

## **In Search of the Unpardonable Sin: The Showman and the Dog in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Ethan Brand***

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Nathaniel Hawthorne “did not find sermons in stones. He had the sermons already; his task was to find the stones to fit them” (Brownell qtd. in Milder 567). W. C. Brownell’s observation on Hawthorne’s writing methods might be applied to the case of the short story entitled “Ethan Brand”, too: having had the theme of the “Unpardonable Sin” in mind, Hawthorne probably turned to his notebook for corresponding images to be incorporated into his writing; and what he found was, among others, the image of a travelling showman with a diorama immediately followed by the appearance of a dog chasing his own tail. The present essay connotes a brief endeavour to investigate how the German Jew and the dog come to symbolize the protagonist’s conduct of life in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short story entitled “Ethan Brand”.

The first part of this essay will elucidate the significance of the German Jew in relation to Ethan Brand’s pursuit of the Unpardonable Sin; nevertheless, in order for us to understand what the itinerant showman stands for, we first need to investigate the origins of his figure. Hawthorne seems to have modelled the character of the German Jew after the “old Dutchman” whom he depicts in the *Passages from the American Note-books*; in fact, if we compare the depiction of the German Jew in “Ethan Brand” and the notebook, the two appear to be nearly identical. In both cases, there appears an old German Jew who is mistakenly called the “Dutchman” by others, and who addresses people as “Captain”; also, he travels carrying a diorama in a wagon; he shows old, worn-out, cracked pictures to his audience, depicting cities and buildings in Europe, Napoleon’s battles and Nelson’s sea combats; his

enormous, hairy hand appears in the showbox as if the “Hand of Destiny”; and his miserable show makes the audience laugh.

Nonetheless, despite the fact that Hawthorne seems to have adapted a whole passage from his notebook and the two German Jews appear to be identical, there is one essential difference to be noted: in the notebook there is no further significance attributed to the “old Dutchman”, whereas in “Ethan Brand” his figure carries symbolic importance. Although scholars tend to disagree on the matter of whom the German Jew of “Ethan Brand” can be identified with, two main branches can be clearly distinguished: while the majority of critics seem to identify the German Jew with the legendary “Wandering Jew”, there are some who associate him with Mephistopheles from Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* and Goethe’s *Faust*.

According to the former branch of critics, the figure of the Wandering Jew can be traced back to a legend according to which the Jew’s “coarse gibe at Christ condemned him to endless roaming” (Milder 567). In a sense, this Wandering Jew of the legend (or, the German Jew of the short story) and Ethan Brand become “twins”: according to B. A. Sokoloff, “in the legend the Jew rejects the Messiah; this act of rejection, similar in kind to Brand’s self-separation from humanity [...], this sin shared in common, binds the two men with steel chains” (414). Indeed, when the showman in the short story remarks, “I find it to be a heavy matter in my showbox,—this Unpardonable Sin! By my faith, Captain, it has wearied my shoulders, this long day, to carry it over the mountain” (8), it is suggested that the German Jew and Brand carry the same sin, in fact.

But, from another point of view, the German Jew’s showbox in itself can be regarded as the symbolic representative of Ethan Brand himself. As Glenn Pedersen argues, “The ‘German Jew’ (a wandering Jew) carries on his back the burden of his sin, which is heavy we discover later because of a stone heart within [...]. The diorama is this burden and symbolically it is Ethan Brand, as its interior subsequently shows” (309-10). On the basis of

this reasoning, the showman and Brand do not become “twins” of each other; instead, the diorama carrying the Unpardonable Sin becomes the mirror image of Ethan Brand’s conduct of life. The analogy between Brand and the diorama is further emphasized when the German Jew bids a little boy, Joe to look into the box, thus

setting the drama of the metamorphosis of Ethan Brand’s heart. In youth, Ethan Brand’s heart was as “Titanic” and beautiful and potential of imaginative fulfillment as Joe’s head, but because of Ethan Brand’s satanic, intellectual dominion over his heart (and the hearts of others) it has become nothing, or more really, [...], a heart of stone. It is Ethan Brand himself who turns his heart to stone, just as he turns the innocent face of Joe to the experience of horror by means of his fiendish stare. (Pedersen 310)

