Images as Speechless Texts: Hawthorne's Hypotypotic Veil

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> "…we strive in vain to put the idea into words. No adequate expression of the beauty and profound pathos with which it impresses us is attainable*."*
> Hawthorne, *House of the Seven Gable*s

Coming from visual arts, painting, a field well tilled by semiotic readings, I hope in a small way to return the favour by surveying textual images for sights beyond signs.[1] My project is to take hypotyposis literally. I will view uncanny mental images produced while reading Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil" as though they were works of visual art. I see these images as a philosophically distinct species of art, untitled works. I mean to show how and why some texts entice us to create images when words fail and how strategies that underestimate visuality may be blind to a fundamental, performative aspect of reading words. My task is barely possible—claiming, *in text*, to *speak* for something in the visual that is beyond words. So, do not expect a reading, look instead for an indication of how some textual images beg for an exchange of knowing gazes rather than an interpretation.

After a text is shelved, what lingers longer in the mind are images not words. Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil" and *The Scarlet Letter* are, for example, most memorable for their central images—the veiled minister, the scarlet letter—vestiges that are co-creations of texts and readers. Can such powerful mental images be considered only or even primarily textual? Words signify concepts, according to the semiotic formula, but concepts are unknowable apart from the shifting private, mental images that shade meaning. These pictures can engender a strange affect when they hover between formation and resolution; and some such pictures can create an unbearable and indefinite suspense—an extra-textual experience.

There are those who consider every thing a text awaiting reading. But even they reveal—whether it is tacitly by their practical avoidance of semiotically resistant images (many abstract paintings, for example), or in their founding of Visual Culture Studies—that there is more to the visual than the textual can apprehend (see W. T. J. Mitchell, Mirzoeff, Elkins, and numerous others). In this short space I will touch on a few of these differences.

In "The Minister's Black Veil,"[2] the young Reverend Hooper is a mediocre minister in old New England who, without warning, appears before his congregation with his face above the mouth swathed in black crape. The transmogrification is sudden, without precedent or discernable motive. Despite protestations, he refuses to remove or explain

the veil. Eventually, his community accommodates to his strange affectation; in fact, they find him an even better minister than before the transformation. He dies, shrouded, his mysterious meanings buried with him.

Because the mystery is not resolved within the text, it haunts the reader. It flickers as an image between being and becoming. Hawthorne subtitles the tale "a parable," and so it is; a peculiar type of illustration that is meant to clarify a teaching but, because of the supplemental power of images, is unresolved and appears to require further interpretations before it is (socially) meaningful.

While the tale airs numerous readings—from Hooper, his flock and the narrator—about the meaning of his adornment. All are vague or contradictory; none is confirmed. When a deputation of the church confronts the minister, they are faced with the crape and silence. They are "speechless, confused" and rendered powerless to raise the issue or the veil. Only Hooper's fiancée, Elizabeth, manages to interrogate him. His eventual explanations—if explanations they are—are qualified, in typical Hawthornian manner, by "if" and "perhaps":

> **If** it be a sign of mourning, I, **perhaps**, like most 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?

Each or all or none may be true. His words are more like readings than reports. After these failed attempts to have Hooper remove the veil, or at least give a clear explanation for his spectacle, he is left alone. Surprisingly, the once 'good-enough' minister becomes an inspiring one, more because of the multivalent image he presents than an improvement in his speeches. Each parishioner finds in the veil the metaphor they need. The story ends with an elderly Hooper on his deathbed, wrestling to keep the shroud from being wrenched from his face. Even in death the community respects his wishes, and the mystery, and buries him unmolested.

Despite his death, both the villagers and readers remain in suspense: "The grass of many years has sprung up and withered on that grave, the burial stone is moss-grown, and good Mr. Hopper's face is dust; but awful is still the thought that it mouldered beneath the Black Veil." Another way to read this is that they each have the individual readings they need. The only absence is a collecting reading. While Hooper's radical act is somewhat contained by his becoming a legend, a text, his final silent image is an excess the continues to haunt his community and readers: as in life, he is a semi-autonomous spectacle—"ghost-like from head to foot." His image persists beyond the text because, like all ghosts, it has unfinished business.

What species of image is this? Hypotyposis, explains Bernard Dupriez, is the literary device whereby a text "paints things so vividly and with such energy that they become *in some way* visible; it also turns a narrative or description into an image, a picture, or even a living scene."[3] Similarly, the O.E.D. claims that hypotyposis is a "vivid description of a

scene, event, or situation, bringing it, *as it were*, before the eyes of the hearer or reader" [emphasis mine].

