

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE'S "YOUNG GOODMAN BROWN"
— AN ATTEMPT AT DECONSTRUCTION

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Criticism insists on performing what cannot be performed — reading texts. There can never be "correct" or "objective" reading, only less or more energetic, interesting, careful, or pleasurable misreadings.

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I

Written in 1835, a tale entitled "Young Goodman Brown" appeared in a 1846 edition of a collection of Nathaniel Hawthorne's tales and sketches *Mosses from the Old Manse*. Since that moment, marking the origin of the text at least in the reality of its readers, the history of its interpretations has been developing in a number of heterogenous directions which, however, may yield to a compendious classification.

The doctrines attributed to Hawthorne involve a headheart psychology, isolation, an unpardonable sin, and a love for the hearth.

Hawthorne is credited with a love of the public and a belief in universal depravity. He has, according to some, an optimistic spirit of democracy. He emphasizes feeling and denigrates intellect, particularly if it is inquisitive. He urges every man to find a place in the social order, and he disapproves of violation of the human psyche. (Tharpe 1967: 10).

In other words, particular readings of Hawthorne's works of fiction, and among them of "Young Goodman Brown", have usually been authoritative and tended to project the reality of the text on various external realms. The

common idiom of criticism has been that of morally committed psychology of characters and their religious experience, or, as in the specific case of Leslie A. Fiedler (1960 : 425) who read the tale in terms of a Faustian dilemma, of various archetypal and mythic associations. Originally, it was Herman Melville who, as one of the first attentive critics, highly appreciated an inquiry into "the deep mystery of sin" that for him seemed to be the central theme of the text. Following Melville's way, F. O. Matthiessen concentrated his interest on the emotional and psychological results of Brown's pilgrimage, rather than on the textual patterning of his predicament. In both respects the interpretive emphasis fell on the effect and not on the preceding process of cognition.

Hawthorne's main concern with the material is to use it to develop the theme that mere doubt in the existence of good, the thought that all other men are evil, can become such a corrosive force as to eat out the life of the heart. In handling the question of what the young man really saw during his night in the forest, Hawthorne's imagination is at its most delicately masterful. (Matthiessen 1941 : 832)

Several other critics, and among them G. E. Woodberry, Austin Warren, and Mark Van Doren (Lang 1962 : 89—93), also indicated and stressed the moral dimension of the tale, interpreting its game of textual ambiguities in terms of the protagonist's confusion and despair. In fact, recent discoveries concerning Hawthorne's literary and documentary sources shed some more light on the problem of Brown's spiritual evolution. F. N. Cherry (Lang 1962 : 90) pointed out significant affinities between Cervantes' "Colloquy of the Dogs" and Hawthorne's tale, as regards the motif of a passage from ignorance to recognition.

It seems, however, that all these considerations, either explicitly or implicitly based upon psychology of an individual, remain within the boundaries of a certain consensus of opinion, most radically expressed by Q. D. Leavis who formulated the boldest version of authoritative reading, precluding all efforts to preserve the problematic character of Brown's quest:

What Hawthorne has given us is not an allegory, and not an ambiguous problem story (we are not to ask: Was it an actual Satanic experience or only a dream?). Hawthorne has made a dramatic poem of a Calvinist experience in New England. (Leavis 1951 : 37)

Hence, the critic has not only avoided, but also openly forbidden any interpretative attempts focused on the uncanny obscurity of Brown's vicissitudes. She has ignored the issue of his blurred perception, simultaneously proclaiming absolute mastery over the puzzling alternatives the text appears to display. No wonder then, that such an attitude provoked a number of protests of some less rigorously minded readers; H. J. Lang (1962 : 90) had deliberately called in doubt an intentional negligence of the element of am-

biguity in the narrative and restored the implied double meaning of Brown's visions. In a similar way, Eric Mottram has hinted at the quasi-Manichean structure of the reality of fictional Salem.

