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"YOUNG GOODMAN BROWN" AND THE
FAILURE OF HAWTHORNE'S AMBIGUITY

By JOHN B. HUMMA

MOST CRITICS OF "Young Goodman Brown" consider it one of Hawthorne's finest short stories. Richard H. Fogle, for instance, says that in "Young Goodman Brown" Hawthorne has achieved that "reconciliation of opposites which Coleridge deemed the highest art." Daniel Hoffman ranks it as "one of Hawthorne's masterpieces." To Roy Male "Young Goodman Brown" is nothing less than "one of the world's great short stories."¹ In spite of such accolades (or perhaps because of them), few critics are agreed as to the story's precise meaning. In general, the criticism falls into two broad categories: to the first belong such critics as Male, Fogle, and Harry Levin, who feel the story reveals Hawthorne's sentiments about the essential iniquity of mankind;² to the second belong those who contend that it is not humanity at all that Hawthorne indicts, but Brown himself. For both groups, the question of whether Brown experienced or dreamed the events in the forest assumes paramount importance. Paul J. Hurley, for one, states that "if Young Goodman Brown did not have a nightmare or experience hallucinations, Hawthorne has created a fearful indictment of humanity."³

Mark Van Doren, on the other hand, arguing that these events are in fact dreamed by Brown, writes that Brown "sees evil where it is not."⁴ F. O. Matthiessen and W. B. Stein also insist upon Brown's guilt, arguing with Van Doren that Brown perceives evil where it does not exist. One of the more recent apologists for this viewpoint is Hurley, who contends that the evil Brown sees is "the product of his own fancy with no reality save that supplied by his depraved imagination."⁵ Outside the pale of both groups of critics is David Levin. He argues that

1 Fogle in *Hawthorne's Fiction: The Light and the Dark* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1952), 32; Hoffman in *Form and Fable in American Literature* (New York, 1965), 151; Male in *Hawthorne's Tragic Vision* (Austin, Texas, 1957), 76.

2 In *The Power of Blackness* (New York, 1958), 54, Levin states point-blankly that Brown's "pharisaical elders . . . are doing the devil's work while professing righteousness."

3 "Young Goodman Brown's 'Heart of Darkness,'" *American Literature*, XXXVII (January 1966), 411.

4 *Nathaniel Hawthorne* (New York, 1949), 79.

5 Hurley, 411.

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Brown neither dreamed nor hallucinated but was instead the victim of the devil, who ingeniously conjured the apparitions, or "specters," of Brown's fellow villagers. Levin remarks that Brown commits the same error as that committed by the good Salem residents in 1692: "He lets the Devil's true statements about the maltreatment of Indians and Quakers prepare him to accept counterfeit evidence, and he fails to insist upon the difference between a person and a person's 'shape' or specter."⁶ Levin goes on to say that the majority of modern critics have fallen into the same error.

I will risk repeating their mistake (and Brown's) and argue that those elders Brown encounters in the forest are present in the flesh. The plain facts of the story warrant no other conclusion. Moreover, I would contend that the probes by Hurley and Levin are valuable for their weaknesses as well as their strengths. These weaknesses lead to an understanding of Hawthorne's real intentions in the story. After examining first Levin's article and then Hurley's, I would like to turn to the evaluation by Fogle of the story's literary merits, which he believes derive in good measure from the ambiguity in the story. Fogle argues that the ambiguity is the result of Hawthorne's reticence to express what in his heart of hearts he felt to be true of humanity, an ambiguity which Fogle says results in the "highest art." It seems to me that this ambiguity results rather in an art that is contrived and finally dishonest.

David Levin's analysis can be quickly dispensed with. He states that Hawthorne clearly recognized the significance played by "specter evidence" in the actual trials. Hawthorne, in fact, says Levin, in two stories ("Alice Doane's Appeal" and "Main Street") "explicitly mentioned the devil's ability to impersonate innocent people."⁷ But then how does Levin explain Hawthorne's failure to mention this ability in "Young Goodman Brown?" When Hawthorne errs it is generally in the way of overstatement, not understatement. He almost always overexposes — almost never underexposes — his tales. It seems unreasonable therefore to be asked to believe that Hawthorne would use the device of specter evidence without first establishing his intentions. Nothing else in his writings suggests he would do such a thing.

⁶ "Shadows of Doubt: Specter Evidence in Hawthorne's 'Young Goodman Brown,'" *American Literature*, XXXIV (November 1962), 344.

⁷ D. Levin, 346.

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One also wonders why Hawthorne, if the reality in the story is indeed spectral, would pose the question of Brown's dreaming the event. Levin seems to feel that Hawthorne was concerned that some nineteenth-century readers might be too sophisticated "to take devils seriously even in historical fiction" and therefore felt called upon to fabricate an alternative possibility.⁸ This is a possibility, but it appears at best to be a precariously tenuous one.