What does "in some way visible" and "bringing it, as it were, before the eyes," mean? Is this a form of transfiguration, magical thinking, or a report of experience? The definitions suggest some thing, some propelling "energy," in excess of mental pictures. Hypotyposis seems to refer to especially vivid images produced while reading, pictures that verge on hallucination. This class of images is not *experienced* as mental objects but as things "before the eyes," as pictures having substance, even an existence apart from the generative text. When outside the grip of hypotyposis it is fine to describe the experience as a mental projection; but from within the event the sensation is real, singular, uncanny.

Through an expository text, it is very difficult to convey how images of this sort feel, how they stimulate uncanny affect. Perhaps the following illustration might help:

> At that instant, catching a glimpse of his figure in a looking-glass, the black veil involved his own spirit in the horror with which it overwhelmed all the others. His frame shuddered—his lips grew white—he spilt the untasted wine upon the carpet—and rushed forth into the darkness.

The feeling I had when I first read this passage was a complex sense of recognition. Perhaps the text 'works' best with those who have similarly been surprised by themselves in a mirror: in the literal sense of thinking it was a real person entering the room; or, best of all, if you have had the experience of imagining yourself one way and being radically contradicted by a more reliable source: a mirror, photograph, another person. It can be a profoundly shocking event.[4]

When I read Hawthorne's words I was hit simultaneously with a picture and a sensation. In a passive way, I felt a sense of recognition, that he had captured an experience that I had had. But in a more tangible way, I felt recognized, hailed! I felt that he saw me, saw me right now! I was being seen. At that moment of reading, I was not alone. This sort of experience belongs to the class of mental images imbued with uncanny life, the hypotypotic. Can we say that such images are the products of a text or a mind? Surely both, but it *feels* like something other and othering. And it is precisely this apprehension that attracts us to fiction, especially horror and mystery.

The metaphor Dupriez chooses is "paints." His image evokes a process rather than a completed picture: before the reader's eyes, a picture paints itself. Neither Dupriez nor the O.E.D.'s definition evoke an author. Hypotyposis is an *event* of reading. When I am *in* reading, when I forget *I am* reading—when I am not in a meta-textual mode (or a semiotic mood)—I stare through the textual veil to the shifting specters they evoke. Such visuality is like dreaming. Both I and the text author the experience at once in an event that often can hardly be called conscious or belonging to any one. In this sense, if "the unconscious is *like* a language," visual art and creative visualizations generated by texts are also *like* a language, *like* texts, but this *likeness* (itself an image, a likeness) does not

express equivalence. The comparison at once points to similarities while simultaneously announcing difference.

If the Kantian sublime, "is the pleasurable experience in representation of that which would be painful or terrifying in reality, leading to a realization of the limits of the human and the powers of nature;"[5] the uncanny is the unnerving experience of the possibility of an image or inanimate thing having an autonomous energy, leading to a realization of the limits of reason and the power of imagination. While the sublime is spectacular, the uncanny is spectral. The uncanny is an image that seems to exceed its generative sources—in this case the text and the reader. Unlike the sublime, the uncanny seems capable of threatening the body—which is why Freud associates it (for males) with the fear of castration.

Hooper, dressed in ministerial black and crowned with a veil, is the very image of phallocentric authority: hidden yet present, seen and unseen. Interestingly, by donning the veil, Hooper is also *cut-off* from the rest of the community and himself; he is only in the company of others when he performs his ministerial function. And yet the veil is also feminine and read as such in the story: "How strange," said a lady, "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!" While a good deal of the image's uncanny power has to do with cross-dressing, this is just one of a series of disruptions of codes afforded him because it is useful to the community.

Despite their various conclusions, the many readings of "The Minister's Black Veil" since 1836 all read it a puzzle to be solved rather than a mystery whose affect is its own reward—Hopper has a "secret sin" that while not revealed in the story can be uncovered by reading. Nearly all, beginning with Edgar Allen Poe, read the sin as sexual, ranging from a fear of sex (sexual anesthesia); to guilt after having premarital sex with his fiancée; to necrophilia with "a young lady."[6] Some speculate that the veil covers a scar inflicted by the mystery lover. Most literal is Carl Ostrowski's claim that Hooper is masking the "ravages of syphilis."[7] Though he fails to describe which strain of untreated syphilis permits its victim such a long and apparently healthy life and disfigures only the upper part of the face, his reading is an extension of literal reading strategies that try to raise the veil, solve the puzzle and end the suspense.