"Young Goodman Brown" proposes that Christ and the Devil may control equally well in terms of daily coordinated moral living in a town, and that dogmatic exclusivity may produce deadly isolation. (Mottram 1982 : 191)

Both readings, regardless of the differences between individual interpretive strategies, seem to be oriented against the critical dogma and postulate a minimum degree of tolerance for the undecided resolution, as well as the dubious climax of Hawthorne's tale. In a way they predict and anticipate a more daring recognition of the role and function of ambiguities in Hawthorne's fiction suggested by Jac Tharpe, who reassessed the crucial tenets of his literary doctrine and practice. Tharpe has identified and rejected the common point of view which seemed to have aimed at the elimination of one of the essential characteristics of Hawthorne's work.

The search for doctrines is also an attempt to divest him of ambiguity, whereas, considering Hawthorne's philosophy, the ambiguous is the source of his strength, because it shows the nature of his insights and describes the world he perceives. (Tharpe 1967 : 9—10)

Thus, Tharpe has given way to a wide range of possible misreadings, removing the accumulated prejudice and revising the established tradition. Supposedly, he revealed the center of Hawthorne's universe and marked a convenient point of departure for further versions of obscurity. The recognition of the force of aporia may turn out the first step towards deconstruction.

II

In his essay on Edmond Jabes' *The Book of Questions* Jacques Derrida has made a seminal remark on the typology of interpretation: "The original opening of interpretation essentially signifies that there will always be rabbis and poets. And two interpretations of interpretation." (Derrida 1978 : 67).

One, firmly anchored in the logocentric heritage, would assume to reveal the ultimate meaning, a hypothetical Logos behind the prattle of the text. A careful exegete would distinguish among discrete levels of analysis and specify pertinent conventions, so that by a proper application of the rules of decoding he may successfully achieve his final goal. Such an interpretation, aiming at the notion of meaning as a product, is defined as rabbinical, since it is founded upon the logic of cause and effect, implying clearly formulated premises and procedures. Beyond the logocentric rigor, there is, however, quite a different style of reading which, on the contrary, seems to reject the concept of hierarchical coherence superimposed by the authority of center.

Hence, whereas the rabbinical interpretation is essentially oriented towards Truth, Source, and Origin that would support and explain the repertoire of rhetorical and literary devices, the poetical reading appears as "the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of the world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin." (Derrida 1978 : 292) While the former is based upon the idea of center and the totality of sense, the latter, proclaiming freedom, performs de-centering and breaks the ready-made meaning into a game of endlessly postponed differences. "This affirmation then determines the noncenter otherwise rather than a loss of the center. And it plays without security. For there is a sure play: that which is limited to the substitution of given and existing, present, pieces. In absolute chance, affirmation also surrenders itself to genetic indetermination, to the seminal adventure of the trace." (Derrida 1978 : 292).

It turns out, then, that the readers of Hawthorne's fiction have usually been rabbis and not poets. As such, they have been driven by a positive desire to elucidate, to get rid of the anguish of ambiguities. No matter how complex the definite meaning could be, it always surpassed the puzzling paradox and undid the aporia. Unfortunately, the trace of young Goodman Brown in the forest does not go across the clearing but dimly flickers among undecidables.

The true reason, or the origin of Brown's decision to leave Salem and abandon his newly-wed wife remains unknown in spite of her attempts to disclose it and change the husband's mind. From the outset the reader encounters the atmosphere of suspense, as the tale evidently lacks a proper opening or exposition. "So they parted and the young man pursued his way, until being about to turn the corner by the meeting house, he looked back and saw the head of Faith still peeping after him with a melancholy air in spite of her pink ribbons." (Hawthorne 1967 : 271) As if to correspond with the aura of obscurity, Brown's itinerary quite soon displays its curvilinear development, furthermore, the road seems "to close immediately behind" (Hawthorne 1967 : 272) him, marking a distinct borderline between the space of the town and the maze of the forest. Isolated from civilization, Brown appears not to be fully aware of the actual significance of his errand in the wilderness, and so may be the reader, since the only hint concerning the protagonist's possible destination comes from an independent and impersonal narrational voice situated beyond Brown's consciousness. The vague purpose of the pilgrimage is supposed to be evil and belong to the dark domain of some mysterious wicked forces.

