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The Possibilities of Parable – the Breath of a Subtle Power: A Reading of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Minister's Black Veil*

'A subtle power was breathed into his words.' (1254)¹ This sensitive remark is made by the nameless (and also faceless) narrator of Hawthorne's much debated story, *The Minister's Black Veil*, when the Reverend Mr. Hooper, the protagonist, gives the first sermon to his congregation with the ominous black folds of crape covering his face. Inspired by this power and by the seemingly illogical growth of energy in the minister's preaching while the unremovable veil is stirred into a gentle motion by his 'measured breath,' (ibid) I wish to investigate to what extent and in what sense the subtitle of Hawthorne's tale, 'A Parable,' can be taken to heart within the framework of Calvinist puritan preaching. Through my analysis, I will keep in mind the subtle insights of Michael Colacurcio who, in the chapter 'The True Sight of Sin: Parson Hooper and the Power of Blackness' of his book entitled *The Province of Piety*,² places the story in its theological and historical context, calling Hooper 'the subtlest of Hawthorne's puritans.'

Before focusing on the 'subtle power,' another one of the text's most exhaustive readings should be consulted: J. Hillis Miller's 'Defacing It: Hawthorne and History.'³ In his 87-page essay, Miller carefully goes through various possibilities of interpretation, but already in his introductory thoughts, he foreshadows his suspended, though somewhat fluttering, twofold conclusion: 'The reading of the story culminates in the double proposition that the story is the unveiling of the possibility of the impossibility of unveiling' (51). Towards the end of his essay, in a less enigmatic way, he says the following: 'Of this story it would be better to say that it is the indirect, veiled expression of the impossibility of expressing anything verifiable at all in parable except the impossibility of expressing anything verifiable' (97).

The first point to be commented on is verifiability, since this notion hardly seems to fit the nature or task of any parable. For example, the entry 'parable' in the *Collins Dictionary of the English Language* gives the following definition:

I. a short story that uses familiar events to illustrate a religious or ethical situation;

¹ Throughout this paper, I refer to Hawthorne's text on the basis of the following edition: *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, ed. Nina BAYM, W.W. Norton & Co., New York, London, 1998. 1252–1261.

² Michael COLACURCIO: *The Province of Piety. Moral History in Hawthorne's Early Tales*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1984. 314–385.

³ In: J. HILLIS MILLER: *Hawthorne & History. Defacing It*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1991. 46–133.

2. any of the stories of this kind told by Jesus Christ (from Old French *parabole* from Latin *parabola* ‘comparison’ from Greek *parabole* ‘analogy’, from *paraballein* ‘to throw alongside’).

The definitions suggest that in the case of parables, one is ‘thrown alongside’ one’s everyday experiences. If verifiability is a criterion indeed, the need of it gives way to the urge of workability by a sudden shift of modality. Since there is no way, in the traditional sense, to test the factual truth of a parable, or even to find irrefutable evidence for its effect on the reader, the only possibility to still use the word ‘verifiability’ in a meaningful way is to *trust* the work, the dynamic mission a parable may perform in the individual. This modal shift from factual certainty to trust, from evidence to faith, can also be characteristic of a shift of emphasis when talking about reading in general: a shift from the desire of objective description to the more passionate desire of full personal participation in the reading process. This thought leads to a second comment on the text quoted from Hillis Miller: by ‘unveiling the possibility of the impossibility of unveiling,’ one inevitably veils the possibility of the possibility of unveiling, in other words, a negative affirmation is given to the question of the possibility of interpretation. To keep the Hawthornean ambiguity alive, that is, to keep it powerful and painful enough, besides acknowledging Miller’s conclusion, there is a need to uphold a chance of a positive affirmation as well. Perhaps the parable presented in Hawthorne’s tale may well be positively understood, maybe it can become workable within the Calvinist framework surrounding it – so it might as well provide the reader with a non-didactic type of teaching through participation in a spiritual exercise in the broad sense.

Of course, Hillis Miller also reminds the reader that there are several possible definitions of ‘parable,’ and he even goes as far as to claim that ‘a parable simultaneously forbids commentary and demands it’ (63), while his challenging definition runs as follows: a parable ‘expresses in a little story a meaning that can be expressed in no other way’ (63). However, Hillis Miller also quotes Franz Kafka who claims that ‘parables promise a transformation of our lives in which we “go over” and “become parables”’ (72). These words open up the possibility of an attitude, a modality towards parables that occurs when one occupies a state in which, after acknowledging the paradoxical nature of parables, one does not suspend their workability but instead becomes a living example of what parables might perform and transform in human beings. This modality requires the suspension of the attitude that repeats the futility of all attempts of explanation, and a recognition of a need for non-simplifying, non-moralising, non-didactic commentary when, as in the story, ‘a subtle power’ is breathed into the very commentary as well.

