Stated Meeting Report

Literature and History: The Example of Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil"

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The question of the relation between literature and history is a frontier area for thinking about interpretation in the humanities these days. For all practical purposes, it would seem, what is sometimes called "the linguistic turn" in the human sciences has taken place, once and for all. John E. Toews defines this paradigm shift in a recent essay in the *American Historical Review*, "Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience." After having said that the "focus on the production, reproduction and transmission of meanings in various historical periods and cultural contexts (is at) the center of the most interesting and innovative work being produced, not only by historians but more generally in the humanities and social sciences," Toews goes on to define the linguistic turn as follows: "Most seem ready to concede that language can no longer be construed as simply a medium, relatively or potentially transparent, for the representation or expression of a reality outside itself; and are willing to entertain seriously some form of semiological theory in which language is conceived of as a self-contained system of 'signs' whose meanings are determined by their relations to each other, rather than by their relations to some 'transcendental' or extralinguistic object or subject." What follows here is based on two presuppositions

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about this "linguistic turn." 1) The shift to the view Toews describes is not as easy to make as he seems to assume. Stubborn traces of the older assumption that history is something solidly "out there," external to language or to other sign-systems, remain in the formulations even of those who think themselves fully committed to the new view — for example in the work of the so-called "new historicists" in literary study. 2) The most important methodological problem now is to refine our understanding of the particular form of sign-to-sign connection involved in the relation of text to context and literature to history. What I shall say here about Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil" is meant to be a start toward that refinement.

"The Minister's Black Veil" depends on a remarkable donnée or fancy, remarkable in its simplicity and profundity. It is a profundity that is all on the surface, or it is accomplished by a change in marks all on the surface. The good Reverend Mr. Hooper appears one Sunday at the door of his house to conduct the morning church service with "but one thing remarkable in his appearance." He is wearing a black veil. He has covered over all but two of those features or marks by which we ordinarily interpret a person's mind and feelings from his or her face. All but his mouth and chin are hidden. Hooper has replaced his face with another kind of mark, the double-folded black veil. No certain explanation is ever given, by the narrator, by Mr. Hooper, or in any other way, of the reason or reasons why he does this. Hooper's explanations are all matters of "if" and "perhaps": "If it be a sign of mourning," he tells his fiancée, "I, perhaps, like most other mortals, have sorrows dark enough to be typified by a black veil. . . . If I hide my face for sorrow, there is cause enough . . . , and if I cover it for secret sin, what mortal might not do the same?" Hooper's act is not explicitly related by him to his vocation as a minister, nor given explicit scriptural precedent, nor supported by other

institutional precendents within his church, nor justified by a claim that he has been commanded to wear the black veil by God or by his conscience or by any other sort of message from on high or from out of this world. Such a message might have elected him to a mission to wear the black veil as a sign of transmitting that message, however enigmatically, to his community.

The effects on the Milford community of the interruption brought about by Hooper's wearing of the black veil are catastrophic. The common forms of communal life are threatened or break down. Everything presupposed by the cheerful picture of social harmony sketched in the opening paragraph is jeopardized. That Sunday, from behind his black veil, Hooper preaches a sermon on "secret sin": the sin we would hide from our neighbors, from ourselves, and from God. The sermon causes the hearts of Hooper's hearers to quake. When they leave the church they have been transformed, at least in the narrator's description, from faces open to one another in the sunlight into mouths without faces; solitary selves, enclosed or veiled by their own secret meditations: "Some gathered in little circles, huddled closely together, with their mouths all whispering in the centre; some went homeward alone, wrapt in silent meditation."

