

Omission, Redundancy, and Fluctuation: The Authorial Voice of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*

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Nathaniel Hawthorne's "retold" stories compiled into *Twice-Told Tales* (1837/1842) are based largely on historical facts and previously published sources. Such a narrative environment not only provides the illusion of verisimilitude for the tales but also functions, as Michael Dunne points out, as a "paradoxically liberating source of creativity," licensing the narrator to enjoy the "editorial freedom" of interposing values and judgments (29). Despite its wide variety of persons, tenses, and degrees of commitment, what is consistent in *Twice-Told Tales* is the author's taking advantage of the opportunities presented by the exercise of such authority. He, at times, can be caught talking to the reader through the voices of his narrators in this collection in which the quintessential Hawthornian themes are already almost in full view: secret sin, ancestral guilt, retribution, dark nuptials, morbid solitude, religious extremity, and so forth.

In his preface to the 1851 edition of *Twice-Told Tales*, Hawthorne relates that he had long been "the obscurest man of letters in America" who failed to make "the slightest impression on the Public" (xxi), and calls his stories "the productions of a person in retirement" (xxiii). This essay is an attempt to examine the unique dynamics of Hawthorne's narrative involvement in *Twice-Told Tales*. I first see the manner in which the author resolves the sharp conflicts between two irreconcilable communities in several tales, and then proceed to the exploration of the intense correlation between narrator, character, and author in "The Minister's Black Veil: A Parable" and "Wakefield." Through these analyses, I would like to define Hawthorne's deft but wavering manipulation of narrative voice by paying careful attention to what Herman Melville called a "great power of blackness" ("Hawthorne and His Mosses" 521), and also to the author's "meticulous concern with ironies of motivation" (Crews 705).

I

It has been generally agreed by critics that Hawthorne analytically explored various forms of extreme thoughts and behaviors in the existence of his characters by tracing the ways in which such extremes “distort lives and relationships” (Pennell 45). In *Twice-Told Tales*, he often dramatizes this motif through the conflicts between two opposing groups: these are resolved through the endorsement of religious tolerance and domestic love.

In “The May-Pole of Merry Mount,” for example, the narrator criticizes the “systematic gaiety” of inhabitants of Merry Mount who go on a spree around a floriated May-Pole to celebrate their newlyweds (47),¹ while portraying John Endicott, a leader of hostile Puritans, as an inhuman persecutor who intends to remake the May-Pole into a “whipping-post” (45). At the end of the story, however, Endicott, “the Puritan of Puritans” (45), becomes a benevolent, patriarchal figure and gives his blessing to the newlyweds: the conflict thus comes to be settled by the Puritan’s generous concession. “The Gray Champion” features, by contrast, severe oppression of colonial Puritans by the British government. Despite the sufferers’ mounting rage, the Puritans’ revolt is strictly checked by old Bradstreet who admonishes his brethren to “do nothing rashly” (5). In the denouement, a gray ghost, an embodiment of “the type of New-England’s hereditary spirit,” emerges to hold back the army of Andros (10). With a symbolic gesture that signifies both “encouragement and warning,” he precisely foretells the end of the persecution (7). In “The Gentle Boy,” Hawthorne deals with Puritans’ harsh treatment of Quakers and the fanaticism of Catharine, a Quakerish mother. In this tale, the sins of the two religious extremes are symbolically redeemed by the tragic death of Catharine’s neglected son Ibrahim whose last word was “Mourn not, dearest mother. I am happy now” (76). The deathbed scene of the innocent child serves as a dramatic catalyst for the sentimental identification between the narrator and the reader (Person 140). At the end of the story, the stern Puritans come to see Catharine “rather in pity than in wrath” while Catharine’s “fierce and vindictive nature” becomes softened as if Ibrahim’s spirit “came down from heaven to teach his parent a true religion” (77). In a manner that reminds Hester Prynne of *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Catharine arouses the persecutors’ sympathy: when she died, they bury her body in the place by the grave of her own son. In those sketches, the narrators recount the details of violent conflicts alongside critical commentaries and trace the way in which the discords are resolved under the

paired theme of moderate Puritanism and domestic love.