Anxiously watching the gloomy surroundings, Brown soon reveals a specific peculiarity of perception. He is unable to concentrate his attention on the physical reality of things, but constantly penetrates into their problematic double nature to see more than human senses may provide. At first, his

mind is haunted by the image of "devilish Indians" (Hawthorne 1967 : 272) lurking behind the trees, then by the vision of "devil himself" (Hawthorne 1967 : 272), supposedly following him "at his very elbow" (Hawthorne 1967 : 272). As a result, he suffers from perplexity and fear, still increasing when he proceeds on his way. Uncertain even with respect to the environment, Goodman Brown cannot predict the moral consequences of his enterprise.

After another crook of the road, once again emphasizing the labyrinthine course of the tour, the young man meets a mysterious stranger who, quite unexpectedly, offers him guidance and help. As a matter of fact, the stranger reveals unusual similarity to Brown's dead father, and, in spite of the difference in age, even to Brown himself. What is more, he is holding a long staff "which bore the likeness of a great black snake" (Hawthorne 1967 : 273), almost immediately provoking some ambiguous Satanic overtones that are, however, all too eagerly questioned by the narrator's remark on the probability of Brown's "ocular deception" (Hawthorne 1967 : 273). Both wanderers continue the peregrination together, although the young man becomes more and more frustrated by the situation as well as the obscure identity of his fellow-traveler. Suffering from the overwhelming sense of guilt, he starts recalling the past and comparing himself with his impeccable ancestors who, as he firmly believes, would never venture upon such an errand. As if in response to Brown's sad monologue, the stranger suddenly begins to tell him most incredible stories about the members of his family, mockingly enumerating their evil deeds and stressing the contrast between their reputation and the truth. Deeply shocked, Brown tries to protest, expressing his adamant confidence in the value of Puritan virtues, yet gradually he is forced to admit the hypocritical character of moral paragons. As the Satanic cicerone claims, the most distinguished public figures of Massachusetts secretly lead a double life, serving him in spiritual subordination and attending black rituals in the heart of the forest. Surprised by such revelations, his young interlocutor replies that he does not know anything about the secular authorities but he can be sure about the genuine Christian faith of the clergy and some respectable and pious citizens. Unfortunately, facts soon indicate something quite opposite, proving that Brown's naiveté and ignorance have no limits and that his opinions about people are based upon illusion. After a while both travelers meet on their way Goody Cloyse, "an exemplary dame" (Hawthorne 1967 : 274), who confirms Satan's confessions and finally reveals his true identity. Moreover, she occasionally mentions the purpose of her pilgrimage — some mysterious gathering, during which "a nice young man is to be taken into communion" (Hawthorne 1967 : 275). Frightened, Goodman Brown refuses to go any farther, having in mind the image and the name of his wife Faith, an obvious pun connecting love and religion. Furthermore, his "ocular deception" turns Goody Cloyse into a witch who flies away on the devil's staff

suddenly transformed into a serpent. Proud of himself, the young man takes a rest, thinking "with how clear a conscience he should meet the minister in his morning walk" (Hawthorne 1967 : 276).

The minister, however, together with the Reverend Deacon Gookin, turn out to be another pair of night travelers in the forest. Surprisingly, they seem to be talking about the same obscure event that has just been mentioned by Goody Cloyse, though instead of a man, they refer to a woman as a welcome novice who is supposed to take part in the ritual. "Doubting whether there really was a heaven above him" (Hawthorne 1967 : 278), Brown has hardly enough time to collect his thoughts, when he hears "a confused and doubtful sound of voices" (Hawthorne 1967 : 278) coming from the direction of Salem. Overtaken with horror, he can recognize among them the voice of his spouse, so he decides to follow the passing crowd and watch the hellish ceremony in spite of the danger to his own soul. As he is shouting his wife's name, the only answer is the mocking echo, a grotesque double of a human call that cannot bring any consolation. Having lost his Faith (faith?), young Goodman Brown is ready to risk everything and runs forward, until the path, "faintly traced" (Hawthorne 1967 : 279), finally disappears. No more is he then afraid of beasts and Indians, since nothing else "but he was himself the chief horror of the scene". (Hawthorne 1967 : 279) The ambiguous character of his perception, frequently reflected in the apparently neutral mode of describing the scenery of the forest, exerted a destructive influence on his imagination and beliefs.