The story thereafter is a series of episodes in which one by one the normal activities of the community are shown to be disabled, transformed, or suspended by Hooper's wearing the black veil: a funeral service, a wedding, an abortive consultation with the minister by members of his congregation, his open interchange with his fiancée, his customary evening walk to the graveyard, his power as a preacher, his own deathbed scene, even the thoughts of him after his death by those who survive him. Once the minister puts on his black veil there is no more open discussion, no more courtship, no more marrying or giving in marriage; rather, marriages become indistinguishable from

funerals, and funerals cease to be an institutionalized acceptance of the fact that the dead are really dead. Hooper's deathbed scene becomes not the expression of a farewell openness to his parishioners but the occasion of a final speech denouncing the people of Milford: "I look around me, and, lo! on every visage a Black Veil." Even Hooper's death is not the occasion of an unveiling, as the last sentence of the story affirms: "The grass of many years has sprung up and withered on that grave, the burial-stone is moss-grown, and good Mr. Hooper's face is dust; but awful is still the thought, that it mouldered beneath the Black Veil!"

This universal disabling of the normal transactions of the community is accomplished by the simple act or gesture of donning the black veil. The veil interrupts the original basis of that most universal and essential of tropes, the trope of prosopopoeia. This is the trope whereby we ascribe a name, a face, or a voice to the absent, the inanimate, or the dead. The trope depends on assuming that a person's face and voice are the outward indices of an inward and hidden self of which they are the more or less trustworthy expression, the delegated signs. The primary prosopopoeia, it may be, is the one whereby we read the faces of those around us. Prosopopoeias, like "face of the mountain," are projections from that first personification. Hooper disrupts this system by substituting a veil for his face. In doing this he suspends the functioning of personification, the trope that is essential not only to narrative but to any human community whatsoever and therefore to the making of history.

History enters or is entered into at a number of different points by "The Minister's Black Veil." Hawthorne's writing of the story was an historical event. It occurred at a specific place and time in history. It was itself a response to an historical event or condition: New England Puritanism as it existed in the past and remained a force in Hawthorne's own time. But "The Minister's Black Veil"

was not so much caused by those antecedent historical events as it was a reading of them. Or, since any conceivable traces, remnants, records, or memorials of New England Puritanism, were already a reading, it would be better to say that Hawthorne's story was a re-reading, with all the connotations of violence involved in the concept of appropriative re-reading. In Hawthorne's story history is turned into a parable — presented in the form of a memorial record of a pseudo-historical event. However paradigmatic of New England Puritanism he is, the Reverend Hooper of Milford never existed as such in history. Hooper is a fictional historical personage, but such personages may have great historical force, as may real historical personages when fictionalized in our memory.

"The Minister's Black Veil" was first published in 1836, in *The Token*; then again in 1837 in the first collection of *Twice-Told Tales*. This collection was underwritten without Hawthorne's knowledge or consent by his friend, Horatio Bridge. The story was published again in Hawthorne's lifetime in 1851 and then down through the years in manifold editions and anthologies until today. All these printings were historical events of the most concrete and material sort. They are embedded in the social and economic as well as intellectual history of the United States, though the metaphor in "embedded" is as problematic and question-begging as are all metaphors by which we try to speak of the relation of a literary text to history.

Each reading of "The Minister's Black Veil," finally, is another historical event. Salient examples are Poe's reading, recorded in a review of *Twice-Told Tales*; Melville's reading as recorded incidentally in his review essay "Hawthorne and His Mosses" ("I have thus far omitted all mention of his 'Twice Told Tales,' and 'Scarlet Letter.' Both are excellent; but full of such manifold, strange and diffusive beauties, that time would all but fail me, to point the half of them out" [Melville, Library of America ed., 1165].); or

Henry James's reading, as recorded in his book on Hawthorne; or my present reading, here and now.

All these moments, at the beginning, along the way, and now, when the story was written, published, and whenever the story is read, are so many historical events. They are moments when language enters life. How can we define those moments as exactly as possible?

The story told in "The Minister's Black Veil" itself provides an answer, if we choose to take it as such. The story offers the reader a paradigm or parabolic expression of what an historical event is. On the other hand, the story itself, as a physical object — black marks on paper, a man-made object produced at certain times and places — is also in its writing, publication, and reading a series of historical events of the most literal and material kind. The story told within the text, then, like the parables of Jesus, is a parable of the performative working of the text thought of as a physical event — in this case a written or printed one rather than an oral performance, though of course the widest effect of the parables of Jesus came about when they were written down by the gospel writers.