The stories collected in *Twice-Told Tales* had gone through a careful selection for publication by an author who was solicitous to establish his position as a professional writer and well aware of the expectations of a potential audience of female readers.² If we go a little further afield to other contemporaneous Hawthornian tales, however, we find a significant instance of the very negation of this kind of amiable solution. Carefully excluded from *Twice-Told Tales* in its process of compilation, “Young Goodman Brown” (1835) depicts how the protagonist’s psychological make-up undergoes fatal transformation through a hallucinatory encounter. Pious Goodman Brown witnesses one night a black mass in the nearby woods that was attended by the respectful members of his village and his wife Faith. Thereafter he becomes “a stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful . . . man” (188). He is never able to dispel his lingering suspicion about the world’s goodness, while remaining uncertain whether the event was a “wild dream” or not (188). The narrator winds up the sketch as follows:

Often, awakening suddenly at midnight, he shrank from the bosom of Faith, and at morning or eventide, when the family knelt down at prayer, he scowled, and muttered to himself, and gazed sternly at his wife, and turned away. And when he had lived long, and was borne to his grave, a hoary corpse, followed by Faith, an aged woman, and children and grandchildren, a goodly procession, besides neighbors, not a few, they carved no hopeful verse upon his tombstone; for his dying hour was gloom. (188)

In the concluding sentence the narrator abruptly summarizes the last half of Goodman Brown’s life by using the succinct phrasing of “And when he had lived long.” The presence of a “goodly procession” of his children and grandchildren suggests that he lived, at least on the surface, a mundane domestic life in his community. Yet, in sharp contrast to the above-mentioned tales, the narrator’s taciturn tone here solely highlights Goodman’s internal alienation and the morbidity of his super-piety, the fundamental source of his “radical pessimism” (Crews 705). If Hawthorne’s narratives on occasion contain a deep split between the geniality of a public writer and an impulse for the denial of the domestic sphere,³ “The Minister’s Black Veil” and “Wakefield”—the most conspicuously anti-domestic stories of *Twice-Told Tales*—deserve close

scrutiny.

II

Reverend Hooper of “The Minister’s Black Veil” enters a life of voluntary isolation by donning a mysterious black veil that ominously covers his face. When Hooper refuses to remove the enigmatic garment, his fiancée Elizabeth abandons him. Yet, at the end of the narrative, she reappears as a “faithful woman,” devotedly nursing the dying minister in his bed (36). “Who, but Elizabeth!” (35)—dramatically, the narrator announces the re-emergence of the only person who had directly asked Hooper about the meaning of his veil. The narrator’s exclamation should appease the pent-up frustration of sentimental readers by providing them with hopes for epiphanic disclosure of the mystery as well as belated fulfillment of the engagement between the couple. Elizabeth, however, never does take off Hooper’s veil nor is she able to console his deep sense of isolation with her abiding love. Her existence only accentuates the terrible futility of her affection. Whether the black veil was itself an ingenious stage prop for rejecting the fiancée or not,⁴ it is manifest that Hawthorne’s deft control of reader response and his scheme to confound expectations of sentimental reconciliation dominate the story.

During the narrative, the narrator does not take up a critical stance toward Father Hooper while offering, as a close observer, varied portrayals of the pastoral’s “sad smile” (28) and his deep “antipathy to the veil” that manifests itself in his obsessive fear of the mirror image: “[H]e never willingly passed before a mirror, nor stooped to drink at a still fountain, lest, in its peaceful bosom, he should be affrighted by himself” (34). The narrator also depicts at length the psychological dynamics of the collective consciousness of the Puritan community, focusing on the details of “the perturbation of his people” that drives their intense desire to find the hidden meaning of the veil (26). In the middle of the story, Hooper oddly rises up from a scandalous “bugbear” (33) to a mysterious “man of awful power” (34) so far as to gain, to his congregation’s satisfaction, widespread fame as a blessed saint of New England. What makes “all the beholders stand aghast” around his deathbed is (36), however, Hooper’s damning indictment of his own community. “Why do you tremble at me alone?” Hopper abruptly opens his lips:

