A History of the American Mind: "Young Goodman Brown"

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1 Nathaniel Hawthorne is foremost, with some exceptions, a historical, allegorical, and moralistic writer. That is, he writes about the nature of historical understanding by referring to historical situations or figures. In his better works he writes about this history allegorically, which I hope to clarify in this essay. And as he writes this “allegorical history,” he imparts to his readers a moral lesson, or various lessons, as is implicit in the genre of allegory. As he offers these concrete meanings, however, he allows more permissive, democratic, responses to his stories. “Young Goodman Brown” is, among the short fiction, the superior example of this allegorical history.

2 In order to foreground my approach to the short story, however, it is helpful to refer to recent readings of The Scarlet Letter. Much recent critical work on The Scarlet Letter assumes that part of the allegorical meaning of the letter A is this: A stands for America as a nation. Sacvan Bercovitch’s The Office of The Scarlet Letter, as a primary example, presents the novel as representative of the American experience of the mid-nineteenth century. Bercovitch elaborately and thoroughly historicizes the novel, arguing that its “historical subject is neither the problem of the law nor the advantages of consensus. It is the process through which liberal society achieves consensus, the ambiguities through which it makes reconciliation seem both inevitable and desirable, a private necessity we cannot help but choose” (71-72). While such brief quotation cannot do Bercovitch’s book justice, it can demonstrate how Hawthorne’s aesthetic and historical use of the Puritans extends into issues of the nineteenth-century. Bercovitch continues to historicize the novel in his more recent article, “The Scarlet Letter: A Twice-Told Tale.” Jay Grossman similarly asserts that the novel is “profoundly implicated in ‘contemporary material’—specifically, antebellum discourses of miscegenation” (14). Whereas Christopher Diffee’s “Postponing Politics in Hawthorne’s Scarlet Letter” criticizes Hawthorne’s refusal to take a political stand on important issues, it also assumes the novel’s nineteenth-century historical implications. I would like to suggest that the story “Young Goodman Brown”
also functions historically along the lines assumed by these scholars and that it is an earlier, albeit less inclusive, allegorical history of America which takes as its subject, in large part, an examination of the incipient American mind-set which begins to shape an American identity. As such, it offers not only a viable understanding of how the three primary Hawthornian qualities of history, allegory, and moralism combine, indeed depend on one another, but it suggests how Hawthorne's allegory functions as history.

If The Scarlet Letter and “Young Goodman Brown” are a type of national history, it is important to sketch briefly the type of history that these two works present. They do not present a history of significant persons and events which determine the social or political course of the nation, in the sense that Hawthorne's friend, George Bancroft, would think of history. Bancroft fully accepted the predominant nineteenth-century concepts of historical progress and Manifest Destiny. Michael Davitt Bell notes that Bancroft also shared the conventional view of a moral history, or a “history [that] embodied moral truths” (5). Hawthorne would have agreed generally with Bancroft, I believe, on the moral nature of their separate types of historic endeavors. But Hawthorne was more skeptical (as Bercovitch makes clear in Office) about the notions of freedom and progress than was Bancroft, and he saw things more complexly, perhaps because he was not considering history in terms of grand and sweeping events as much as he was analyzing the operations of historical forces or considering the effects of historical forces on everyday people. As Harold K. Bush, Jr., points out, “in direct contrast to the rosy pictures of the Puritans presented by romantic historians like Bancroft, Hawthorne's version of New England's seventeenth-century privileging of concern over freedom shows how political oppression and civil corruption were created” (148). Bush's article, which includes an intelligent summary of the use of the Puritans as American founding fathers by early nineteenth-century historians, places Hawthorne among the romantic liberals (like Bancroft), but demonstrates, through the examples of “Endicott and the Red Cross” and “The May-Pole of Merry Mount,” Hawthorne's more critical perspective, stating that he “sometimes explicitly challenged Bancroft’s nearly impervious account” (138).

For Hawthorne, Bancroft's type of history, though extremely important, lacked vitality. Hawthorne preferred to embody history in fiction, not an actual accounting of people and events, but a real, or true, one. And of course, his preferred mode of fiction was allegory. So, I suggest, his allegorical fictions are, in a sense, true representations of historical facts. Or, put simply, his fictions are histories. Not the only histories. Not the best histories. But they are histories, nonetheless as valid as, say, George Bancroft's history. Histories not as voluminous, perhaps, as Bancroft's; not as attached to precise temporalities or occurrences; not as simply or superficially causal as a nineteenth-century historian's depiction of the influence of institutional, economic, or personal forces. But they are histories as detailed and specific in their own way, and more completely and intricately expressive of national character and psychology and identity; more analytical and exploratory of how ideology shapes the thoughts, and thus the actions, of the citizenry; more expressive of the common workings of a democracy in action at a human level, the level at which a democracy is, by definition, concerned; and more expressive of the daily human workings of a democracy and how these daily workings continue and perpetuate ideology; more expressive, in short, of a lived or living, common or democratic history.

How does “Young Goodman Brown” function as allegorical history in the mid-nineteenth century?
Young Goodman Brown, apparently in ignorance and innocence, goes into the woods one evening, apparently to keep a prearranged appointment with the devil. Complacently, he assumes that he will encounter the ultimate evil face to face, remain untainted, and return to his new wife unchanged, thus proving his Faith. He fails. Or rather his Faith fails him.

These broad strokes of the plot reflect the general experience of the Puritans' immigration to the New World, conflating the separatist and non-separatist immigrations and settlements. Assured of the truth of their religion (the Faith), they voyaged forth into the wilderness, where they knew Satan was in residence. Hard as the struggle would be in their war with the devil, their earthly success was assured if they kept their part of the Covenant of Grace and maintained their faith. Not all would be saved, to be sure, but among them were God's Elect, and that belief in election carried with it, as Hawthorne portrays in Goodman Brown, a certain complacency, or “presumption,” as Michael J. Colaccursio identifies it (288). Indeed, they must not fail because they were to be, as John Winthrop forcefully reminded them, “as a city upon a hill.”

Along with the presumption of their own faith and goodness, according to Hawthorne, Brown and the actual Puritans carry into the woods, the wilderness, a corresponding faith in the goodness of their fellow Puritans. Brown and those aboard the Arabella, or the Mayflower, are a model of Christian charity, assuming their community is one fellowship bonded in the love of Christ. So as Brown thinks well of himself, generously he thinks well of others in his community who also further the means and end of glorifying Christ through their lives—ministers, deacons, and catechists. The complacency and presumption, in other words, are not merely an individual inclination, but a collective one.