This textual happening has two temporal vectors, one toward the past, the other toward the future. On the one hand, "The Minister's Black Veil" is explicitly presented, by way of an initial footnote, as a re-reading or re-writing of history. The footnote is signalled by an asterisk appended to the subtitle: "A Parable*." The footnote runs as follows:

> *Another clergyman in New England, Mr. Joseph Moody, of York, Maine, who died about eighty years since, made himself remarkable by the same eccentricity that is here related of the Reverend Mr. Hooper. In his case, 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 own death, he hid his face from men.

Hawthorne's story, then, is a repetition — with a difference — of another historical event. That either or both or neither of these events is fictitious does not affect its parabolic or paradigmatic power. The fact is, however, that the Reverend Moody of York, Maine, was a real historical personage, known locally as "Handkerchief Moody." I owe these facts to the manuscript of a family diary possessed by Bliss Carnochan of Stanford University. One of Carnochan's ancestors had Handkerchief Moody as a tutor and once peeped under Moody's handkerchief. The Reverend Hooper of Milford repeats the Reverend Moody of York, though with a difference. Hawthorne's story is a twice-telling, with a difference, of the story of the Reverend Moody, whose wearing of the veil "had a different import." It is not necessary for Hooper to know that he is repeating Moody in a different mode (enigmatic, "allegorical," in place of ordinary and explicable) for his act to function as a repetition. In fact it may be the case that a parabolic happening requires, as an essential requisite for its working, the forgetting or ignorance of the antecedents it repeats. If we take the "Minister's Black Veil" as a valid example, it would seem characteristic of historical events that they are not so much the remembering or representation of earlier historical events as their unintentional or inadvertent re-enactment. This re-enactment functions on its own, independent of the knowledge or intention of the new actors on the stage of history. It functions as a re-reading, or even as a misreading and distortion, of previous events, even if the characters performing the repetition are not aware that they are doing so. Karl Marx, in a notorious passage in "The Eighteenth Brumaire," claimed that an historical event occurs twice, once as tragedy and then again later on as farce, as in the repetition of Napoleon by Louis Napoleon. But the French

Revolution and its culmination in Napoleon Bonaparte's rise to power was itself already, in this case self-consciously, the repetition of Roman history.

The second definition of an historical event or happening, if we still take "The Minister's Black Veil" as a paradigm or parable of such an event, is that it is the irruption of a sign or system of signs, itself the differential repetition of an earlier sign or system of signs, into the historical continuum or onto the stage of history. The good Reverend Mr. Hooper appears wearing his black veil. This manifestation or monstrosity, this showing forth of a sign, breaks into the even regularity of the communal life of the people of Milford. That community is never the same again. Hawthorne writes and publishes "The Minister's Black Veil." American history is, in however small a degree, never quite the same again. Our history is once more interrupted or disrupted, suspended or transformed, in always unpredictable ways, every time the story is read. This feature of violent interruption, eruption, or unannounced breaking in is essential to historical happenings, as Walter Benjamin shows in the "Theses on the Philosophy of History."

If Hooper's appearance in the black veil, Hawthorne's writing and publication of "The Minister's Black Veil," and any reading of the story are not parables of what an historical event is, but literal historical happenings, whether real or fictive, it would appear that an historical happening is not what it is sometimes still thought to be, in spite of that so-called "linguistic turn." We are still likely to think of history as in one way or another something solidly extra-textual, a physical or material occurrence that happens outside language, like an earthquake or the explosion of a star. Such an event, it would appear, can be known by consciousness and named referentially by language. But if "The Minister's Black Veil" is a valid paradigm, an historical event cannot be assimilated, it would appear, to notions of exteriority,

material fact, ''experience,'' the body, power, force, ''economic realities,'' and so on. Some such conception of history is still in one way or another these days often invoked as the rock of reality, the ultimate point of reference in the human sciences or in cultural studies, including literary criticism. It is invoked as an antidote to language-oriented theory, as a return to reality from the wild disembodied speculations of theorists who see everything as language, the world as text, and language as the endless ''play'' of signs in the void. One understands the rage of those who want to get back from language to life, history, facts, the material world — to pass, as Marx said in his rejection of Hegel, from language to life. But if ''The Minister's Black Veil'' — both the story told within it, and the act of writing, printing, reading the story — can validly be taken as paradigmatic historical events, it would appear that an historical event is not to be understood as representation, or as memory. Nor can history be defined as the direct experience in the present by a subject of events that take place before his eyes, written down in a memorial record that is later re-read by future generations of historians as access to ''history as it really happened'' or at any rate as access to the subjective responses of those before whose eyes history really happened.