Tremble also at each other! Have men avoided me, and women shown no

pity, and children screamed and fled, only for my black veil? What, but the mystery which it obscurely typifies, has made this piece of crape so awful? When the friend shows his inmost heart to his friend; the lover to his best-beloved; when man does not vainly shrink from the eye of his Creator, loathsomely treasuring up the secret of his sin; then deem me a monster, for the symbol beneath which I have lived, and die! I look around me, and, lo! on every visage a Black Veil! (37)

In short, the incorporation of Hooper's enigma into a conventional religious code did not mean, in fact, the relocation of the Uncanny into the coordinates of the rational system. Having carefully withheld any critical commentaries, the narrator thus successfully dramatizes the devastating disclosure of Hooper's long-suppressed anger that violently subverts the shared expectations of his parishioners.

By taking full advantage of the Gothic mode, Hawthorne's serious narrator appears to be so deeply involved in Hooper's muted sense of isolation and indignation as to come close to *approve* the minister's dark extreme. It should be noticed, however, that the narrator's tone makes a subtle but significant shift in the conclusion:

While his auditors shrank from one another, in mutual affright, Father Hooper fell back upon his pillow, a veiled corpse, with a faint smile lingering on the lips. Still veiled, they laid him in his coffin, and a veiled corpse they bore him to the grave. 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! (37)

In a similar way to which the narrator of "Young Goodman Brown" winds up the story, the narrator hurriedly condenses the passage of time in the concluding sentence. While giving the reader a final jolt, here the narrator secures at last the distance that relativizes both the symbolic meaning of Hooper's veil and the ethical value of his alienation by making a conspicuously histrionic gesture of exclamation. A mocking overemphasis that would cast a slight doubt on, or at least obscure, the narrator's seriousness—the capitalized "Black Veil!" manifests itself not so much as an expression of the narrator's emotional identification with Hooper as his critical detachment from him. Such

a shift in the narration should allow, if not impel, the reader to suspect that Hooper might have been after all a self-righteous fool obsessed with the vanity of fanaticism who has no right to condemn ordinary good people (like them).

The abruptness of his final move is a good index to the degree of the narrator's commitment to Hooper's inclination toward dark religious extreme. This is the point at which the narrator betrays a remarkable divergence from the values represented by those other moralistic narrators of *Twice-Told Tales* who endorse a happy marriage between moderate religion and domestic love. Of significance is that the narrator's intense involvement with Hooper's dark extremity seems to confirm what Melville called Hawthorne's "great power of blackness." In "Hawthorne and His Mosses" (1850), Melville relates as follows:

For spite of all the Indian-summer sunlight on the hither side of Hawthorne's soul, the other side—like the dark half of the physical sphere—is shrouded in a blackness, ten times black. . . . Certain it is . . . that this great power of blackness in him derives its force from its appeals to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free. For, in certain moods, no man can weigh this world, without throwing in something, somehow like Original Sin, to strike the uneven balance. . . . You may be witched by his sunlight,—transported by the bright gildings in the skies he builds over you;—but there is the blackness of darkness beyond; and even his bright gildings but fringe, and play upon the edges of thunder-clouds. (521-22)

By suggesting a deep split between the ostensible, "harmless Hawthorne" and the shrouded, dark inner self (521), Melville verifies the authenticity of the latter that frequently escapes the attention of the public readership. Leslie A. Fiedler reflects on the special affinity between Melville and Hawthorne as below:

Among the assumptions of Melville and Hawthorne are the following: that the world of appearance is at once real and a mask through which we can dimly perceive more ultimate forces at work . . . that in man and Nature alike, there is a "diabolical" element, a "mystery of iniquity"; that it is impossible to know fully either God or ourselves, and that our only protection from destructive self-deceit is the pressure and presence of others; that to be alone is, therefore, to be lost; that evil is real, and that

the thinking man breaks his heart trying to solve its compatibility with the existence of a good God or his own glimmering perceptions of goodness. From this it follows that the writer's duty is to say, "Nay!," to deny the easy affirmations by which most men live, and to expose the blackness of life most men try deliberately to ignore. (432)

Although both Hawthorne and Melville shared these common conundrums, the approaches they made were quite different. In chapter 36 of *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* (1851), for instance, Ahab recognizes "the unreasoning mask" on all perceptible objects and insatiably desires to reach "some unknown but still reasoning thing" behind the mask (140). On the other hand, Hooper, perceiving a black veil on every visage, rather *expects* his people (and the reader) to reflect on the presence of some unknown but still reasoning thing behind the "miserable obscurity" of his mask (33). Ahab is indignant at both the existence and nonexistence of God, the source of the absolute meaning of the world—or lack of it. When he declares, "Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough" (140), Ahab even endorses the complete meaninglessness of his own conduct. Hawthorne's minister, by contrast, is desperate to secure the virtue of his act by implying the typological significance of the veil, explaining, "Know, then, this veil is a type and a symbol . . . If it be a sign of mourning . . . If I hide my face for sorrow . . . and if I cover it for secret sin" (32).

Hooper, nevertheless, is not quite certain what his veil really signifies: his suggestion is composed of what J. Hillis Miller called "riddling 'ifs' " (98). When he hastily averts his eyes from the mirror image of himself, Hooper is presumably afraid of the dire possibility that doffing the veil ushers him only deeper into the infinite regress of narcissistic isolation. From this perspective, it can be said that Hooper unconsciously shares Ahab's deep skepticism about the existence of any divinity who allots meaning to the world. Yet Hawthorne and his narrator put emphasis rather on the ironic situation in which people's (and the reader's) attempt to find the hidden meaning comes to be incessantly dislocated and thwarted by the flickering ambiguity of the symbolic surface.

With his histrionic gesture of detachment, the narrator finally succeeds in relativizing his attitude toward Hooper's suppressed anger against the sanctimonious public—a feeling with which the dark aspect of Hawthorne should have had considerable sympathy. In other words, in "The Minister's Black Veil" Hawthorne seems to be driven by the paired impulse to identify himself with, and simultaneously to reject, Hooper's obsessive skepticism and

miserable feeling of solitude. The narrator's heedful but somewhat precarious control of the narration would be a suggestive index to the author's own-ambivalence both about his strong inclination toward the dark Puritanism and the conventional expectations of the public readership upon which he had failed to make even "the slightest impression."

III

Unlike the narrator of "The Minister's Black Veil," the moralizing narrator of "Wakefield" evinces from the outset a thespian move of critical detachment. Wakefield of London leaves his house one day on business and never returns home; enticed by a cryptic desire to cut himself off from society, he becomes a peeping observer of his own wife, stealthily living in a flat nearby. "None of us," relates the narrator, "would perpetrate such a folly, yet feel as if some other might" (97-98). He readily achieves a moral alliance with the reader by quickly identifying himself as a member of the loyal "us." With frequent insertions of warning apostrophes toward the conduct of Wakefield, the narrator also suggests how fundamentally his moral views differ from the protagonist's, emphasizing the danger of separation from home and "system" (105). "No mortal eye but mine has traced thee. Go quietly to thy bed, foolish man," he warns when Wakefield reaches a new apartment in the vicinity of his house: "and, on the morrow, if thou wilt be wise, get thee home to good Mrs. Wakefield, and tell her the truth" (99-100). The narrator's admonition, admittedly, exemplifies the conventional values that his audience would presumably share with him. The conspicuous histrionics of his tone, however, should simultaneously excite indecent curiosities in the reader who would in fact more or less wish to enjoy the spectacle of Wakefield's further acts of folly. The story progresses as is expected: Wakefield comes to separate himself from his own home and society without realizing it while weirdly trying to take a secret look at the private life of his forlorn wife. In the course of the narrative, the narrator sharply criticizes the "morbid vanity" (100) of Wakefield who lacks any intellectual ability to make moral judgment on his own conduct.