It is singularly ironic that generosity, or charity, breeds presumption, but that is precisely Hawthorne's point. The irony establishes the generosity or charity as false, therefore as presumption. Furthermore, such presumption can result in cruel, unchristian actions, and hence hypocrisy, as Hawthorne suggests early in the story. The devil claims acquaintance with Brown’s familial ancestry, that is with his Puritan heritage: "I helped your grandfather . . . when he lashed the Quaker woman . . . . And it was I that brought your father the pitch-pine knot, kindled at my own hearth, to set fire to an Indian village . . . . They were my good friends, both" (77). Brown replies, "If it be as thou sayest,[ . . . ] I marvel they never spoke of these matters. Or, verily, I marvel not, seeing that the least rumor of the sort would have driven them from New-England. We are a people of prayer, and good works, to boot, and abide no such wickedness" (77). In short, the Puritans, like Brown, did not see themselves for what they were, people who rationalized their less-than-Christian acts (their destructive religio- and ethnocentric acts) into acts of Divine Providence or construed them as acts attesting to God's glory. The double irony of “good works” punctuates Hawthorne's point: first, while they think they are doing good works, in fact the examples of intolerance, the whipping of the Quaker woman and the burning of the Indian village, show quite otherwise; and, second, according to their doctrine doing good works cannot save them. Because they do not believe in free will, there is no incentive to do right action, so they are rendered incapable of “good works,” or at least excused, on an unconscious level, from wrong action. And if excused thus, they will continue to be blind to the evil results of their actions and continue to commit them.

Another debilitating aspect of this ideology, the Puritan tenet of total depravity, further complicates the psychological tension between Christian compassion and the egocentricity resulting from the tenet of Election. Brown carries with him into the woods
a conviction that there is evil within him—else why is he going to meet the devil? And with his conviction of his own depravity, Brown also carries a conviction that, if his community is a fellowship, then there is evil in its other members, too. Hence, he needs to hide when he hears voices of people approaching in the woods. He needs to hide himself, his own evil, from them, and he needs to shield himself from the fact that there might be evil in them. In effect, in this complex and conflicting psychological state Brown must isolate himself from his community and hide himself from himself. There is, after all, a close family resemblance between him and the devil, and the devil reminds him early during their meeting in the forest of the diabolical tendencies of Brown's family, of the devil's past associations with his grandfather and father. So not only is Brown suspicious of himself, he is suspicious of his community (especially of those in the last generation who taught him his faith) and of his family roots (those from whom he inherited his faith). In short, what the Puritans brought with them, along with their model of Christian charity and election, were other tenets of Calvinism, including a conviction of their own innate depravity—original sin. As the New England Primer reminded them, “In Adam's Fall / We Sinned all.” They carried, with their presumptuous conviction of saintly election, a belief in their own, deserved damnation.

No wonder that for Brown the black cloud passing overhead bears such a cacophonous turmoil of “a confused and doubtful sound of voices”—a sound that then seems to fade until he doubts whether he heard the voices at all. But the sound returns more raucous, and ends in a “cry of grief, rage, and terror” and a scream (we do not know if from Brown or the cloud), which is “drowned immediately in a louder murmur of voices, fading into far-off laughter” (82, 83). The confusion of the doctrine has caused an interior confusion—spiritual and psychological—that results finally in despair: “maddened with despair, so that he laughed loud and long, did Goodman Brown grasp his staff and set forth again, at such a rate, that he seemed to fly along the forest-path” (83), becoming the “chief horror of the scene” (83). Ironically, Brown's Faith has in fact driven him to the ultimate sin of despair. And it is his Faith that drove him there, for between the description of the turmoil of voices in the cloud and the “cry of grief, rage, and terror,” Hawthorne interposes Brown's plea to his Faith to save him. But he utters the word “Faith!” with “agony and desperation,” clearly ironic, allowing the reading that faith, agony, and desperation had functioned together. This reading is further emphasized when the forest mockingly echoes, “‘Faith! Faith!’ as if bewildered wretches were seeking her, all through the wilderness” (82, 83). Brown’s bewilderment caused by the conflicting doctrines of his faith is shared by the voices of his community, in the cloud and throughout the forest.

Add the Calvinist doctrine of predetermination to this incipient national identity, this ideology of the Puritans (the actual ones and Hawthorne’s), and it is extremely difficult, perhaps impossible, Hawthorne might say, to achieve a happy conclusion to the story. Believing in goodness and charity might be easy enough, but continuing to believe that goodness and charity exist in oneself and others while confronting evil in one’s self and one’s community members is more difficult, though perhaps possible. Maintaining that belief in the face of intractable damnation is much more difficult, perhaps impossible. The problem arises from the human need for a certain degree of psychological comfort or security during one’s earthly life. True, the Puritans’ doctrines, arguably the balance between Election and damnation, attempted to allow for such comfort. But from Hawthorne’s perspective, when these doctrines were applied, they failed to achieve this balance. Rather, their effect was the opposite. As Claudia Johnson points out, "Young
Goodman Brown” describes a “mock descent in the Puritan tradition”: “Though the landscape of [Brown’s] heart was available to him, he never saw the true extent of its terrors. . . . Like the stock example of the deluded, self-satisfied man of the justification sermon, young Goodman Brown stands as a negative definition of the regenerative descent” (201, 203). In other words, Brown’s complacency and egotism are the very essence of the sermons given to stir self-examination, a comparison between one’s own thoughts and actions and those of the self-satisfied man. The sermons, like the story “Young Goodman Brown,” present an example of what foibles and sins one must be alert to and try to avoid. I suggest that this self-satisfaction is precisely what Brown stands for, but not, as Johnson claims, as a description of an individual Puritan nor as a representation of the universal human situation, but as a portrayal of the collective American Puritan experience. In short, while American Puritans had the tools, the sermons to which Johnson refers, to examine their own collective heart and soul, I would add that they simply did not examine them very well, or could not effect from such examination an appropriate level of psychological comfort. What stopped them, ironically, was the psychological confusion, not balance, caused by the conflicts of presumption, the belief into depravity of the human soul, and the belief in a predetermined spiritual existence.