What then is that way of historical happening, if it is not to be thought of in any of those ways in which we are likely to spontaneously conceptualize it, under the command of ideological presuppositions so powerful that they are even more difficult than most to see as presuppositions and not just as ''common sense?'' If I go on taking ''The Minister's Black Veil,'' both the story told and the act of telling, as an hypothetical paradigm, I shall need to say that an historical happening is not a physical event in the present open to representation, but the proferring of a sign or system of signs open to an act of reading that is not purely representational but also performative. An historical event is a speech

act, but a speech act of a particular kind, or perhaps it would be better to say that an historical happening, such as that recorded in "The Minister's Black Veil" and that performed by "The Minister's Black Veil," bring into the open in a specific way universal features of speech acts in general. An historical event is a speech act of the particular sort that involves the putting forth and then the reading of a sign.

In the case of the minister's black veil and "The Minister's Black Veil," the veil and the story, the signs to be read are fundamentally undecidable in meaning. The alternative possibilities for defining what the black veil is—its "type and symbol" as Hooper puts it—can be exactly delimited, but the text does not authorize a choice among them, and in such a reading the text must be the ultimate authority. The black veil and its associated system of signs may mean this or they may mean that, but it is impossible to tell for sure, on the basis of the text, which reading is the correct one. Insofar as reading is to be thought of as a hermeneutic process in which the hidden meaning of the text is uncovered by an appropriate process of diciphering, this situation can be formulated by saying that "The Minister's Black Veil" unveils the possibility of the impossibility of unveiling. Though both the veil itself and the story about it contain clues to how they should be read, those clues, the folding of the veil, its blackness, various readings of the veil within the text of the story, Biblical echoes, and allusions to the facts of New England history, do not in the end authorize a single unambiguous reading. The tale mutely submits to whatever reading we impose on it, but it does not absolutely and unequivocally justify any one reading. In this it is like any "real" historical event when it is recognized to be the positing or proferring of a sign. Something happens when anyone reads "The Minister's Black Veil." Something certainly happens in the community of Milford when Hooper appears in his veil. But what happens

in either case is to some degree unpredictable and in that sense incommensurate with its cause. What happens is not "caused" according to some model of physical causality, but depends on how the proferred sign is read, and the sign does not authorize or confirm any single unequivocal reading. If an historical happening is neither a representation nor in itself representable, neither is it a cause or a result, if we mean by those words an element in a system involving a straightforward and rational correspondence between cause and effect.

The story itself presents a salient demonstration that a speech act and what it causes cannot be assimilated to the logic of cause and effect, since it is communicated by way of an act of reading. The Reverend Hooper, the reader is told, became something of a celebrity in New England: "Strangers came long distances to attend service at his church, with the mere idle purpose of gazing at his figure, because it was forbidden to behold his face. But many were made to quake ere they departed!" Hooper, as the years go by, is to a certain extent assimilated into the community. He becomes one of its regular fixtures, something to take in on a sightseeing trip, like other natural and manmade wonders. In one case, however, Hooper's preaching has a more serious social and political effect than the momentary scaring of those who have come to look with idle detachment: "Once, during Governor Belcher's administration, Mr. Hooper was appointed to preach the election sermon. Covered with his black veil, he stood before the chief magistrate, the council, the representatives, and wrought so deep an impression, that the legislative measures of that year were characterized by all the gloom and piety of our earliest ancestral sway." The reader is not told that the sermon recommended specific legislation. Presumably it was his usual sermon about secret sin, the sin we would hide not only from our neighbor, but from ourselves, and from God himself. The chief magistrate, the council, and the repre-