It should be also noted that the supposedly real-life counterpart of Wakefield of London returned home after a long absence and became "a loving spouse" till his death as the narrator indicates at the beginning of the story.⁵ In his adaptation, however, Hawthorne does not portray a happy moment of reunion. When Wakefield suddenly betakes himself to his household after an

absence of twenty-one years, the narrator relates: “This happy event—supposing it to be such—could only have occurred at an unpremeditated moment. We will not follow our friend across the threshold” (104). At the end of the story, he even suggests the total impossibility of Wakefield’s becoming again an affectionate partner by concluding that he has already been transformed into “the Outcast of the Universe” (105). Such a hyperbolic way of reasoning accentuates a significant deviation from the story Hawthorne based his tale on. By representing Wakefield as a self-imposed exile, the author completely remodels the original happy anecdote into a story with a dark moral.

Given the narrator’s unwillingness to depict the “happy event,” it is worthwhile to suppose, as Melissa McFarland Pennell suggests, that behind the narrator’s conspicuous gestures of detachment, there exists suppressed desire and anxiety.⁶ To confirm this assumption, I would like to examine a passage that marks a remarkable narrative disturbance. When Wakefield comes to return home, the narrator makes an abrupt intervention that seems to contradict his repeated moral suasions:

On the ceiling, appears a grotesque shadow of good Mrs. Wakefield. The cap, the nose and chin, and the broad waist, form an admirable caricature, which dances, moreover, with the up-flickering and down-sinking blaze, almost too merrily for the shade of an elderly widow. . . . He ascends the step—heavily!—for twenty years have stiffened his legs, since he came down—but he knows it not. Stay, Wakefield! Would you go to the sole home that is left you? Then step into your grave! (104)

Immediately before Wakefield’s return, the narrator suddenly represents the deformed, witchlike silhouette of Mrs. Wakefield wavering jollily in the dark. He attempts, almost poignantly, to deter Wakefield from coming back to his home by transforming it into a kind of tomb of the damned. Here the narrator’s attitude is quite dubious in comparison with that of other moralistic narrators of *Twice-Told Tales*—stern advocates of moderate faith and domestic love, who consistently reject extreme forms of thoughts and behaviors that distort people’s recognition of the realities and the morality. In this apostrophizing passage, the one who distorts the realities is the narrator himself. Through this dark reconfiguration of the original narrative, in other words, the narrator appears to require Wakefield to live in a similar isolation to that of Young Goodman Brown who found his wife in the center of a hallucinatory “witch-

meeting" (188). From this perspective, the narrator's desire and anxiety should coincide with that of Reverend Hooper, who broke off his engagement to his fiancée by wearing the veil while fearing the possibility that his voluntary solitude might be totally meaningless.

What is suggested by the narrator's exaggerated didacticism and the abrupt transition of his discursive voice is Hawthorne's pair of contradictory impulses to uphold and to reject the accepted moral views. Hawthorne, of course, does not place himself directly in a legible relation to Hooper and Wakefield. Nevertheless, we can discern the dim reflection of the author's muted anxieties in the unexpected oscillations of the narrative voice that would disrupt the reader's perceived sense of verisimilitude and authorial intention.