It is this last tenet—predestination—that causes the most problems, for with free will an individual—or a society—might be able to adjust to its dual nature of good and evil. Without free will, however, one's existence remains illusory and dreamlike, not substantial. To put the question of simultaneously maintaining a belief in goodness and intractable, deserved damnation in another way, how can a person who believes that his soul is depraved possibly prevail over Satan—or psychologically adjust to the existence of human evil—when he meets him? From a devout Puritan’s perspective, this question could be answered: he does not prevail over Satan (he does not achieve a psychological balance). God triumphs over Satan, and one accepts the reality of God's control and lives according to the covenant. But, Hawthorne asks, what about the individuals and the society that are spiritually and psychologically confused chiefly because they accept the doctrine of predetermination? How do they, under their indoctrinated conditions, prevail when they face Satan? They cannot! Consider Goodman Brown. On the surface he accepts his faith, believing it will sustain him through his dealings with the devil. That is, he believes that love of Christ, the Covenant of Grace, and charity to his fellow Puritans will see him through. He believes, in other words, that his Puritan community is on the path of goodness and righteousness and can thus confront and overcome human evil (the devil) when they meet it (him). But Brown's Faith forsakes him. And it is not simply that his faith leaves him when he breaks the covenant, and without that faith and the power of God it brings through the covenant he cannot stand up to the devil. Rather, it is impossible for him to maintain such faith in the goodness and righteousness of his errand when his doctrine insists simultaneously that he is damned and that he has not the will to do anything about it. The fatal flaw is not in Brown, but in the ideology of his religion, and in this case in the ideology of the “Civil Body Politic” as well. So, for Brown, as a result of the forces of the ideology he lives under, “his dying hour was gloom” (90).

Unfortunately, the gloom is not for Brown alone, but is apparently extended to his progeny and his community: “when he had lived long, and was borne to his grave, a hoary corpse, followed by Faith, an aged woman, and children and grand-children, a godly procession, besides neighbors, not a few, they carved no hopeful verse upon his tom-
stone” (89-90). It is not Brown who determined that there was no hope, nor is it God. It is “they,” Faith, progeny, and neighbors. Brown is arguably responsible for his personal hopelessness, though as a product of his society, he, alone, I would argue, is not singly responsible. His community, his religion, his society determined the gloom of his dying hour. And apparently, because “they” carve no hopeful verse in the tombstone—the only symbol of social documentation in the story and a lastling symbol at that, “they” will continue—to perpetuate this hopelessness, through religious and social doctrines that are self-condemning. Of course, the place and time period of the story’s setting, Salem around the witch outbreak of 1692, also suggest the destructive force of Puritan belief. The combination of presumption and predetermined damnation causes an internal psychological conflict, as in Brown, but it also causes a communal hysteria. The fear, perhaps paranoia is not too strong a word, that is nurtured by the conflict eventually results in a need to purge the evil by scapegoating members of the community. Brown, and other community members like him, could easily attempt to preserve their own sense of goodness by accusing—and in some instances hanging—their fellows in Christ. The Puritans will continue to perpetuate this hopelessness and self-damnation, as they have perpetuated their relationship with the devil from grandfather to father to Brown, if they maintain their conflicting beliefs in election and damnation, and particularly if they maintain their doctrine of divine predetermination over free will. But with free will, there is a chance that they can shape their own actions and beliefs so as to allow the balance between election and human evil.

14 The devil’s staff symbolically underscores the possibility of reconciling this dual nature. As in chapter seven of Exodus there are two types of staffs, both turning into serpents: the staffs of pharaoh's sorcerers become serpents, connoting evil (however, they are impotent because only magical or illusory), but the staff of Aaron becomes a serpent which swallows up those serpents of the sorcerers, connoting good conquering evil. The devil's staff in “Young Goodman Brown” can be either, or both. As I read the story, it is most like the sorcerers’ evil staffs. It is, the narrator informs us, “one of the rods which its owner had formerly lent to the Egyptian Magi” (79). As such, it implies that the Puritan doctrine (linked for generations with Satan) results, as would the sorcerers’ serpents, in destruction of community, neighbors, and individuals. Perhaps a portent of such destruction is signified by the devil giving to Brown the second staff (the walking stick) he makes of a maple branch. Were the Puritan doctrine different, however, acknowledging freedom of will and enabling good works, the staff could be like Aaron's and a symbol of good. The possibility of the second staff being like Aaron's implies a moral lesson in the reverse. That is, “Young Goodman Brown” depicts the forces that shape individual destiny and demonstrates how individuals become victims of those forces. It shows Hawthorne’s readers, in other words, what to be wary of, what to avoid. And most importantly, it instructs them that they have the power to change their destiny if they understand how those forces operate on them so that they are able to confront and resist them when they threaten their existence.

15 Ever the moralist, Hawthorne does not merely condemn. One of the main functions of allegory, he believes, is to point out the path to goodness. Free will is key to Brown’s and his readers’ worldly as well as spiritual salvation. Had Brown believed in free will, he could, possibly, have escaped his end. Had he free will, then confronting evil in himself, in his ancestors, and in his religious teachers would not be traumatizing because there would be a viable, possible alternative to damnation, viable because one could actually do
something about it. As the narrator emphasizes near the end of the story, “Be it so, if you
will” (89, my emphasis). But free will means one has to earn, or make, one's salvation. It
does not necessarily solve Brown's problem by guaranteeing him salvation, for earning
salvation is no easy task. It means that one has to confront and overcome that evil that he
meets in the forest, or the evil that is in each human heart. To do this he needs help, and
it is not much help to simply condemn. But an understanding of how ideologies can be
destructive, even when on the surface they appear to be good, is certainly instructive and
helpful. Knowing how an individual arrives at his convictions allows him to change them.
So in “Young Goodman Brown” the reader is not given a moral model of right behavior,
but is given a “sympathetic” model. In the very condemnation of Brown, in the devil's
words at Brown's induction into the cult, is the key:

... By the sympathy of your human hearts for sin, ye shall scent out all the places—
whether in church, bed-chamber, street, field, or forest—where crime has been
committed, and shall exult to behold the whole earth one stain of guilt, one mighty
blood-spot. Far more than this! It shall be yours to penetrate, in every bosom, the
deep mystery of sin, the fountain of all wicked arts, and which inexhaustibly
supplies more evil impulses than human power—than my power, at its utmost!—can
make manifest in deeds...