In this way, not only does the diorama symbolize the sinful life of Ethan Brand, but it also serves as a medium which manifests the transformation of the protagonist, revealing how promising and innocent he once used to be before his heart turned into stone during his search for the Unpardonable Sin. When Brand looks into the showbox, however, he sees nothing but an empty canvas; but “what Ethan Brand sees in the Jew’s showbox [...] is the most meaningful glimpse possible – the horrifying emptiness of the self, a vision of vast, blank, lonely absence of sensation and purpose” (Vanderbilt 455). Accordingly, the German Jew’s diorama comes to represent a mirror image to Ethan Brand’s life: it shows how hollow and dark his heart has become while he gave up his heart for the sake of knowledge; and it is the German Jew who makes it possible for Brand to look into such “mirror”, which makes the showman all the more significant in the short story.

According to the other branch of scholars, however, the German Jew should be identified with Marlowe and Goethe’s Mephistopheles, the servant of Satan. As Jerry A. Herndon and Sidney P. Moss claim,

it seems strange that critics, even those who regard Ethan Brand as Faust, tend to agree that the old German Jew – the showman of the story – is the Wandering Jew, when actually he is Mephistopheles whom Brand has evoked from Hell disguised as the Wandering Jew. It is clearly suggested at the outset of the story that the “massive iron door” of the lime-kiln “which seemed to give admittance into the hill-side . . . resembled nothing so much as the private entrance to the infernal regions.” (362)

In other words, it is Ethan Brand himself who has evoked Mephistopheles, appearing in the form of an old German Jew, probably through the iron door of the limekiln which highly resembles the mouth of hell.

At this point, some may argue that, according to the narrator of “Ethan Brand”, the protagonist is believed to have conversed and made a pact with the devil before his departure on the quest for the Unpardonable Sin (4); nevertheless, the narrator clearly questions the validity of such belief by qualifying it as a “story”, “legend” and “tale”. Mark Harris agrees when he writes, “when the narrator refers to the limekiln in conjunction with anything supernatural, he qualifies the reference: ‘[The limekiln] door ... *seemed* to give admittance to the hillside; it *resembled* nothing so much as the private entrance to the infernal regions’ (70). Harris goes even further when he undermines the idea of Brand making a pact with the devil, by stating:

nothing supernatural takes place at the kiln, and neither does the kiln have any causal function in Brand’s search. What we are told about Brand’s pre-search musings at the kiln is that “he had thrown his dark thoughts into the intense glow of [the] furnace, and melted them, as it were, into the one thought that took possession of his life” (272). Brand’s “thoughts” were “dark” before they ever entered the kiln; they entered the kiln, rather than entering Brand from the kiln [...]. (69-70)

In making this comment, Harris argues that, although Brand’s character may have given grounds for stories such as having made a pact with the devil, the narrator seems to have placed some clues in the text which might prove the opposite; such clue is the fact that Ethan

Brand has had “dark thoughts” without making a pact with the devil, already before departing on his quest for the Unpardonable Sin.

Nonetheless, even if Brand has not made a pact with the devil, the old German Jew may still be regarded as a Mephistophelian or satanic figure, with whom Brand might have already made acquaintance before. When Brand recognizes the showman and says, “I remember you now” (8), one may suspect that the two of them might have possibly met and conversed before; and, when the German Jew answers with a “dark smile” and mentions the Unpardonable Sin, he even suggests that he has already known about Brand’s quest, despite being an outsider in the village community. The possibility of their acquaintance prior to the arrival of the Jew can be further supported if we consider the fact that Brand and the showman’s relationship is different from that of the community and Brand’s since “only the wandering Jew of the story, a doomed, Mephistophelian figure, is able to establish an imperfect, ironic, joyless rapport with Brand” (Vanderbilt 455). But the two characters’ rapport may be attributed to the mutual burden of sin, too; therefore, although it could be a possible point of reference, identifying the German Jew with Mephistopheles or Satan would still need some further argument, whereas the Wandering Jew analogy appears to be more valid in the case of the travelling showman.