sentatives, however, take the sermon as the command to enact specific laws, laws characterized by gloom and piety. The sermon makes something happen. It is an efficacious speech act. But what happens is not directly commensurate with its cause, nor predictable from it. Like all historical events it is effective through an act of reading in which the listeners draw their own conclusions, in this case the conclusion that they should enact certain specific laws, though the narrator does not tell us that Hooper's sermon made any such specific recommendations. In fact, the narrator emphasizes more the effect of the veil itself in making "so deep an impression." The harsh legislative measures seem to have been caused by the veil. Or, rather, they are the result of an unauthorized reading of the veil, one more example of the effect on the community of that simple piece of double-folded black crepe.

But there is even more to say of the way in which the reading of "The Minister's Black Veil," like its writing, printing, and publishing, is a paradigmatic historical event. The reading of the story, in both senses of the word, as the mere passing of the words through the mind of the reader and as critical reflection — commentary — on the story, is an historical event wherever and whenever it occurs, as it is for you and me at this moment. But this happening in history has a double definition. On the one hand, reading (for example the reading of "The Minister's Black Veil") is a powerful instrument for the identification and dismantling of ideological mystifications, in this case of the ideological opposition between realism and allegory and the Puritan ideology of apocalypse associated with the figure of the veil and the ideology of prosopopoeia that is inextricably associated with that figure. The most elegant and succinct formulation I know of this indispensable function of reading (as opposed to theory) is proposed by Paul de Man in "The Resistance to Theory": "What we call ideology," says de Man, "is precisely

the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenalism. It follows that, more than any other mode of inquiry, including economics, the linguistics of literariness is a powerful and indispensable tool in the unmasking of ideological aberrations, as well as a determining factor in accounting for their occurrence. Those who reproach literary theory for being oblivious to social and historical (that is to say ideological) reality are merely stating their fear at having their own ideological mystifications exposed by the tool they are trying to discredit. They are, in short, very poor readers of Marx's *German Ideology*'' (''Resistance to Theory,'' 11).

Certainly my reading of ''The Minister's Black Veil'' would exemplify this claim for an indispensable social function of ''rhetorical reading.'' I have shown that Hawthorne's story does not merely reaffirm the Puritan version of the traditional language of parable and apocalypse, the notion that here below, in this mortal life, each of us veils a secret sin that will be unveiled, exposed, at the last trumpet, after death. The story also puts that ideology in question by demonstrating the possibility of the impossibility of unveiling, that is, by showing that the assumption that there must be some identifiable secret behind any veil is a piece of ideology. Through that, the story functions as a powerful displacement or cancelling of the ideology of an opposition between realism and allegory on which Hawthorne's own self-analysis and deliberate procedures as a writer depends.

But the reader should always be wary when such a claim of mastery through a happy marriage of theory and reading is made. In the context of my own reading here, there is something a little ominous about calling rhetorical reading a ''tool,'' as though it were a technique or a procedure a reader could control and freely manipulate. There is also something a little unsettling, in the light of this present essay, about the latent or effaced

prosopopoeia in the word "unmasking." Rhetorical reading is a "tool" for "unmasking!" That seems to contradict what I have said, with the help of Hawthorne, about the possibility of the impossibility of unmasking or unveiling. Moreover, the reader might be alerted that there is a problem by a certain slippage in the sentences I have quoted from de Man. He begins by praising rhetorical reading, calling it a "mode of inquiry" into "the linguistics of literariness," elsewhere in the essay defined as "the rhetorical or tropological dimension of language" (17). This then slips into defense not of reading but of theory as such. But the whole point of de Man's intricate argument is to move through the assertion that "the resistance to theory is in fact a resistance to reading" (15) to a final far more radical assertion that far from being in happy harmony, rhetorical reading and literary theory are in irreconcilable opposition. Far from facilitating reading, theory — even the theory of rhetorical reading, it turns out — contaminates, inhibits, and ultimately disables rhetorical reading.