... Depending upon one another's hearts, ye had still hoped, that virtue were not
all a dream. Now are ye undeceived! Evil is the nature of mankind. Evil must be
your only happiness. Welcome, again, my children, to the communion of your race!'

(87, 88)

I read this passage thus: accepting sin (evil), but not as the unalterable condemnation of
the depraved soul, one becomes “undeceived.” Accepting evil rather as something that
can be overcome, as something that an individual or community or nation has the power
—the will—to defeat, one or one's community becomes, as the devil himself admits above,
more powerful than the devil. In that sense “Evil” must be Brown's and the Puritan's
“only happiness,” meaning that facing it with humility and conquering it (which is
possible if one's doctrine acknowledges free will), Brown and his community can escape
the presumption and the debilitating effects of the opposing beliefs in election and
inescapable damnation. From a Puritan perspective this belief or conversion to the
Arminian heresy is diabolical, but from another perspective it is liberating. Yes, with free
will comes the danger of doing great harm to one another: they can “penetrate” evil into
“every bosom” with a power greater than Satan's. That is, they can place evil in one
another's hearts. But the Puritan doctrine drives them to do that anyway, without any
effective recourse to change. Or they can “penetrate, in every bosom, the deep mystery of
sin.” That is, they can see through or understand the sin in each other's hearts, so that,
unlike Brown in his inability to see beyond the evil, they can effectively confront it—not
forget about it, but forgive it in themselves and others. In this latter case, “Evil” can be
“happiness” in the sense that it can be conquered, not in the sense that it can be revealed
in. It can be happiness in the sense that understanding evil enables or empowers people
to understand, and achieve, its opposite. Brown's dying hour need not have been gloom,
had he and his community (“they”) the ability—which now thanks to the story the
nineteenth-century reader and the present day reader have—to see how the doctrinal
powers of his historical situation created him and his countrymen. Furthermore, the
combination of the allegorical and historical qualities of the story point out that it is not
only a self-awareness that Brown, or an individual, needs, but a social awareness and a
social responsibility to make broad changes for the better.
Since the Puritan mission was simultaneously ecclesiastical and civil, as the Mayflower Compact evinces, the presumption, hypocrisy, and “gloom” of the religion are shared by the government as well. Hawthorne implies this in Brown's and the devil's dialogue when they first meet in the story. After Brown's assertion of the righteousness of his religious settlement, the devil claims a friendship with “deacons from many a church; . . . the selectmen, of divers towns; . . . and a majority of the Great and General Court, . . . [and] the governor” (77). Initially shocked, Brown replies, “Howbeit, I have nothing to do with the governor and council; they have their own ways, and are not rule for a simple husbandman, like me” (77). But Brown, as a member of the Faith, does have something to do with the government. More exactly, the government has much to do with Brown.

Brown's government's blend of the civil and the ecclesiastical is particularly destructive. As history shows, especially the witchcraft trials of 1692, and as William Bradford demonstrates, the practicalities of the civil government or of the social welfare also impinge on the ideals of the religious principles. In terms of what Hawthorne knew of the witch outbreak of 1692, it is quite easy to conclude that Christian principles of love and charity for one's fellows were perverted by the accusations of witchcraft based on spectral evidence. Samuel Sewall's public admission of culpability for his participation as a judge in the 1692 Salem witch trials, for example, demonstrates that he saw the performance of his duties as grievously sinful. Furthermore, Carol F. Karlsen demonstrates in The Devil in the Shape of a Woman that during the New England witch trials of the late seventeenth century religious beliefs and fear of witches were, in effect, used for very worldly purposes: the legal machinery was employed against “women without brothers or women without sons” in order to ensure “the orderly transmission of property from one generation of males to another” (116). In Book 2, Chapters 23 and 34 of his history (especially in chapter 23) Bradford laments the fact that the material need for land causes the dispersal of church members, the splitting of the church, and finally the moving of the seat of the church to a new location.

A more workable system is for a government to be separate from religion, and Hawthorne suggests such a separation in a few ways. Brown's disavowal of a connection between his government and his good, religious self (cited in the paragraph immediately above) is the most direct. Later in the story, when Brown refers to the "covenant" (76) he has kept by meeting the Devil in the forest, Hawthorne implies the legalism of Puritanism—a fundamentalist combining of religion and politics. It is ironic, of course, that Brown's covenant with the Devil rather than with God is emphasized, the irony suggesting, perhaps, that the real evil is in the combination of civil law and religious belief. The story underscores this idea when the Devil aligns himself with both civil and ecclesiastical aspects of the government. He boasts to Brown,

I have a very general acquaintance here in New England. The deacons of many a church have drunk the communion wine with me; the selectmen, of divers towns, make me their chairman; and a majority of the Great and General Court are firm supporters of my interest. The governor and I, too—but these are state-secrets.”

The wrongs, or the Devilish evil, of Puritanism which the story notes are the result of this religious and political combination: Brown's grandfather's whipping of the Quaker woman, his father's burning of an Indian village, and the Salem witch trials of 1692, which took place at the Salem meeting house, seat of religious and political government in the community. This meeting house is mentioned twice in the story, once near the beginning and again near the end (see pp. 75 and 89). Finally, the reference the Devil makes to the
Old South church of Boston suggests a separation of church and state. Old South was founded in descent in 1669 when twenty-eight members of the First Church of Boston seceded to form the Third Church, which became known as Old South. These secessionists favored the Halfway Covenant, which can be seen as a dissolution of earlier, strident Puritan doctrine about baptism and church membership. The Boston Tea Party of 1773, which helped to start the American Revolution, was also ignited by the Sons of Liberty at Old South. The history of this church, therefore, suggests a breaking down of Puritanism and a breaking away of it from the state, which the American Revolution in (1775-1783) helped to accomplish.

Were church and state separated, there would be more of an opportunity for justice for all because the governors would less likely be blinded by the hypocrisy resulting from the conflicting and confusing Puritan ideology. The logical extension of Brown's situation to America's, then, is this: Brown's complacency and presumption and hypocrisy are America's complacency and presumption and hypocrisy, and the results for Brown and America alike are morally destructive.