In June 4, 1837, just after the publication of *Twice-Told Tales*, Hawthorne wrote to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow as follows:

By some witchcraft or other—for I really cannot assign any reasonable why and wherefore—I have been carried apart from the main current of life, and find it impossible to get back again. Since we last met . . . I have secluded myself from society; and yet I never meant any such thing, nor dreamed what sort of life I was going to lead. I have made a captive of myself and put me into a dungeon; and now I cannot find the key to let myself out—and if the door were open, I should be almost afraid to come out. . . . Sometimes, through a peep-hole, I have caught a glimpse of the real world; and the two or three articles, in which I have portrayed such glimpses, please me better than the others. (*Tales* 326-27)

Hawthorne's legendary seclusion in Salem, Massachusetts, was probably driven by his strong Puritan inclination toward "the blackness of darkness," the fundamental source of his deep skepticism. Yet his life of retirement had been impelled, seemingly, also by something cryptic in or outside him, the meaning of which he could not grasp at all. He must have sensed, and feared, the grim possibility that his moralistic isolation was after all merely an uncanny product of "some witchcraft or other." The way in which the narrator of "Wakefield" condemns his protagonist as "spell-bound" (102) should suggest Hawthorne's own anxiety that he might, too, perchance perpetrate "such a folly" (97). It is quite likely that the dark Hawthorne, a peeping skeptic, was "pleased" with Hooper's deliberate rejection of the conventional values of his people; he also perceived, however, that such Hooperian extreme of detachment might end

eventually in the senseless isolation of Wakefield, the “man of habits” (100). In this light, the two paired eccentrics are refracted and displaced through the dynamic of authorial identification.

In *Twice-Told Tales*, there is no stable relation between narrator and tale; sometimes too much is said, sometimes too little. Often the same tale will have lacuna at significant points, and at others excess commentary, both of which lead to interpretative uncertainty—instead of the doctrinal fixity one might expect of texts emerging out of the Puritan allegorical tradition. “Hawthorne interests me considerably,” wrote Flannery O’Connor in 1961, “I feel more of a kinship with him than with any other American” (457). What was empathically found by O’Connor, an American Catholic who was fascinated with violent fundamentalist vision,⁷ was perhaps not only Hawthorne’s “great power of darkness” but also his alternative inclination for religious moderatism as well as his keen awareness of the reader’s shared expectations. Along with his deft employment of historical facts and previously published sources that licenses the author’s editorial freedom, the narrative fluctuations discerned in *Twice-Told Tales* well anticipate, in their varied manners of involvement and detachment, the complexity of Hawthorne’s further explorations of the combined motifs of dark religion, domestic love, and the mysteries of the human will.

Notes

¹ The narrator dubs them “Gothic monsters” (39); his view is in alliance with the bride Edith who regards the orgy as extraordinarily “unreal” (41).

² Leland S. Person observes that Hawthorne “positions female readers in strategically conceived relationship to his fictional materials” and “deliberately creates characters and stages scenes designed to manipulate reader, especially female reader, responses” insofar as these may be construed as sentimental and domestic (128).

³ Person examines Hawthorne’s “campaign against the domestic sphere of marriage and family” (127).

⁴ Frederick Crews suggests the possibility that Hooper has “donned the veil in order to prevent his marriage” (706).

⁵ Hawthorne explains as follows: “And after so great a gap in his matrimonial felicity—when his death was reckoned certain, his estate settled, his name dismissed from memory, and his wife, long, long ago, resigned to her autumnal widowhood—he entered the door one evening, quietly, as from a day’s absence, and became a loving

spouse till death" (97). According to Gretchen Short, Hawthorne perhaps had read a reprint of an anecdote related in William King's *Political and Literary Anecdotes of His Own Times* (1818) (387).

⁶ Pennell points out the narrator's muted feelings as follows: "[The narrator's] attempt to diminish Wakefield and thereby undercut what he has done suggests the narrator's own fear. He, too, desires change [in his life] but fears that his efforts will produce an ironic situation like Wakefield's, the exchange of one stifling routine for another. He needs to reassure himself that his own life has not reached the same level of mundane routine and that he is a more appealing individual than the title character" (46).

⁷ For a detailed analysis of O'Connor's ambivalence about fundamentalism, see Brinkmeyer 62, 115-16, 160-62.

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