During the gloomy ritual, listening to the devil's sermon on the sway of evil over the world, Brown sees strange things with his mind's eyes. Instead of a wood, he beholds a huge temple, with "a rock, bearing some rude, natural resemblance either to an altar or to a pulpit, and surrounded by four blazing pines, their tops aflame, their stems untouched, like candles at an evening meeting." (Hawthorne 1967 : 280) A solemn song intoned by the assembly sounds to him like an ecclesiastical hymn, and the font seems to be full not of water but of blood. Moreover, the distorted figure of Satan himself "bore no slight similitude, both in garb and manner, to some grave divine of the New England churches." (Hawthorne 1967 : 281) In general, Goodman Brown's vision in the middle of the forest appears as an exact equivalent of a church celebration, yet totally reversed and performed by God's adversary. The problematic ontological status of the scene turns out to be the main condition of the ambiguous character of Hawthorne's tale. In fact, the narratorial voice which seems to control both the fictional reality and Goodman Brown's mind only augments the bewilderment of the reader, neither confirming, nor falsifying the protagonist's insights. During the climax of the ritual, when the devil is going to admit the new member to the congregation, Brown suddenly bursts in to a desperate cry and then loses his senses. When he

wakes up there is nobody around and no trace of the celebration whatsoever, so having returned to Salem, he is entirely unable to decide whether what happened to him the night before could be real or not. The riddle remained unsolved until the end of his life, so he could not trust anyone in the town, including his own wife and "his dying hour was gloom." (Hawthorne 1967 : 284). The consequences of his forest experience ruined his faith in people and in the world. Thus, both to young Goodman Brown and to the reading audience, there arose a relevant question: "Had Goodman Brown fallen asleep in the forest and only dreamed a wild dream of a witch meeting?" (Hawthorne 1967 : 284)

III

Indicating several obsessive themes which Hawthorne often pursued in his works, Jac Tharpe has emphasized one crucial dilemma: "Hawthorne is persistently concerned with the problem of knowledge, particularly with regard to human action." (Tharpe 1967 : 12) Accordingly, young Goodman Brown's spiritual adventure may as well be considered in terms of a polarity between ignorance and knowledge, or perhaps even innocence and experience, that has already become a classic interpretive device with respect to major works of American literature presenting the inner development of an individual. Based upon a clear spatial model of a quest, Hawthorne's tale easily surrenders to the stereotypes of reading and seems to fit the established pattern of critical response. It offers a number of clear-cut antinomies which neatly thematize the riddles of the text. Hence, the literary consensus of opinion almost unanimously declares Goodman Brown a typical figure of an innocent hero who is ignorant of the reality of sin and corruption. Morally pure and naive, he passes through a process of recognition, leading toward self-awareness and maturity. Apparently, all the significant elements of the tale seem to support such a line of reasoning and reveal a ready-made meaning, easily applicable to virtual ambiguities. Unfortunately, some minor details may dismantle the arrangement of contrasts and undo the violent order of interpretation.