But a theocracy, which the Puritans had in mind, cannot simply proclaim its belief in free will, especially since Christian theology as a whole—whether Calvinist-Puritan, Quaker, or Roman Catholic—denies the ability of humans on their own to earn salvation or to absolve themselves of original sin. What means were available in the nineteenth century, in Hawthorne's mind, to allow such a doctrinal shift? Perhaps a budding American Transcendentalism. Whereas Hawthorne could not yet have been aware of Ralph Waldo Emerson's writings (whose pamphlet Nature was not published until the year following the publication of “Young Goodman Brown”), he was most likely aware of, and possibly influenced by, the Boston-centered, Trinitarian-Unitarian debates of the 1820s. In her biography of Sophia Hawthorne (Nathaniel's wife), Patricia Dunlavy Valenti notes that in a letter written in 1823 Elizabeth Peabody assigns her younger fourteen-year-old sister, Sophia, a reading list, which includes published letters debating the nature of childhood innocence. The Trinitarian Leonard Woods argued the natural tendency in children toward evil, whereas the Unitarian, Henry Ware, argued “that children are born innocent and through free will constructed the quality of their characters” (8).

Ware was minister of Second Church in Boston in 1829 when Ralph Waldo Emerson was ordained to that church, becoming Ware's colleague and apparent successor. In October of 1832 Emerson reached a seminal point in his thinking and broke from the Unitarian church over the issue of his administering the Lord's Supper. Though “apt to feel that in other hands than theirs [the Lord's Supper] easily became a superstitious practice” about which they were uneasy, Unitarians, according to Ralph L. Rusk, “generally wanted to keep the sacrament as a sacred feast” (160). Emerson, however, would not capitulate to administering the feast, arguing that Jesus, “in beginning the rite of the Lord's Supper, was merely celebrating the Passover with his disciples. His remarks at the time were nothing but the figurative language he was constantly using” (Rusk 163). Thus asserting his own understanding, Emerson concluded that the rite “was without valid authority. It was also positively harmful” (Rusk 163). These self-reliant ideas grew, and a few years later Emerson published Nature (1836), the first full statement of his Transcendental philosophy, which provided the intellectual foundation for optimism and man's control of his own destiny.

Though Emerson maintained himself for some years following 1832 by intermittent, substitute preaching, in effect, his resignation from the Unitarian church removes for
him the figure of Christ from the concept of God. And when Emerson states in *Nature*, “The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me. I am part or particle of God,” he replaces Christ as a necessity to God’s grace with a human being’s own self-determination and advancement to the spirit. These concepts in *Nature*, along with Emerson’s insistence that the individual in his soul was innately good, articulated a belief that could offer American culture at large a freedom of will. *Nature* was, in essence, a treatise emphatically proclaiming a type of democracy of the soul, an ideal of *every man’s* ability to freely will his own future.

25 It would have been difficult, indeed, for Hawthorne to be unaware of such protracted, public, pervasive, and, as in Emerson’s case, life-changing arguments. Furthermore, Hawthorne would likely have been sympathetic to the freer Unitarian position since soon after publishing “Young Goodman Brown” (November 11, 1837, to be precise), he befriended and was befriended by the Peabody sisters, who, especially Elizabeth, were also sympathetic to such concepts and who had moved from Salem to Lancaster in 1820. The story “Young Goodman Brown” itself dramatically emphasizes a transcendental act of the imagination, an assertion of the will to create a new reality. The entire scene of the witch meeting, complete with flaming trees and a baptismal bowl of blood on the stone altar, vanishes, replaced by a glen empty of people, “chill and damp” rock, and a tree bathed in “the coldest dew” (88). The narrator asks, “Had Goodman Brown fallen asleep in the forest, and only dreamed a wild dream of a witch-meeting?” And, he answers, “Be it so, if you will. But, alas! it was a dream of evil omen for young Goodman Brown. A stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man, did he become, from that night of that fearful dream” (89). Brown created his own reality with his will, uncontrolled and unconscious though his creative act was. The key is the will. The narrator says, “Be it so, if you will,” implying that there is another choice. A different act of will, perhaps the conscious and disciplined Emersonian act of turning away from the sanctioned religious doctrine and toward the divine potential in man, would allow a different, an optimistic, reality.

26 Thus, Hawthorne’s story can be read, and legitimately, as being didactically moral. On one level the moral is simply “forewarned is forearmed.” More specifically it might be this: do not be as complacent and presumptuous as Goodman Brown because it will only get you into trouble, or as put with sophisticated humor by Colacurcio, “the history of the lapsed Faith of Puritanism remains a capital way of learning the benefit of doubt” (59). But, as Colacurcio knows and writes about at length, there is much more to this story, and I would suggest that a broader-reaching moral stems from the story’s portrayal of how ideology effects and affects incipient and future American society and its members. This moral is not so simple as the one that suggests to an individual that if he remains healthily skeptical and maintains a belief in his ability to will change, he can in fact change: that is, his dying hour, if he wills otherwise, will not be gloom.

27 And with this moral extended to a social level, it is even harder to enact. The situation is not so simple as this: if an individual changes, American society will change. Maybe this process for social change can work, but not very quickly, as Hester Prynne later informs us: “She assured [her visitors] . . . of her firm belief, that, at some brighter period, when the world should be grown ripe for it, in Heaven’s own time, a new truth would be revealed” (*Scarlet Letter* 263). Not only is this truth postponed until some vague, “brighter period,” but that period is even qualified—twice! The question becomes, can such change occur in the one-hundred fifty or more years between the setting of the short story and
the time of its being written? That is, has America in the nineteenth century accepted free will—rejected natural depravity—to the extent that it can shape its own destiny? And furthermore, will that destiny lead the nation to salvation: that is, allow it to fulfill the promises stated in The Declaration of Independence of equality and the “unalienable Rights” of “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”? Hawthorne does not answer these questions, but he does pose them for application to and consideration in the nineteenth century. In other words, the situation of the reader in a later historical period than the seventeenth century is Brown's situation: can a nineteenth-century reader, or a twentieth- or twenty-first-century reader for that matter, with the historical and cultural knowledge that Brown lacked, determine his own destiny and obtain happiness rather than gloom? Such a reality at least seems possible. And this possibility is not the faith in progress in nineteenth-century terms of Manifest Destiny nor in seventeenth-century terms of Mission, but it is faith in democracy—in freedom of thought and spirit that allows one to question and therefore more fully understand and possibly subvert the determining forces of the ideologies one lives in and with.