While D. A. Miller, a la Foucault, investigates the patriarchal power structure that permits, enables and ultimately benefits from Hooper's eccentricity, Miller, too, cannot resist reading the tale as a detective. One which "if we had access, say, to a rival minister's 'taped testimony' and could specify the minister's secret, that secret would almost certainly be a sexual one."[8] This fantasy dramatizes our contemporary need not only to have no limits placed on what is available for reading, but the confidence that modern technology, eyewitness testimony and interrogation could penetrate any puzzle. Embedded here and in nearly every written reading of the tale is the assumption that the central image is a signifier with an allusive but capturable signified.

Perhaps the most notorious reader of the story—and the only one I have found to escape the mystery project—is J. Hillis Miller who reads the tale as a Derridian performance of the impossibility of reading: "The reading of the story culminates in the double proposition that the story is the unveiling of the possibility of the impossibility of unveiling."[9] He manages to read the surface of the veil—for performance rather than for an intentional meaning—but the cost of not looking for secrets appears to be a subjective relativism as unsatisfying (even to later Miller texts) as the previous hermeneutic suspense.

Miller's account resonates with a similar Hegelian apocalypticism found in Arthur Danto's aesthetics, specifically Danto's declaration of the "End of Art." By "the end of art," Danto means the end of art history, which is really the conclusion of a cohesive and hierarchical account of art objects and their formation, and the end of art objects that are blind to their own formation and meaning (and therefore in need of an art history). He finds in works like Andy Warhol's "Brillo Boxes" (1964) such a high level of self-consciousness—they critique their own condition—that they should be considered less as works of art (under the old paradigm) and more like works of philosophy. So, the end of art is the beginning of a polyphonic account of art, not of objects freed from context but from progressive and hierarchic models of history. The end of art also heralds the birth of a decentered art world, a realm without controlling master narratives, only a mélange of unranked objects and voices.

Well, he doesn't quite go that far. Despite his egalitarianism, being a philosopher, Danto maintains an ontology of good and bad readings. "Proper" interpretations are

> under the constraint of truth and falsity: to interpret a work is to be committed to a historical explanation of the work….There is another kind of interpretation, to be sure, much discussed these days—what Roland Barthes identifies as 'writerly' as against 'readerly' interpretation…writerly reading is close of logical kind to the non-cognitive discourse which consists of fiats and declarations: it is what the work means to the viewer, with no concern with whether it is true or false."[10]

Danto links the 'readerly' approach to Panofsky's iconology and Baxandall's "inferential art criticism." It also accords with Bryson's semiotics. So, while voices and objects are multiplied after the end of art, their interpretations are still regulated by reason. Put another way, the end of art frees art from art history but not from (Dantonian) philosophy.

The limits of philosophy (as Danto himself describes, and Bryson agree for semiotics), is that it seeks to discover truths about everything within a category. It speaks about general conditions for a class and must remain mute about the meaning of individual cases. Therefore, only social meanings signify. Lived experiences not shared or interpersonally penetrated by language do not count; this includes subjective sensations such as the uncanny. Readerly readings attempt to make unreasonable or uncanny works of art reasonable. This is only possible by bracketing the phenomenological experience of reading and seeing.

Both Danto and Miller announce the end of one paradigm and the birth of another which, ironically (or strategically), places them as the last readers of their respective (impossible) objects. They both discover works of art that don't seem to need them, works that even actively resist them. This, of course, must signal a general end rather than a personal limit. Miller, too, proposes a set of controls on reading after the end of reading. He calls for an ethics of reading, which amounts to a certain vague humility, explains William Bonney, whereby "as a consequence of reading, skilled readers will derive merely a humbling and elusive awareness of their own final inability to read and understand. This awareness must then be used to avoid 'the disaster of a misuse of literature for didactic ends for which it offers no sound basis'."[11] Ethical reading sounds like an imaginative counter balance, but in practice, if practice is possible, it renders effective critique unlikely (because the result of every reading is the same stalemate) and action unthinkable—it is a strategy without a position, without a body, without a leg to stand on.

Perhaps what Miller narrates is not so much the impossibility of reading as his sighting (as Danto has) of the horizon of a particular reading strategy—call it the pale of propriety. To me, his reading unveils the limits of 'readerly' readings and announces the need for a critical visual rendering.

If we can enter the charm of the story for a moment with a mind looking for images, we would notice that much of Hawthorne's tale is taken up with looking, especially the reactions of persons (including Hooper) to the sight of the veiled minister. They are affected by an image rather than a text. In fact, the true creepiness of the image is that it is unaccompanied by an authorized text. This refusal to name, to speak, is a primary source of uncanniness. What happens in horror movies and books whenever someone encounters a ghost? They want it to speak. [Horatio (to the ghost): Stay! Speak, speak! I charge thee, speak! *Hamlet*, Act 1, sc. i.] An image without a text is unbearable. Even a painting that has not been granted a title by its artist will be conferred one by the curators and art historians, "untitled." The absence of a title, an explanatory text, is impermissible.

