of truth above all.

A persona for Hawthorne himself, Father Hooper acts out his
author's belief, as stated in The American Notebooks, that "an
innate perception and reflection of truth gives the only sort of
originality that does not finally grow intolerable." Paying the
price of that innate perception and reflection of truth—and of that
originality—Father Hooper is the artist-hero, conveying the truth
to his fellows at whatever cost to himself by the most effective
means he knows. Whatever ambiguities we find in "The Minister's

4 The American Notebooks by Nathaniel Hawthorne, edited by Randall
Stewart (New Haven, 1932), 168.
Black Veil,” then, can be resolved in the light of this bias towards the artist. Hawthorne’s endorsement in this tale of qualities he normally attacked—extreme willfulness, Transcendental self-reliance, deliberate isolation from community, an obsession about the secret sin of others—is explained by Father Hooper’s all-absolving identity as an artist of the truthful.