While attending Bowdoin College, in 1824 Hawthorne, as a member of the Athenean Society along with future politicians who were and remained his friends, worked for the election of Jackson. Though John Quincy Adams won that election by electoral vote (Jackson having the majority of the popular vote), Jackson succeeded in the election of 1828, holding the office of president for two terms from 1829 to 1837. According to Philip Jenkins, Jackson won office by “mobilizing social groups and regions that felt themselves to be the victims of surviving privilege in American society; the west against the east; urban labourers against employers, farmers against financiers” (97). He continues to note the onset of populism during the Jacksonian era: “Presidential electors now tended to be chosen by popular vote rather than by state legislatures” (97), and the Jacksonian spoils system “was now linked to a democratic and anti-elitist theory that held that any man was as technically qualified as another to hold office” (97-98). In short, “Jacksonian democracy took politics into everyday life” (98). Clarifying his veto of the Bank of the United States, Jackson proclaimed,

In full enjoyment of the gifts of Heaven and the fruits of superior industry, economy, and virtue, every man is equally entitled to protection by law; but when the laws undertake to add to these natural and just advantages, artificial distinctions, to grant titles, gratuities, and exclusive privileges, to make the rich richer and the potent more powerful, the humble members of society—the farmers, mechanics, and laborers... have a right to complain of the injustice of their Government. (quoted in Mayfield, 120; my emphasis)

Thus, Jackson proclaimed and stood for a democracy of the common man.

How does the story “Young Goodman Brown” suggest this historical application to the nineteenth century? Brown's circumstances reflect the political situation of the late 1820s and 1830s, the rise of the common man in the populist democracy ushered in by Andrew Jackson. For instance, Hawthorne's use of “Goodman,” the title for a common man like today's “Mister,” and the common surname surely associate Brown with the average person, as well as evoke the allegorical tradition of the Everyman of fifteenth and sixteenth-century English morality plays. Recall, Brown argues to the devil that he (Brown) has nothing to do with the government, but, as I have said, the government has to do with Brown—in the seventeenth century of American Puritanism and in the nineteenth century of Hawthorne.
Furthermore, the tumult of the *vox populi* of the new Jacksonian democracy may be heard in the cacophonous voices emanating from the cloud passing over Brown in the forest:

Aloft in the air, as if from the depths of the cloud, came a confused and doubtful sound of voices. Once, the listener fancied that he could distinguish the accents of town’s-people of his own, men and women, both pious and ungodly, many of whom he had met at the communion-table, and had seen others rioting at the tavern. The next moment, so indistinct were the sounds, he doubted whether he had heard aught but the murmur of the old forest, whispering without a wind. Then came a stronger swell of those familiar tones, heard daily in the sunshine, at Salem village . . . . There was one voice, of a young woman . . . . And all the unseen multitude, both saints and sinners, seemed to encourage her onward. (82)

Such loud, discordant, and threatening voices may be likened to the unschooled, uncouth, impious, and riotous voice of the common man coming into his own in Jacksonian America. This new democratic voice could certainly sound dissonant after the educated eloquence of the drafters of the Declaration of Independence and the framers of the Constitution. Such unruly voices, however, could lead to self-government as easily as they could to a self-destruction like that allegorically represented through communion with Satan in the woods or through a “dying hour [of] gloom” (90). With a new optimism and “faith” in human control, which was budding in the debate over free-will in Boston, the result does not have to be self-destruction, as the meeting in the forest may not have “in reality” taken place. The result could be self-determination, self-government, for the greater good.

That Hawthorne is writing about a democracy is implied yet further. Though Brown denies his connection to the government, he is, perhaps it is not too much to suggest, part of the government. Second, consider the description of the crowd gathered around the rock altar in the woods near the end of the story:

Among them . . . appeared faces . . . which, Sabbath after Sabbath, looked devoutly heavenward, and benignantly over the crowded pews, from the holiest pulpits in the land. Some affirm that the lady of the governor was there. At least, there were high dames well known to her, and wives of honored husbands, and widows, a great multitude, and ancient maidens, all of excellent repute, and fair young girls . . . . But, irreverently consorting with these grave, reputable and pious people, these elders of the church, these chaste dames and dewy virgins, there were men of dissolute lives and women of spotted fame, wretches given over to all mean and filthy vice, and suspected even of horrid crimes. It was strange to see, that the good shrank not from the wicked, nor were the sinners abashed by the saints. Scattered, also, among their pale-faced enemies, were the Indian priests, or powows, who had often scared their native forest with more hideous incantations than any known to English witchcraft. (84-85)

Superficially, the description appears to mix the righteous with the profane. But the heathen and profane beings are only so in the eyes of the Puritans, such segregation being another sign of Puritan hypocrisy, I would suggest. Another way to see this group is as a cross-section of a nineteenth-century American democracy in its ideal inclusiveness. It includes peoples of different continents, races, cultures, genders, ages, social ranks, and marital and sexual status. But it is the Puritan doctrine of Election that causes the segregation and hypocrisy, for the Puritan distinction separating the two segments of the group is that between “sinner” and “saints.” Their very unchristian doctrine has separated humanity rather than joined it together.
This result of the doctrine, of the contradiction between election and inescapable damnation, could easily be construed as creating a “loathful brotherhood,” as the narrator calls this group (86). But not loathful because blasphemous. Loathful because self-prescribed and self-condemned. And Brown, as an individual member of such a “congregation” (86), would certainly have cause to feel a “loathful brotherhood” with his community members. But this “loathful brotherhood” has the potential to become a true brotherhood, a democratic community or nation, wherein the people would have equality and freedom regardless of class, race, gender, age, or marital status.

How valid is the history “Young Goodman Brown”? Is it as valid, for instance, as an historical account of the Puritan endeavor and the dilemma imposed by their doctrine as a history by George Bancroft, or William Bradford, or Cotton Mather? It is certainly an extremely fanciful, even fantastic, story, with staffs crawling away like snakes, with trees and rocks ablaze only to be damp and cool to the touch in the passing of an instant. The narrator of the story asks a similar question: “Had Goodman Brown fallen asleep in the forest, and only dreamed a wild dream of a witch-meeting?” (89) The story's answer to both questions is similar. With a significant play on the notion of free “will”—it is this: “Be it so, if you will. But, alas! it was a dream of evil omen for young Goodman Brown. A stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man, did he become, from the night of that fearful dream” (89). And Brown continues thus until his dying hour of gloom. His life was a dying gloom because of that “dream.” The point, obviously, is that the actuality of an occurrence makes little difference. It is the effect that counts. And, as is the relation between dream and reality, so is the relation between the unconscious and reality—between the collective unconscious of the community or nation and the reality that unconscious constructs.