My understanding of the word ‘parable’ is closest to Paul Ricoeur’s, expressed in his ‘Listening to the Parables of Jesus.’⁴ In this short essay, Ricoeur argues that parables, through their inherent paradoxes and hyperbolic exaggerations, first

⁴ In: *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur. An Anthology of His Work*, Ed. Charles E. REAGAN and David STEWART, Beacon Press, Boston, 1978. 239–245.

disorient, that is, surprise, shock or astonish listeners. In an extravagant and rather uncanny way, they shatter expectations before they perform their work of reorientation: 'We are first disoriented before being reoriented' (244).

The eccentric deed of the minister, disorienting, and, in turn, reorienting the community of Milford village, is a case of self-imposed alienation from the community, since, by putting on the veil, he creates a deep gap between himself and his congregation. The first reaction, on the part of the community, is doubt: whether it is really the face of their beloved minister that is concealed behind the veil (1253). The second is the discovery of 'something awful' about the change, perhaps both in the sense of 'awe inspiring' and in the sense of 'terrifying, appalling.' (ibid) The third natural reaction is the following outcry: 'Our parson has gone mad!' (ibid)

The gap thus created is only deepened by the fact that 'Mr. Hooper appeared not to notice the perturbation of his people. (ibid)' As if he himself were not aware of the change in his appearance (like in the case of an innocent spider crawling slowly down the back of one's garment), or as if he regarded the whole thing to be too natural or accidental to be worth mentioning (like a new haircut, or the edge of a handkerchief hanging out of his pocket). Yet, although the veil creates embarrassment, oddly enough it never becomes ridiculous, and although veils of various sorts are predominantly worn by women (like brides, widows or nuns), the veiled minister never seems effeminate – not as if in a fit of madness, he had put on a pink ribbon, for instance. It must be noted that the sight lacks the impression of masculine power as well: the Reverend Mr. Hooper's appearance is very far from the heroic and legendary Zorro's or, for that matter, from that of the raw brutality of masked terrorists.

Because of the lack of explanation which could humanise the eccentricity and release humor, the two folds of crape, in the imagination of the listeners, feverishly fling themselves into emblematic function, hiding something: the minister's face from others and the light of the world from the minister. They also show something: a memento of fatal significance to the congregation and the gloom of the world to the minister. And although the Reverend Mr. Hooper behaves in the most appropriate way, although there is 'nothing terrible' (1254) in what he says, 'at least, no violence,' (ibid) his words and deeds evoke trembling and horror because the veil exhibits, in a rather vulgar way, some intimate secret, some 'sad mystery' (ibid) of the human heart, and, in a sense, it contaminates the integrity of the inner region by such an unusual and exaggerated publicity. The gesture is, in a sense, the profanation of something sacred, since it is literally the materialisation of something spiritual.

Such a strange event, amounting later to a scandal, can hardly be tolerated by a Calvinist congregation of well-meaning, hard-working but average, ordinary people. On the first day, when Hooper has to perform practically all of his pastoral duties (morning service, afternoon service, a funeral and a wedding – though no baptism of infants) the veil may be accepted as a rather frivolous demonstration to be explained in the not too distant future. He does explain to his brave fiancée

Elizabeth that the veil is ‘a type and a symbol (1257),’ but he fails to give further interpretation, thus depriving himself of marital happiness forever. It seems to be very unlikely that such an event could ever be so much domesticated that it becomes an integral part of habitual, everyday reality for many decades in Milford village. Yet – a strange response to strange behavior – the members of the congregation will not withdraw their confidence from Hooper and send him away, while that was not unusual in the eighteenth century: the most famous theologian of the age, Jonathan Edwards himself, was dismissed by his own congregation. Hooper, however, appears to be respected and feared by the church members, in spite of the fact that they do not understand what he demonstrates.

There are, undoubtedly, also advantages of having a faceless minister who otherwise excels more and more in the art of preaching. Not only that he is a special sight, some kind of tourist attraction, but he also functions without having to be taken into consideration as a human being. The veil, emitting a dark cloud and keeping the minister enshrouded in a mysterious gloom, excuses the inhabitants of the village from the necessity of social gestures, like inviting him for dinner, going with him for a walk, or caring about his health. Thus, free of human responsibility, the ones in need, i.e. the sinners and the dying can easily unburden their souls – and this is what a minister is most needed for. (In a recent newspaper, an experiment of an electronic congregation on the internet was advertised – such an impersonal priest might have the same hi-tech relieving effect.)