As an exemplary Christian, young Goodman Brown seems to be rather suspect, since he does not show any hesitation or doubt, starting his traumatic pilgrimage. Nor does he want to listen to his wife's beseechment and comply with the duties of a young husband. On the contrary, he feels a strong compulsion to leave and stands ready for anything that may happen in the depth of the forest. If then he is not sinful, at least he appears to be weak and prone to corruption, and that seriously undermines the dogma of his unquestionable innocence. What is more, a striking parity between Brown, his late father, and the devil provides another point of dubiousness and blurs a convenient

distinction separating the wicked from the good. In other words, the romantic topos of the double subverts the disposition of ostensibly opposite values and meanings. At first, young Goodman Brown eagerly obeys his mysterious guide, with no serious protest following him on the path. The devil proves to be so irresistibly persuasive "that his arguments seemed rather to spring up in the bosom of his auditor than to be suggested by himself" (Hawthorne 1967 : 276) Indeed, the boundaries between the personality of the protagonist and his fiendish double have almost completely disappeared under the pressure of an overwhelming temptation. Only after a while did Brown manage to change his mind, admonished by his somewhat abused Christian conscience.

It is also a crucial question whether the hero has really achieved the desired enlightenment, since despite his Satanic experience he is still quite unable to formulate an adequate hypothesis of the reality. In fact, "the matter of self-knowledge, which is essentially Goodman Brown's problem" (Tharpe 1967 : 17) has not been settled at all, so that the proper cause of his morbid frustration seems to be an epistemological uncertainty, rather than any kind of dreadful, though actually definite moral experience. Strangely enough, there is no qualitative difference between the protagonist's initial ignorance and ultimate apprehension. He still knows nothing about the world, and therefore suffers from bewilderment that disrupts his confidence and peace. Brown's knowledge is then painfully identical with ignorance — it is ignorance, much deeper and more paralyzing than before. Radically subverted, it reveals its enigmatic character, it goes, in a sense, under erasure, overturning the preestablished order of balanced opposition.

"The antithesis of ignorance and knowledge, vaguely symbolized by darkness and light, is a major theme in most of the great works [of Hawthorne]." (Tharpe 1967: 12) The story of young Goodman Brown both confirms and denies such a clear statement, since it successfully disrupts the logic of assertion and negation. What the protagonist finally acquires is a kind of problematic *sous rature*, under erasure, that abolishes the equipoise of antithesis with an unarrested movement of deferral, invalidating any fixed point of destination. The hierarchy of innocence and experience, and ignorance and knowledge falls apart, so that the apparently solid contradictions lose their independent status in the interplay of meanings without origin and without limit. Brown can never be sure if he had a bad dream or indeed participated in a genuine black ritual, therefore his frustration is incurable. The uncanny complexity of the narrative double bind displays only the destructive force of the trace as a joyful game of difference that leads, however, to gloomy consequences.

The general structure of the unmotivated trace connects within the same possibility, and they cannot be separated except by abstraction, the structure of the relationship with the other, the movement of temporalization, and language

as writing. Without referring back to a "nature", the immotivation of the trace has always *become*. In fact, there is no unmotivated trace: the trace is indefinitely its own becoming-unmotivated. (Derrida 1974 : 47)

As it appears, the negative energy of trace traverses the discourse of "Young Goodman Brown". The text provides the frustrated reader with nothing more but an endless progress of paradox, a suspended radical ambiguity with no satisfying explanation. There is no final meaning to be laboriously disclosed, no closure to be ultimately reached, following the pathway of a rabbinical, logocentric interpretation. It is impossible to transcend the network of differences, an unrestricted interplay of contradictory options, equally well motivated by two simultaneously exclusive systems of recuperation. Each event and each phenomenon that occurs within the pale of the fictional reality may be interpreted either in terms of Brown's genuine experience or, according to the marginal commentary of the narratorial voice, as a result of the protagonist's unreliable perception. The voice on the margin, apparently only a supplement, persistently undoes the comfortable order of understanding, leaving no place for a valid recognition of truth beyond doubt, and questioning the authority of reading. Consequently, as a narrative, "Young Goodman Brown" reveals no stable center of meaning as a proper goal of the hero's quest. There is no single explanatory doctrine to be discovered behind the misleading game of signifiers, no triumphant presence to be announced as the corresponding signified.