Likewise is the relation between fiction and history. Past events influence our present lives. Whether the history is personal, familial, regional, or national; whether it occurred within our view or beyond it so that we had to hear or read about it; whether it occurred during our lifetime or before so was brought down to us written or spoken, implied or explicit; no matter our direct or indirect relationship to the event, so long as we act according to its precepts, its existence is realized. Likewise, constructed principles, doctrines and ideology influence our present lives. Whether an event actually occurred or not, whether a principle was actually manifest or not, is of little consequence. So long as we act according to its dictates or principles, it was and is real.

This is the essence of Hawthorne's little allegory of faith. According to “Young Goodman Brown,” the doctrine of the Puritans created a communal psyche of complacency, presumption, and hypocrisy clashing with the self-loathing of total depravity. The result was a moral confusion of truth, right and wrong, good and evil. As this psychological portrait of Goodman Brown is extended to the community—emphasized by Hawthorne’s chosen setting of the 1692 Salem witch trials, the psychological portrait of the community extends to the psychological portrait of the new nation. At the writing of “Young Goodman Brown” America was sixty years old. Its national character was still being defined—created. Since Hawthorne accepted the historical view that the Puritan founders of the nation passed on their character to the national identity and that that character would be passed on to their national descendents, this psychological portrait becomes that of America itself.

The story functions as an allegory, invoking the moral tradition of Everyman, which is appropriate to the new democracy—a government of the people, the common man. The
allegorical symbolism suggests that America in the first one-third of the nineteenth century, because of its intellectual and psychological inheritance, was in danger of confusing—and thereby forsaking—its basic principles of justice and equality for the individual. It could confuse its good principles of right with evil ones. It could become hypocritical.

The solution to this moral crisis was to reimagine the morality of the newly created nation by bringing to consciousness its unconscious, but debilitating ideology and by replacing that ideology with a new, optimistic, vision of hope and control of one’s identity, morality, and future. So, “Young Goodman Brown” is not merely a story about the consequences of keeping or losing one’s faith. Nor is it merely a rendition of the psychological state of third generation Puritans, nor a diatribe against American Puritanism, nor a recounting of waning religious passion. But, incorporating all of these and more, it is a story about the severity of American cultural influences on the identity of its citizenry, about how those influences are internalized for an “American,” and about how they effect and affect that individual’s interaction with society. Because the new democracy is formed by the nation’s combination of individuals, it is also a story about how ideas effect and affect the new nation. It is a short history of an evolving America as Hawthorne saw it from his early nineteenth-century, New England vantage point.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. Much has been written about this story, and perhaps there is little “new” to say about it. It has been read from nearly every conceivable critical perspective, from New Critical to post-structuralist, and it has been interpreted as propounding several, often opposing, meanings. I trust that my reading of this allegorical history, however, differs from other readings of this story not only in that it offers a viable understanding of how the three primary Hawthornian qualities of history, allegory, and moralism combine, indeed depend on one another, but that it suggests how Hawthorne’s allegory functions as history. While the following is not a complete list of the readings of “Young Goodman Brown,” it includes representative and the most notable ones. New Critical readings: Abel and Matheson. Psychological: Crews and Loving. Historical: Bell, Christophersen, Colacurcio, Doubleday, Eberwein, Erisman, Franklin, Fussell, Johnson, Leverenz, Levin, Shear. Narratological: Dunne.

2. Among recent critics making this assumption are the following: Bercovitch, Daly, Diffee, Grossman, Johnston, Milder, and Millington.

3. One should also see the following three articles, which recognize the achievement of Bercovitch’s book but also present its shortcomings: Millington, Milder, Johnston.
4. Jean Fagan Yellin, it is worth noting, implicitly disagrees with Grossman’s reading. Rather, making an excellent case that Hawthorne was aware not only of the issues of black slavery but of many particular anti-slavery movements in his immediate vicinity, she asserts that Hawthorne avoided dealing with the issue of black slavery. While each of her two articles on this topic offers a slightly different perspective, “Hawthorne and the American National Sin” is more focused on Hawthorne particularly.

5. Bancroft’s first history, which included the American Puritans, appeared in 1837, and Hawthorne’s friendship with him did not develop until after this year. “Young Goodman Brown” first appeared in 1835. However, the concepts that Bancroft and other American historians accepted were very much part of the social discourse at the time Hawthorne was writing the short story. Bancroft retained those concepts throughout his career and summarized them in History of the Colonization of the United States. He describes the North American continent as an “unproductive waste” until European settlement changed it. “It is the object of the present work,” he writes, “to explain how the change in the condition of our land has been accomplished; and, as the fortunes of a nation are not under the control of blind destiny, to follow steps by which a favouring Providence, calling our institutions into being, has conducted the country to its present happiness and glory” (1, 4). He notes, also, the importance of freedom to the formation of the nation, writing, “The spirit of the colonies demanded freedom from the beginning” (1).

6. Hawthorne notes history’s lack of life in several places, including Septimius Felton (The Elixir of Life Manuscripts 15-16) and “The Whole History of Grandfather’s Chair” and “Biographical Stories for Children” (True Stories from History and Biography 5-6, 213-14).

7. By “actual” I mean persons and events the reality of which is based on fact, on corporeal or material existence. By “real” and “true” I mean persons and events that have a being which is constructed through text and/or context and which is accepted as having the possibility of a viable existence in a factual, material world. Thompson is succinctly informative about the relationship between history and fiction in Hawthorne’s early tales. He writes in The Art of Authorial Presence, “the literary (or the fictional) and the historical are counterpointed yet conflated in Hawthorne’s early writings—indeed, throughout his career” (204). And he continues to explain: “Fiction and history differ presumably in the ontological reality of the initiating event . . . . But how does one get back to the real historical event when it is constituted by a series of texts? For Hawthorne the fictional construct truth is always an as if proposition. Rather than monologically presenting one side (one interpretation, e.g., of historical process), Hawthorne dialogically dramatizes doubleness, multiplicity, and contradictoriness. In this way romantic fiction is realistic and true. That is, true romance is historically faithful and faithfully fictional. A true romantic fiction would be faithful to both the facts and the romantic myths and to the subjective interpretations that accrete around those historical facts and those myths, becoming part of them. Such romance is truer than mere factual recounting, truer than free-floating romance cut loose from local legendary history. The true romance of history is acknowledged to be factual and fictional, framed by the recognition of the ineradicable intertwining of fact and fiction in the human imagination” (235-36).