Elizabeth, Hooper’s wife-to-be, accepts the situation as well, and remains faithful to him. Although she shrinks from the idea of marriage, she does not shrink from human responsibility. At the end of their decisive conversation she ‘cover[s] her eyes’ (1258) – both in shock and in sympathy – though she is decent enough not to put on a black veil herself. Afterwards – as it can be suggested from the last images we get of her – she treats him as if he had entered some strange religious order (also requiring celibacy), or as if he had become seriously ill, as if, unwillingly, suddenly, all by accident, he had biologically ‘grown’ an ominous veil. Indeed, the veil, as the story unfolds, is more and more a part of the minister’s body, hiding his face organically, the way his face hides his skull and his skull hides his brain. This might remind the onlooker – Elizabeth and the members of the congregation just as much as the reader – that one is nothing but thick layers of material, suffocating and covering whatever spirit one may have all through their mortal lives. This gives some hope for a faraway *apocalypse* – the word also meaning ‘unveiling,’ as Miller points out – making up for all of Hooper’s gloom.

If the ‘subtle power’ that ‘was breathed into his words’ (1254) is taken seriously, it might be accepted that Mr. Hooper’s gesture is an integral part of his holy office. In the Old Testament, parables manifest themselves not so much in a verbal way but predominantly in the lives of the individual prophets. The aspects of disorientation, eccentricity and madness are present, for example, in the well-known images of Jeremiah and the yoke on his neck or Ezekiel boiling the pot after the death of his

wife. It is never explicitly stated that Mr. Hooper is acting upon a divine call, but he says to Elizabeth that he can only explain himself ‘so far as my vow may suffer me. (1257)’ And later, when he is appointed to preach the election sermon for Governor Belcher, his speech is so powerful ‘that the legislative measures of that year were characterised by all the gloom and piety of our earliest ancestral sway.’ (1259) ‘That year’ is sometime between 1730–1741; the event historically places Hooper and makes him a contemporary of Jonathan Edwards. Thus Hooper, too, becomes a figure of the Great Awakening movement, trying to restore the original puritan aspect of Calvinism. No wonder, then, that he puts so much emphasis in his demonstration on the doctrine of innate depravity. ‘Lo! on every visage a black veil! (1261),’ he cries out before he dies and, as a ‘veiled corpse, (ibid)’ begins to ‘moulder’ (ibid) in his coffin. As if original sin were more important to be understood for the congregation than the saving grace. The thundering words of Jonathan Edwards’ best known (though not most characteristic) sermon seem to suggest the same: ‘O sinner. Consider the fearful danger you are in: it is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath [...] You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it [...] and you have no interest in any Mediator, and nothing to lay hold of to save yourself, nothing to keep off the flames of wrath, nothing of your own, nothing that you ever have done, nothing that you can do to induce God to spare you one moment.’⁵

These words of Edwards, as well as the sight of the veiled Mr. Hooper do make any congregation tremble. As Michael Colacurcio points out, ‘by [Hooper’s] standards, to be truly awakened is merely to know that no power on earth can ever violate the ineluctable moral secrecy of our sinful subjectivity, the “saved” man is simply the undeceived man, who knows that in this life he cannot truly know – or be known by – another’ (338–339). Furthermore, commenting on Hooper’s panic-reaction to the sight of himself in the mirror, spilling the glass of wine and rushing out to the darkness leaving the wedding party behind, Colacurcio says the following: ‘On this point Jonathan Edwards and Edgar Poe would be in perfect agreement: the appropriate result of a truthful look might fairly be described as “horror”; the blackness within the self would correspond much more nearly to the darkness outside the wedding into which Hooper rushes (“for the Earth, too, had on her black veil”) than to the cheery light inside the hall’ (341).

However, if the aim of both Edwards and Hooper is the restoration of original Calvinist thinking, these fearful aspects must be part of their disorientation before reorientation. Reorientation to the Covenant of Grace, that is, to the doctrine that the mercy of God can never be humanly induced, provoked or deserved. Granting God absolute sovereignty, his grace can only come all of a sudden, by surprise, in astonishing and undeserved abundance. The shocking doctrine of the original

⁵ From Jonathan EDWARDS: “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” (1741). in: *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Fifth Edition, ed. Nina BAYM, W.W. Norton & Co., New York, London, 1998. 480–481.

sin is to be accepted in preparation for the perhaps even more shocking, humanly illogical, overwhelming, all-embracing gesture of divine generosity. Mr. Hooper might take this so seriously that he entirely entrusts nobody else's but the divine hand with the task of the removal of the veil.