According to D. Levin, the devil stage-manages the entire performance on that fateful night in the wilderness, from the moment Brown first sees Goody Cloyse until the moment at which he apparently passes out from shock. Levin's theory has the advantage of plausibly accounting for Faith's pink ribbons, a detail whose "literal existence" Matthiessen found objectionable.⁹ But it has the larger disadvantage of being unable to explain Hawthorne's treatment of the "appearances" of the minister and Deacon Gookin. Although Brown hears their voices and the sounds they make as they pass, he cannot see them. Concerning this phenomenon, Levin writes that "Brown cannot see 'so much as a shadow,' but he 'could have sworn' — as witnesses in 1692 did indeed swear — that he recognized the deacon and the minister in 'the voices talking so strangely in the empty air.'"¹⁰ One has to ask why Hawthorne, since he gives his other specters flesh and blood embodiment, fails to do the same with the apparitions — as Levin contends they are — of the minister and the deacon. If these figures are in fact what Levin asserts they are, the devil plainly has little reason for making apparitions of apparitions. For this reason and those stated above, it seems best to go back to the original alternatives of dream and reality.

Like David Levin, Hurley believes that Hawthorne intended his story to be read as an account of a single individual's perversion and not as an indictment of the moral nature of man in general. But neither should the story be read as an account of the masterful talents of the devil: "To take guilt away from human beings in order to place it on infernal powers is not a satisfactory explanation of the story."¹¹ Very true. (Levin argues, of course, that Brown is not absolved from guilt, that he

⁸ *Ibid.*, 353.

⁹ *American Renaissance* (New York, 1941), 284.

¹⁰ D. Levin, 349.

¹¹ Hurley, 411-412.

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should have seen through the devil's improvisations.) Yet one wonders why Hurley should feel Brown is not morally responsible in the one instance (when he is tricked by the devil) but is in the other (when he hallucinates). In both cases apparently Brown took what he saw as reality.

Like Levin, Hurley treads shaky ground when he argues that the passage in which Brown thinks he hears the voices of the minister and Deacon Gookin proves Brown's willingness to see what is not there. Hawthorne's passage, however, leaves little doubt that *something* is there:

On came the hoof tramps and the voices of the riders, two grave old voices, conversing soberly as they drew near. These mingled sounds appeared to pass along the road, within a few yards of the young man's hiding place; but, owing doubtless to the depth of the gloom at that particular spot, neither the travellers nor their steeds were visible. Though their figures brushed the small boughs by the wayside, it could not be seen that they intercepted, even for a moment, the faint gleam from the strip of bright sky athwart which they must have passed. Goodman Brown alternately crouched and stood on tiptoe, pulling aside the branches and thrusting forth his head as far as he durst without discerning so much as a shadow. It vexed him the more, because he could have sworn, were such a thing possible, that he recognized the voices of the minister and Deacon Gookin, jogging along quietly, as they were wont to do, when bound to some ordination or ecclesiastical council. While yet within hearing, one of the riders stopped to pluck a switch.

Hurley writes that "Fogle has alluded to this passage too as evidence of Hawthorne's ambiguity, but there is no ambiguity in the fact that Goodman Brown actually *saw* nothing at all. Nevertheless, he stands 'doubting whether there really was a heaven above him.'"¹² There are two objections to Hurley's argument: First, there is no ambiguity about the fact that the voices Brown hears are actual voices; nor is there any ambiguity about the fact that the "figures" brush against the vegetation. Hawthorne does not after all say *seem*. Second, if Hurley's conclusions are based on the fact of the literal invisibility of the deacon and the minister, then why has he not acknowledged the literal *visibility* of the devil, Goody Cloyse, Faith's famous ribbon, Faith herself, and all those elders present at the diabolical ceremony before the stone altar?

Hurley argues further that if Hawthorne's theme had been the "universality of human sinfulness" he would have mani-

¹² *Ibid.*, 413.

festated a greater evidence of it: yet "the only scene in which such a manifestation occurs is the Devil's communion, but that takes place after Goodman Brown has declared his loss of faith."¹³ Perhaps Brown has made such a declaration: earlier he had proclaimed that his faith was gone, that the world was the devil's. But again, perhaps he has not: after all, his last words in the forest are "Faith! Faith! look up to heaven, and resist the wicked one." But really, what difference does it make? Why should Brown be less inclined to see evil in people while he still has his faith — and Hurley does contend that Brown is searching for evil at that point — than after he has lost it?

Hurley is convinced that had Hawthorne wanted us to believe in the literalness of the events, he would not have confused us with the dream possibility — unless (as he goes on to qualify) Fogle's theory *is* correct, and Hawthorne was attempting to escape the implications of his own suspicions about the iniquity of the human race. The latter alternative, which Hurley rejects, would appear to be more nearly the right one. But one can nonetheless turn Hurley's supposition around and ask why, if Hawthorne had wanted us to believe that Goodman Brown was dreaming, did he confuse us with the possibility that the events might be real? In actuality, there is no good reason to believe that Brown dreamed or hallucinated anything. The *only* occasion in the story when he can be observed to lose consciousness occurs *after* he has viewed the assembly at the "communion" ceremony. It is, incidentally, for this reason that Hurley is careful to hold out the possibility that Brown perhaps hallucinated instead of dreamed. Hawthorne's own reply — "Be it so if you will" — to his question as to whether Brown had "only" dreamed a wild dream certainly implies a negative response, as if he means to say, "Go ahead and believe it a dream if, for reasons of your own, that is what you must believe."