"The many quests that appear in Hawthorne's work are journeys without goals. Much happens, but no goal is reached, in part because none exists, in part because one forgets what the goal is, and in part because there is no way of reaching it. In addition, there is probably no use." (Tharpe 1967: 58–59) Since, however, "to read is to struggle to name" (Barthes 1970: 99), the ostensible impossibility of reading may just as well provoke various attempts to naturalize the ambiguity. "The device of multiple choice" (Fogle 1952 : 16), suggested by F. O. Matthiessen, and "the formula of alternative possibilities" (Fogle 1952 : 16), coined by Yvor Winters, are the two most successful terms to convey the permanent suspension so characteristic of Brown's predicament, although neither of them seems to take into account the temporal aspect of an endless delay of the ultimate closure of meaning in the tale. Moving even further in the opposite direction, Richard Harter Fogle, in a study of Hawthorne's symbolism, has questioned the proposals of his predecessors, and he has stressed the need for a more definite framework of analysis: "Ambiguity alone, however, is not a satisfactory aesthetic principle. Flexibility, suggestiveness, allusiveness, variety — all these are without meaning if there is no pattern from which to vary, no center from which to radiate." (Fogle 1952 : 22) Thus, demonstrating the kind of anxiety typical of a logocentrically oriented mind, the critic as an exemplary reader has expressed his

desire for a firmly established meaningful center as an indispensable condition of coherence, both of the text he reads and his own act of response. In order to achieve this, he reduced the freeplay of differences to the recurrent pattern on the level of episodes, focusing his attention on the principle of virtual symmetry underlying the structure of the plot. Eventually, sharing the epistemological anguish with the protagonist, he preferred the rigor of curtailment to the joyful uncertainty of the unmotivated trace.

"But is not the desire for a center a function of play itself, the undestructible itself?" (Derrida 1978 : 297) Provoking it in a radical way, Hawthorne's tale appears to be a tantalizing exercise with no solution at all. Though it contains a distinct climax, at the moment when Brown loses his senses and falls down on the moss, on the other hand, it provides no point that may promise final satisfaction and fulfillment of the reader's expectations. Quite on the contrary, it demonstrates an inevitable process of disintegration, a pungent absence of any superior principle of coherence, pure negativity precluding a discovery of the fundament. Therefore, all the efforts to support the text with a center are doomed to interpretive failure, since it is erased by the force of "la différance", "the active, moving discord of forces, and of differences of forces" (Derrida 1982 : 18), that has effectively disrupted a stable, meaning-generating system of oppositions — an illusory object of the receiver's frustrated desire. As a matter of fact, it can only be suppressed and never assuaged — due to the absence of a center, the erratic wandering of the un-arrested trace — unless stopped by some arbitrary substitute of sense.

IV

One of the characteristic features of deconstruction practised as an approach to the reading of literary texts is "an interest in a way conflicts or dramas within the texts are reproduced as conflicts in and between readings of the text". (Culler 1982 : 214) It is rooted in the conviction that "texts thematize, with varying degrees of explicitness, interpretive operations and their consequences and thus represent in advance the dramas that will give life to the tradition of their interpretation". (Culler 1982: 214) For, as it may turn out, "critical disputes about a text can frequently be identified as a displaced reenactment of conflicts dramatized in the text, so that while the text assays the consequences and implications of various forces it contains, critical readings transform this difference between mutually exclusive positions". (Culler 1982 : 215).