Yet another episode where Hawthorne highlights Ethan Brand’s conduct of life is when, immediately after the German Jew’s exhibition, there appears a stray dog in the short story; just like in Hawthorne’s *Passages from the American Note-books*. In both writings, the dog is described as great and elderly; he appears to be quiet and good-natured, offering his head to be patted; then, unexpectedly, he starts to chase his short tail, with growing fierceness, as if in enmity with his other body half; he ceases his “performance” due to utter exhaustion, and becomes as mild and quiet as when he arrived; and, finally, he amuses the audience in both instances. Nevertheless, similarly to the German Jew with the diorama, the dog of the

notebook is also transformed into a symbolic motif in “Ethan Brand”: according to Robert Milder, he “becomes a parodic double of Ethan Brand in his quest for the Unpardonable Sin” (567).

As opposed to the case of the German Jew, however, the symbolic bond between the protagonist and the dog may be considered somewhat less ambiguous: “the dog in the story bears a didactic relationship to the protagonist” because “in the ‘self-pursuing cur’ Ethan Brand sees a ‘remote analogy’ to his own case” (Stock 123). Indeed, Hawthorne’s detailed and emphatic depiction of the dog chasing his own tail and Brand’s subsequent laughter upon finding resemblance between his life and the “self-pursuing cur” makes it impossible not to notice the correspondence between the two cases.

Notwithstanding the overlapping descriptions of the dog in “Ethan Brand” and in Hawthorne’s notebook, there are some significant alterations to be noted in terms of language: in the short story, the chase of the tail becomes emphatically futile and ridiculous as Hawthorne seems to have added some adjectives and adverbs in order to heighten the grotesqueness of the dog’s ludicrous performance, when he writes:

*Never* was seen such headlong eagerness in pursuit of an object that could not possibly be attained; *never* was heard such a *tremendous* outbreak of growling, snarling, barking, and snapping,—as if one end of the *ridiculous* brute’s body were at deadly and *most unforgivable* enmity with the other.” (8; emphasis added)

In this way, not only does the dog’s chase become ridiculously futile, but, though in an indirect way, the absurdity of Brand’s quest for the Unpardonable Sin is also highlighted by the narrator. Another significant change is the fact that, while in the notebook, the dog might belong under the influence someone who has “taught this trick by attaching a bell to the end of his tail”, in the short story, the narrator stresses the dog’s freedom of will by observing: he “seemed to be his own master, as no person in the company laid claim to him” (8) – thus

implicitly referring to the apparent autonomy of Ethan Brand who decided to pursue the Unpardonable Sin seemingly without any external influence.

In what other ways can Ethan Brand be considered as similar to the dog chasing his own tail? First, we can find some analogy in the circular nature of both the dog and Brand's movement, which refers to the futility of the act since a circle has no end. Pedersen agrees when he observes:

the dog, becoming possessed of a demon, travels round and round in pursuit of an unattainable because inadequate end, "as if one end of the ridiculous brute's body were at deadly and most unforgivable enmity with the other." Ethan Brand had wandered in a circle, possessed of a demon, his head at enmity with his heart, in pursuit of an unattainable because inadequate end – a life of all mind and no heart. (310)

Ironically enough, Ethan Brand's journey seems to be futile because his circular journey in pursuit of knowledge ends at the exact same spot from where he started the search. Nonetheless, not only does Pedersen's observation reflect on the circular movement of Brand and the dog, but it also calls attention to further analogies between the two cases: the dog, just like Brand, seems to be possessed of some fiendish madness; and the dog's tail, just like the protagonist's heart, is in unresolvable conflict with its possessor's head. The analogy between the dog's tail and Brand's heart becomes even more palpable if we consider the fact that, while the dog's ferocious chase "is a 'headlong' pursuit of his stubby tail", "during Brand's large mental development, he grew fatally long on head and unforgivably short on heart. The dog's tail is, of course, the externalization of the heart: it wags when the heart is glad" (Vanderbilt 454).