In Danto's ontology, "mere things are unentitled to titles." An individual hammer, for example, may be of a certain type but it is unlikely that it would be given its own name. If it did, there would certainly be a story behind that designation. We would expect that, like B.B. King's guitar, Lucielle, there is a reason the owner granted this special title. We give titles and names to things and beings that we perceive as being special, ontologically distinguished from things that may resemble them in every other way.

But even more than designators of status, titles are linguistic prompts to meaning, even authorial intent: "a title is more than a name; frequently it is a direction for interpretation or reading."[12] But what is Hooper's visual gesture? It is an untitled image—a special act clearly in need of a title. Until then, it is outside authorized discourse; it is an autonomous visual act that I see as aesthetic, by which I mean it operates like visual art, not like an expository text—*like* but not *as* a language. But because the gesture/image is non-textualized, for Danto, it cannot be a work of art. However, as I have shown, Danto's ontology is limited by his failure to accept subjective, imaginative experience into his account. That is, to read a subjectively produced image *as* a work of art would not count

for him—that would be "writerly." The irony is that his most famous illustration of his theory performs just this exercise.

In *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Danto describes a series of nearly identical red canvases that populate a fantasy exhibition. Among the group: one, borrowed from Soren Kierkegaard's imaginary collection, is titled "Israelites crossing the Red Sea." There are pair of paintings from his own fictional collection, both called "Red Square": the first "a clever bit of Moscow landscape," the second, a minimalist painting. There is also an imaginary canvas painted red by Giorgione as a ground for an unfinished painting. It is not a work of art but a mere thing.[13]

The exhibition is assembled to demonstrate a philosophical problem 'how is it that a work of art differs from a mere thing like it in every way'. The answer as suggested above has little to do with the picture and everything to do with the titles. The titles tell the tale. But picture the labels removed, is this enough to make them no longer works of art, no longer deserving of reading *as* art? Under Danto's construction, visual art is epiphenomenonal to words. It is the text that confers ontological status not the image. This is clearly a logocentric blindness. The veil is like the red square, silent, full of possible meanings and intentions but viewers remain in hermeneutic suspense regarding the possibility of a conclusive reading—that is, conclusive because it is a *shared*, agreed upon set of meanings. The irony is that Danto's story is constructed of words that create the images that fill his art gallery. The images are not works of art according to his theory, but we still, in the space of reading "see" them as such. Fictional images can operate in the mind like tangible works of art. Danto's red square paintings reside in my imaginary with equal presence with my memories of Cezanne's apples.

There is another strange parallel between Danto and Hawthorne; strange because it echoes the uncanny and its association with doubling. The only footnote to the tale introduces a second veiled man:

> 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."

As with Danto's imaginary exhibition, Hawthorne produces two identical images: one accompanied by a text, a reason for his actions, another without a text.

This odd supplement seems designed to prevent readers from conflating the two into one meaning—fiction mistaken for fact, his parable rendered a report. It also directs literal readings toward the literal veiled man, leaving an indeterminate space for Hooper. Hawthorne challenges the reader not to look for a literal meaning, and, I would argue, to attempt to enter into the experience of the performance of the veil, to take the veil. It is a sort of reading, or more properly, uncanny viewing that actually occurs in the story but is usually overlooked by readerly readers because it is silent, visual.

In their meeting, Elizabeth is upset with Hooper's obstinacy, when,

> in an instant, as it were, a new feeling took the place of sorrow: her eyes were fixed insensible on the black veil, when, like a sudden twilight in the air, its terrors fell all around her. She arose, and stood trembling before him. "And do you feel it then, at last?" said he mournfully. She made no reply, but covered her eyes with her hand, and turned to leave the room."

No hint is given as to what she saw and felt but Hooper senses that she has had a glimpse and is eager for her to share it with him—make the meaning social. He grabs her arm and pleads for her to live with him. She declines. "She withdrew her arm from his grasp, and slowly departed, pausing at the door, to give one long shuddering gaze, that seemed almost to penetrate the mystery of the black veil." His strange response is another of his enigmatic smiles.

Whatever she sees or feels—be it a sexual content; a loss of face, or faith; or that the gesture is a perverse game enabled by patriarchal power, worn for no reason but because he can; or a sign of madness tolerated because of his position; or the nameless uncanny—whatever it is, she wants no part in abetting it. Tragically, this moment is the closest Hooper gets to an exchange of visual knowings. Significantly, she both covers her eyes and does not speak about the veil—she reproduces, mirrors, the very image of Hooper.