Surely, in spite of de Man's warning that the resistance to reading cannot be resisted, I can avoid this danger, now that I know all about it, with the help of Hawthorne, James, and de Man, among others. In this case too lucid knowledge of the truth should set me free. But can we not see, in retrospect, an example of the distressing disequilibrium or asymmetry between theory and reading in the reading I have proposed here of "The Minister's Black Veil?" Have I not, not through some remediable inadvertance, but through an ineluctible compulsion, necessarily and unavoidably used as the "tool" of reading the very thing I have most wanted to put in question, in this case the ideology of apocalypse with its associated figures of the veil and of prosopopoeia? Have I not all along projected a human face, personality, and voice into those little black marks on the page, marks as inanimate and dead as a corpse or as any stone? Just as surely as the citizens

of Milford projected a face on or behind the black veil of the Reverend Hooper and assumed that the missing face was an index of a personality or selfhood behind the veiling mask of the face itself, so have I projected faces, selves, and voices on the white pages, filigreed in black, and have thought of "Hawthorne," or of "James," have thought and spoken of Hooper and his fellow parishioners as if they were real people, though they have no existence beyond the marks on the page, and have even personified the text itself in speaking of the way it patiently endures all readings of it. I cannot read the story without doing this, even though the point of the story is to put in question the activity of prosopopoeia on which its functioning as a narrative depends. By the time I have, with the help of the story, come to doubt the validity of such personifying projections, it is too late, too late to go back. I have already committed the crime I am led by the story to condemn. I have been made the mystified victim, once more, of the piece of ideology I would "unmask." In order to demystify, "unmask," I must forget that I am using as the "tool" of unmasking the very thing I am unmasking, the trope of personification. In order to read the story as a critique of the ideology opposing realism to allegory, and as a critique of the ideology of the imminence of apocalyptic unveiling ("There will come a time!"), I must reaffirm the ideology from which I want to free myself and my readers — in this case the assumption that behind every mask there is a face and behind every face, as behind every sign or configuration of signs, there is — something — a personality, a self, a secret, an object or set of objects, a transcendent reality, something in any case extra-linguistic. Belief in the truth value of the figure of prosopopoeia is a piece of ideology so basic that it is impossible to imagine a working and workable human society without it.

History, we might now conclude, is a series of disruptive happenings that repeat, in one way or another, the fundamental linguis-

tic error of personifying the absent, the inanimate, or the dead, imposing or projecting a face on the veil, or creating a face that acts as a veil. In doing this, we repeat the error of taking a linguistic for a material reality even in those cases where the historical event is the ''unmasking'' of that error. To put this another way: the working of my reading, like the working of Hawthorne's parable, is a speech act that, like all speech acts, is an historical event or happening. Just as a parable is not a description but an act of language that works to divide the sheep from the goats in its hearers, those who have eyes and see from those who do not (though there is no certain way to decide which of those groups you are in), so my ''reading'' will work to make something happen in those who read or hear it, but that effect will be unpredictable, open, just as is the effect of reading ''The Minister's Black Veil'' itself.

I draw the following conclusions from what I have said: As long as the relation between text and context, literature and history, is defined in one way or another in grammatical or logical terms, that is, as the control of a set of conventions or of a linguistic code over another set of signs, the traditional assumption that history causes literature or that literature merely reflects history will have reformed itself or reasserted itself in another guise. This will happen in spite of claims by the interpreter that he or she has made the ''linguistic turn.'' Only a rhetorical analysis of the relation between literature and history, that is, an analysis recognizing that this relation is figurative or tropological, not merely conventional, grammatical, or logical, will escape the surreptitious reaffirmation of one form or another of the assumption that history determines literature or that literature merely ''reflects'' its historical context. Moreover, only the recognition that a work of literature, in its production and in its reading, is a speech act, performative as well as constative, will provide an escape from the reassertion, in one way or another, of the pri-

ority of history over literature. This means that a subtle and scrupulous analysis of the way speech acts work is a fundamental part of the study of literature today. Discussions of theory, finally, should center not on this or that theory as such, but on the ways a given theory facilitates reading. Reading here is meant in an extended sense. It means not just the reading of works of literature, but the reading of historical documents, or works of art, material artifacts — the cultural signs of all sorts that are transmitted from the past and that surround us today.

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