The main ambiguity of "Young Goodman Brown" belongs to the realm of epistemology. It has been caused by the conflict of interpretations of the world that paralyzes the protagonist's will, at the same time isolating him from the community of Salem. The tale displays a number of clues that seem

to offer, as empty signifiers, two contradictory explanations of Brown's predicament, inevitably cancelling each other. Brown himself may choose among three possible attitudes: to consider his experience as a terrible, yet ephemeral nightmare, to understand it as a dreadful ritual of initiation into the evil nature of the universe or, finally, to bear the pressure of uncertainty as an inherent characteristic of human existence. Ostensibly, the consequences of the last two options are identical, since in both cases the hero may be deprived of the privilege of love and happiness and thrown into the state of despondency. On the other hand, he is entirely unable to accept the first, truly optimistic solution. As the reader of the text of reality, he cannot get rid of his bewilderment and develop into a mature individual, fully aware of the difficult complexity of the world. Logocentrically biased, Brown expects a one-dimensional answer to his question, so that when no solution appears, everything dissolves, leaving no prospect for future comfort and hope. The young man is dead serious, and just as a majority of literary critics, he suffers from keen discontent from the same unsatisfied desire that made most of the readers of the tale look for convenient substitutes of meaning to restore, at least provisionally, the violent order of interpretation over the freeplay of the trace. His anguish properly anticipate the embarrassment of response, a need for a center as a necessary guarantee of epistemological certitude. Therefore, both the protagonist and the exemplary reader are victims of the same mechanism of logocentric commitment, being submitted to the power of authority represented by a specific theory of signification. In a desperate search for a closure they both ignore the force of aporia, the de-centering deferral that subverts the satisfaction of understanding.

Hence, as a text dominated by the problem of perception and cognition, "Young Goodman Brown" contains an implied typology of various possible strategies of its reading, as practised by the title hero and the mysterious stranger, identified as a figure of the devil. Brown's point of view is firmly based on the belief that the world is ruled by the divine Providence, whereas Satan claims his own power over human souls and behavior. Both of them, nonetheless, paradoxically share one crucial premise that the universe, regardless of its moral foundation, must be ordered according to some definite principle, as a ground of its ontological coherence. Listening to the arguments of his wicked guide, the young man essentially preserved the structure of his worldview, virtually shifting to the other extreme under the influence of experience. The crucial dichotomy of good and evil may still hold true, despite all the horrible revelations during the forest journey. The real crisis of confidence and the ensuing emotional and intellectual breakdown came at the moment when the unreliability of cognition undermined the general assumption concerning clearly defined and mutually independent oppositions.

Thus, both Goodman Brown and the devil seem to represent one and the same strategy of interpretation, in spite of the diverse codes of morals. Quite similarly, the typical reader of the tale since the time of its publication has usually been a figure of the protagonist who let himself be persuaded by the Fiend. The critics of the story have often eagerly repeated the gesture of horror made by Brown after he saw the pink ribbons of his wife on the branch of a tree. They have sympathized with his grief as a feeling of disenchantment, and not bewilderment — as a result of moral, and not cognitive shock. In fact, they performed the same act of reduction to keep intact their logocentric vantage at the cost of their troubled conscience.

The closing paragraph of the tale shows disastrous results of Brown's adventure, simultaneously minimizing the problem of his dramatic choice. For no matter what the cause of his misfortune could be, its effect ruined his life and cast him out of the society. Hence, as if to deny its own unreadability, the narrative aims at a resolution without explanation — it ends with a signifier that refers to no signified. Goodman Brown's desperation does not reveal the reason for his perplexity, but it illustrates a reaction of the mind obsessed with the idea of order to an unanswerable epistemological question. In a way, it also predicts the quandary of the reader and proclaims a failure of the logocentric approach in a textual confrontation with the aporia. Nevertheless, Hawthorne's typology of receivers seems to imply as well a more promising interpretive option which, however absent from the tale, unfolds itself in the endless movement of the trace, in the playful negativity of "la différance". The text that displays no center of its contrasts, that communicates nothing but its being-in-the-process-of-decomposition calls for a reader who would voluntarily forget about the postulate of closure as a necessary compensation for his activity. Such a reader, having taken into account the possibility neglected by the hero, would recognize and appreciate the game of differences and avoid a personal involvement in the spectacle of response devised by the contradictions of the narrative. After all, there is no duty to enter the forest and follow the guide on a logocentric path. Resisting the devil's temptation to exercise his authority, a critic may choose the part of a joyful spectator, a witness, a voyeur.

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