But the dog comes to symbolize Ethan Brand's conduct of life in his human qualities, too; Cyril A. Reilly explains the importance of such human attributes when he states, "the more human the dog appears, the more effectively will he symbolize the protagonist, Ethan

Brand; and the more absurd he appears, the more will he symbolize and dramatize the absurdity of Brand's search" (978). In other words, in order to become similar to Ethan Brand, the dog has to possess human characteristics; but also, the grotesqueness of the animal becoming human-like (while symbolizing the life of Ethan Brand) makes Brand all the more ridiculous. One of the dog's human qualities is the abovementioned freedom of will; this freedom, however, is rather ambiguous, "for the grave dog, without clear motive, suddenly has departed from the crowd of townspeople to make his ridiculous, growling effort to catch his own tail. (What witchcraft also prompted Ethan Brand, against the warning of his own conscience, suddenly to leave his fire and the villagers to go on his quest for the Unpardonable Sin?)" (Vanderbilt 454). Therefore, the dog and Brand's autonomy becomes rather relative as they both appear to be possessed by some evil force which induces them to pursue their fruitless business. Reilly goes on to enumerate some further human qualities of the dog by comparing the short story and the equivalent passage in the *Note-books*, as follows:

There are a number of fairly obvious changes which help to humanize the dog. [...] both versions call him "elderly." No modification was needed here, for the term, with its suggestion of a dignified human being, was humorous just as it stood in the *Notebooks*. But Hawthorne inserts a new, humanizing characteristic [...]: the dog seeks out men, wants to be "sociable." [...] the "great, old dog" becomes a "grave and venerable quadruped." This latter phrase again lends the animal a human but humorous dignity, a touch which is helped by the lengthy Latin derivatives. [...] the author adds "and respectable in his deportment," another high-sounding and humanizing phrase. (978)

Again, Reilly's observation suggests that, by lending the dog human characteristics, Hawthorne seems to have aimed at making the dog (and thus Brand) appear as miserable and absurd as possible – and, apparently, he has succeeded at doing so.

In spite of the aforementioned correspondences between the protagonist and the dog chasing his own tail, one may also discover some crucial differences between the two figures. First, the dog is distinguishable from Ethan Brand in his ability to stop the futile chase by himself; Brand, at the same time, was virtually unable to set limits to his quest: he pursued the Unpardonable Sin for as many as eighteen years. Second, the dog, having finished his ludicrous performance, returns among the audience as mild in his manner as when he first appeared; whereas Brand “proudly and consciously has insisted on his isolation from the villagers” (Vanderbilt 454). Third, although the old dog’s tail (which stands for Ethan Brand’s heart) is much shorter than it should be, he can still wag it, while Brand’s “stunted heart [...] can no longer pulsate. It has, in the later phrase, ‘ceased to partake of the universal throb’” (Vanderbilt 454). Finally, the dog does not pursue mighty aims but only his own tail; whereas Brand’s purpose was not less than to find the Unpardonable Sin. In this sense, as Joseph C. Pattison argues, “the analogy with the dog chasing its tail completes a *reductio ad absurdum* for Ethan: the quest for unpardonable sin is terrible, empty, ridiculous. This is more than difference in degree. It is change in kind, Brand’s mighty satanic purpose reduced to absurdity” (368). Therefore, partly because of the futility of Brand’s search and partly because of the analogy with an ordinary dog chasing his own tail, the great quest for the Unpardonable Sin becomes ridiculously absurd, pointless and empty.

The aim of the present essay was to investigate how two of the symbolic figures, the old German Jew and the dog chasing his own tail symbolize the protagonist’s conduct of life in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short story “Ethan Brand”. The first case demonstrated that, even though Hawthorne apparently modelled the German Jew after the showman in his *Note-books*, the old German of the notebook is transformed into a symbolic figure in “Ethan Brand”: either we can regard him as the legendary Wandering Jew, carrying his diorama as a burden of his sins and thus mirroring the sinful life of Ethan Brand; or, we may identify him with

Marlowe's and Goethe's Mephistopheles, a satanic figure, who has influenced Brand to pursue the Unpardonable Sin – although the former analogy appears to be more appropriate. The second case illustrated how the dog, also having his origins in Hawthorne's *Note-books*, becomes a didactic analogue of Brand by chasing his tail in a futile, absurd and grotesque manner, thus reminding us and Brand himself of the ridiculous fruitlessness of his originally mighty quest for the Unpardonable Sin. In fact, both the showman and the dog show a mirror image of Ethan Brand, making him face the emptiness of his self – and, though in an implicit way, prefiguring his inevitable end.

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