8. “Young Goodman Brown” functions aesthetically as Bercovitch sees that The Scarlet Letter does: “To understand the novel historically is to recognize that we learn most about background and sources from its aesthetic techniques. And to appreciate it aesthetically is to recognize that what is richest and most compelling about the novel lies in its profound ideological engagement” (18).

9. As with The Scarlet Letter, some critics have recently read “Young Goodman Brown” as reflecting American history in the nineteenth century. See particularly Emily Miller Budick (87-97), David Leverenz, and Harold K. Bush, Jr.

10. The historical perspective of the separatist William Bradford is well known, but it is perhaps worth referring the reader to some chapters from Book 1 of Of Plymouth Plantation: Chapter 1
starts with the acknowledgment of the continuing wars between the Puritans and Satan. Chapter 4 first suggests the wild quality of America by describing its “savage and brutish” and “wild” inhabitants. Chapter 7 includes a copy of a letter from John Robinson that specifically denies that the immigrating Puritans have “presumption” in “their hearts.” Chapter 9 contains the famous quotation describing the New World as a “hideous and desolate wilderness.” Whereas the overriding tone of John Winthrop’s “A Model of Christian Charity” is arguably humble, as is appropriate to the subject matter, the sense of mission that is highlighted smacks of presumption and complacency. So do many of Bradford’s earlier chapters of Plymouth Plantation, especially the passages describing Bradford’s satisfaction when sailors die after taunting the Puritans, how the sailors are reduced to fearing for their own lives, and the attitude that allows the Puritans to take the food of the natives at such an unproductive and inhospitable time of the year. It is the Puritans’ faith in Divine Providence that allows such thoughts and actions.

11. I do not wish to discount the extraordinary scholarship and convincing interpretations of David Levin and Michael J. Colacurcio of specter evidence and “Visible Sanctity” and of Brown’s representing a third generation, Halfway Covenant, Puritan. My understanding and appreciation of “Young Goodman Brown” owes far more to these scholars than the few mentions of their works in this article might imply. I do wish to suggest, however, that the allegorical nature of the story is inclusive enough to also allow a more extended reading of history.

12. A couple of instances from Bradford’s Plymouth Plantation illustrate this. Book 1, Chapter 9 tells of a young sailor who berated the Puritans, but “it pleased God before they came half seas over, to smite this young man with a grievous disease, of which he died in a desperate manner” (139). Bradford is just a bit too gratified by this young man’s consignment to hell. Chapter 10 relates an anecdote about Divine Providence providing the Puritans with food: this food was clearly the winter stores of the natives, whom the Puritans deprived when they took it.

13. See Franklin, who argues that the catechism used during the time the story is set, John Cotton’s Milk for Babes, balances references to the “possibility of salvation” with references to “humanity’s certain sinful nature” (?1). In Franklin’s view Brown fails the doctrine, not vice versa. But my point is exactly that such a balance, though it might be successfully maintained in individuals and with enough social reenforcement in the society at large, was not in Hawthorne’s view so maintained, neither individually nor collectively. Therefore, because such balancing failed, the conflicts of the doctrine itself caused Brown’s damnation. Or put another way, if you and/or your communal religion believe in human depravity and predetermination, you and/or your community damn yourself.

14. This insistence on free will most likely comes from nineteenth-century America’s rendition of the Puritan mission the “faith” in human progress.

15. See The Mayflower Compact in Bradford, Book 2, Chapter 11.

16. See Levin and Colacurcio.

17. See Sewall’s diary entry for January 15, 1697, in which he copies the notice that his minister read from the pulpit and which was posted publically the day before.

18. It is not necessary to my argument that Hawthorne actually knew of these historical particulars that I have appealed to or that he interpreted them in precisely the same way. My point is that Hawthorne understood the workings of history in a similar way, recognizing that religious principles are often forsaken for practical concerns.

19. Bush convincingly connects the appearance of Roger Williams in “Endicott and the Red Cross” with the idea of the separation of church and state. See pages 144-46.

20. Consider also that the Mayflower Compact (see Bradford) links the Puritan’s religious beliefs with their “Covenant[ing] and Combin[ing] ourselves into a Civil Body Politic,” which may “frame . . . laws . . . Constitutions and Offices” (182; see 181-82. Winthrop, too, proclaims loudly in the last three pages of “A Model of Christian Charity” that the Puritans are come to America to form a “government both civil and ecclesiastical” (223; see 223-25).
21. See the website for the Old South Church: www.oldsouth.org
22. These friends were Jonathan Cilley, who was to become a United States congressman; Horatio Bridge, who was to hold a high office in the Navy Department in Washington, D.C., and Franklin Pierce, fourteenth president of the United States.
23. See also Wilentz, pp. 309-311, 312-314, and passim; and Watson, pp. 96-131 and 132-171.

ABSTRACTS

Cet article, ancré dans la critique littéraire traditionnelle, a pour thèse que la nouvelle “Young Goodman Brown” est un récit historique. Pour être plus précis, cet article peut être considéré comme une relecture historique qui, néanmoins, s'appuie sur les interprétations traditionnelles du texte. Cette association de perspectives témoigne de la richesse du texte et rend évidentes les nouvelles approches historiques de l’auteur lui-même. La thèse de cet article peut se résumer de la façon suivante : "Young Goodman Brown" se penche sur l’impact important que peuvent avoir les influences culturelles sur l’individu, sur l’intériorisation de ces influences par l’individu et enfin sur comment ces influences créent et affectent les relations de cet individu avec sa société. Par extension, cet article analyse la façon dont les idées créent et affectent une société. En résumé, "Young Goodman Brown" est le condensé historique d’une culture, qui est la culture d’une Amérique démocratique et en pleine évolution.

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