Clearly, she has a reading! And, unlike Miller's suspenseful reading, it is one that allows her a conclusion and a basis for action. She has no need to publish her reading to see if it accords with anyone else's. It works for her.

If we take Hooper at his word, he is searching for an apocalyptic reading: a moment "when all of us shall cast aside our veils," when all will be revealed, known and judged at once. The moment will be sudden, without discourse or defense, beyond language, a visual event. When he sees the possibility of a precursive glance of such a terminal reading in Elizabeth's eyes, he begs her to stay. It is this sort of sudden, unspoken knowing (shown in a discourse of glances rather than readings) that he is looking for. As Griselda Pollock says of the gendered gaze in the later 19th century: "seeing was bound up with knowing."[14]

Reader frustration with Hooper's gesture is due to the assumption that he has produced a signifier with a hidden signified. But if his gesture is like a work of art, it may be that he does not know what the referent is, or even if there is one! Only a readerly critic would assume that the author knows what he or she is doing.[15]

That Hawthorne draws attention to an obscure figure, Moody, that few would have known (in fact, it has only recently been discovered that he actually existed), seems an unconscious gesture. It is as if Hawthorne heard Moody's amazing story and simply passed it on, unopened, unread. In fact, to ensure its unreadablity, its resistance to the containment of language, he refigured it as a fiction, removed the explanatory text (the

title) and rendered it as a powerful image—uncannily powerful because it is an image posing as a text. He wanted the picture to exist for readers as it existed for him. It is an image that could be attached to any number of individual complexes—perhaps as numerous as reading subjects.

Miller explains:

> Hooper's act works because it is done in perhaps the only way such an act can be effectively performed: in a silent 'gesture' that is not really a gesture, since it is not part of a usual system of bodily movements, and by the proffering of a sign that is not really a sign, since its referent and its signification remain forever unverifiable….Language is brought to a stop, rendered powerless'.[16]

Where the text and reading ends an image begins.

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[1] This essay was first presented in 2000 at the *Image and Text* Conference, Brock University. It appears here with minor revisions and a few clarifications.

[2] All unmarked quotations are from the short story: Hawthorne, Nathaniel. "The Minister's Black Veil: A Parable" (1836). *Tales and Sketches*. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1982. P. 371-384.

[3] Dupriez, Bernard. *Gradus: A Dictionary of Literary Devices.* Toronto: U of Toronto Press, 1984. P. 219.

[4] I suppose that I am drawn by the hypotypotic, moments when the developing image streams from the page in an almost hallucinogenic way—as often happens when you read ghost stories, alone, at night, or when you let almost tangible images collage in your mind until they compose the next picture you will paint. Such images have a presence that haunts the limen between fictional and real space. Perhaps it is because I am a limner, one who both paints and describes in words and liminally suspended between picture and text making, I am haunted by this liminal picture. In fact, the urge to deliver this paper through a similar veil has been almost overwhelming. Dressing, as many artists do, in black (as a blank), is as close as I dare.

[5] Mirzoeff, Nicholas. "What is Visual Culture?" *Visual Culture Reader* (1st edition). Nicholas Mirzoeff, editor. New York: Routledge, 1998. 3-13. P. 9.

[6] Quoted in Miller, J. Hillis, *Hawthorne and History*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell, 1991. P. 80.

[7] Ostrowski, Carl, "The Minister's "Grievous Affliction": Diagnosing Hawthorne's Parson

Hooper." *Literature and Medicine,* 17.2. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. 197-211. P. 198.

[8] Miller, D.A. "The Administrator's Black Veil: A Response to J. Hillis Miller." A.D.E. Bulletin, Winter 1987. 49-53. P. 50.

[9] Miller, J. Hillis, *Hawthorne and History*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell, 1991. P. 51.

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[11] Bonney, William, "Miller, J. Hillis. *Encyclopaedia of Contemporary Literary Theory*. Irena R. Makaryk, editor. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993. P. 427.

[12] Danto, Arthur C., *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art.* Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981. P. 3.

[13] Ibid. P. 2-3.

[14] Pollock, Griselda. "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity." *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art,* London: Routledge, 1988.

[15] From an artist's point of view, let me tell you that (despite what we may write on our Canada Council applications) this is rarely the case. Much of what artists do is to create images—or rather images occur—and wait for readings to see what they might mean.

[16] Miller, J. Hillis, *Hawthorne and History*. P. 96.