Fogle considers this ambiguity the "very essence of Hawthorne's tale." He says that Hawthorne wishes to propose, not flatly that man is primarily evil, but instead the gnawing doubt lest this should indeed be true" and concludes that the ambiguity which Hawthorne deliberately affects is integral to this purpose.¹⁴ I could not agree more wholeheartedly. The "multiple choice" device, as Matthiessen called it, does

¹³ *Ibid.*, 417.

¹⁴ Fogle, 16.

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yeoman work in "Young Goodman Brown." But I must part company with Fogle when he proposes that the use of this device results in an artistic triumph, adding "depth and force to Hawthorne's thin and delicate fabric." Fogle contends that "above all, the separate instances of this 'multiple choice device' organically cohere to reproduce in the reader's mind the feel of the central ambiguity or theme, the horror of the hero's doubt. Goodman Brown, a simple and pious nature, is wrecked as a result of the disappearance of the fixed poles of his belief. His orderly cosmos dissolves into chaos as church and state, the twin pillars of his society, are hinted to be rotten, with their foundations undermined. The yearning for certainty is basic to his spirit — and he is left without the comfort even of a firm reliance in the Devil."¹⁵

It should be noted that Fogle fails to consider Hawthorne's criticism of Brown — more than just implied, it seems to me — in the story's concluding paragraph. This criticism is hardly in keeping with the possibility that the events Brown witnessed were real, for if so, as even Hurley admits,¹⁶ Brown cannot very well be held at fault for the gloom of his later behavior. How else is he to react to such a total indictment of human nature?

In *The Catcher in the Rye*, J. D. Salinger, through the relentlessly honest eyes of Holden Caulfield, is able to impeach all those sorry details of human behavior that he — Salinger — apparently despises. Yet at the end of the novel Holden finds *himself* impeached for the damning indictments which the author has framed, with so much evident relish, in his hero's language. Is Salinger having his cake and eating it, too? It would seem that Hawthorne is attempting to both have *his* and eat it: for the multiple choice device permits Hawthorne to condemn humanity in the instance of the one possibility (the events as real), and to condemn Brown in the instance of the other (the events as figments of Brown's imagination). The question is whether such a method is art or trickery. Should we admire the story as a genuine treatment of the human condition or rather as an ingenious precursor of the O. Henry short story (*sans* the happy or wistful ending)?

A comparison might be helpful in this respect. Melville, in "Bartleby the Scrivener," portrays an individual who, like

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁶ Hurley, 412.

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old Goodman Brown, lives in isolation from the rest of humanity. Like Brown's isolation, *Bartleby's* appears to be both willful, on the one hand, and the result of an unfortunate experience, or an accumulation of unfortunate experiences, on the other. The primary difference between the two stories lies in the authors' treatments of the protagonists' situations. In Melville's story, there is perhaps an implied criticism of *Bartleby* though it is difficult to know for certain. But more significantly, there is the great — and one senses, genuine — flow of sympathy that goes out from Melville toward *Bartleby* and for the tragedy that this bereft man has wrought for himself. "Ah *Bartleby*, ah humanity," the narrator sighs at the story's end. Yet the narrator, as well as *Bartleby*, represents Everyman, and one can see that in spite of the pronounced differences in their situations, there is not finally so great a *distance* between them.

Although Melville sympathetically comprehends *Bartleby's* condition, Hawthorne on his part appears to have but little appreciation for the tragic circumstances in which Brown finds himself. Hawthorne prefers to give us after all a pair of alternate possibilities. And if, as in the one alternative, Brown actually witnessed the events in the forest, then he is faced with a situation to which he cannot possibly accommodate himself (the standard Hawthorne remedy). Hawthorne's failure to deal with the sad plight of old Goodman Brown in the light of this alternative represents nothing less than a failure of art, a failure to responsibly cope with a problem he has deliberately allowed to surface. Brown deserves not so much censure as understanding. For the reality he confronts, like that *Bartleby* thinks (at least) he confronts, does not for once admit of adjustment. Adjustment here for Brown would mean complicity in evil. Hawthorne's refusal, however, to confront the dilemma into which he has thrown Brown signifies more than an artistic deficiency. It also signifies a deficiency in the author of the one quality that could have brought justice to both the hero and the story: compassion. "Young Goodman Brown" then does not represent, as Fogle claims, the triumph of art; it represents rather the failure of the artist's vital responsibility toward his material.