It is explicitly stated that he had become 'a very efficient clergyman' (1259) – but, besides his favourite topic of secret sin, no mention is made of the biblical passages he took under exegesis. Whether, for instance, he ever reflected on 'the veil of the temple' in a Good Friday sermon, as we read in Luke 24:45: 'And the sun was darkened, and the veil of the temple was rent in the midst'; or in Matthew 27:51: 'The veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom.'⁶ Such words spoken from behind an unremovable black veil must carry extraordinary significance, his veil becoming a semblance of the veil of the temple that Hooper chose to put on in order to show that only God's hand can rend it in twain. The minister might also be commenting on Moses who, coming down from the mountain with the tables of the commandments, covered his shining face with a veil. As Paul reflects on this, in his second letter to the Corinthians 3:7: 'so that the children of Israel could not steadfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance which glory was to be done away with.' In this light, the veil becomes interpretable in the context of some mortal glory 'to be done away with,' shining on Mr. Hooper's face that has to be hidden so that it should not divert attention from the heavenly one. Or he wants to show a living example for the following verses of the very same chapter, 3:14-16: 'But their minds were blinded: for until this day remaineth the same veil untaken away in the reading of the old testament, which veil is done away in Christ. But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the veil is upon their heart. Nevertheless, when it shall turn to the Lord, the veil shall be taken away.'

Be it so – still, it must be noted, that behind his veil, Mr. Hooper has to go through serious suffering, sharing it with his converts who claim that 'before he brought them to celestial light, they had been with him behind the black veil (1259).' As suffering servant of the Lord, 'kind and loving, though unloved, and dimly feared (ibid),' he is in need of help from another biblical passage, the Letter to the Hebrews 10:19-22: 'Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, By a new and living way which he has consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; And having an high priest over the house of God; Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.'

Hawthorne's text allows no such open consolation to the Reverend Mr. Hooper or his congregation, yet the story offers the workability of a parable to its reader (or to its author, tortured by ambiguities). J. Hillis Miller observes the following: '... the text is like the black veil itself. The performative efficacy of "The Minister's Black Veil" lies in this similarity. It works. Like the veil, the story is a strange kind of effica-

⁶ In all biblical quotations, I use the King James Version of the Holy Bible.

cious speech act. It is a way of doing things with proffered signs. But it does to undo, to take away foundation or authority from anything any reader can say of it.' (106.)

Authority, yes – but also authenticity? In a further bold attempt at reorientation with the help of the parable, the significance of a *personal* encounter with such a black veil of a text depends on whether the reader wants to 'face' it or 'deface' it, that is, to make it illegible or – acting upon a sudden impulse – to try it on. To make the text workable as a parable, one would be very much in need of that 'subtle power' which was breathed into the words of the Reverend Mr. Hooper. It is always Hooper, it seems, to be the right person to help all listeners, through the parable of his own story, the breath, gently playing with the veil above the minister's mouth, over his sad smile, becoming the breath of the whole text, gently stirring the veils in front of the readers. Reading (and writing) then might also be imagined as a special respiratory exercise, in which the inhalation of the 'breath' of a story results in inspiration which is followed by the exhalation of a new, veiled and available, yet non-avoidable, text.

Abstract

Through the close reading of Nathaniel Hawthorne's story The Minister's Black Veil, taking into consideration J. Hillis Miller's and Michael Colacurcio's interpretations as well as Paul Ricœur's explanation of parables, the paper investigates the possibility of interpreting the story – as suggested by the subtitle – as a parable on which a powerful protestant sermon might be based. Remaining within the framework of Calvinist puritan preaching, the workability of such a parable is tested: to what extent it may perform its task of reorientation through disorientation and whether it can be imagined as a means of spreading the Gospel by any – veiled or unveiled – minister.

Keywords

american short story, Nathaniel Hawthorne, protestant sermon, Michael Colacurcio, Paul Ricœur

Rezümé

A dolgozat Nathaniel Hawthorne A lelkipásztor fekete fátyla című novelláját elemzi J. Hillis Miller és Michael Colacurcio interpretációi, valamint Paul Ricœur példázat-fogalma alapján. Arra keresi a választ, hogy lehet-e a novellát – mint alcíme sugallja – egy protestáns prédikáció alapjául szolgáló példázatnak tekinteni. A kálvinista és puritán kereteken belül maradvánnyal képes a szöveg a ricoeuri értelemben vett dezorientáció révén reorientálni az olvasót, el lehet-e fogadni a novellát mint egy lelkipásztor sajátos igehirdetési módját?

Kulcsszavak

amerikai novellairódalom, Nathaniel Hawthorne, protestáns prédikáció, Michael Colacurcio, Paul Ricœur