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Recommended Citation

Harris, Mark, "A New Reading of 'Ethan Brand': The Failed Quest" (1994). *Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 27.
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A New Reading of “Ethan Brand”: The Failed Quest

by Mark Harris

Many analysts of Hawthorne’s “Ethan Brand” have agreed that the story is a cautionary tale about Hawthorne’s Unpardonable Sin, divorcing one’s head from one’s heart and oneself from humanity. They read the story as a serious treatise, and Brand’s commission of the Unpardonable Sin goes virtually unquestioned. The assumption that Brand has in fact “produced the Unpardonable Sin” (285) needs examination, however. I am convinced that Brand has failed and that his tale is as ironic as it is serious. Ethan Brand begins his search as nothing but a common man and returns from it a common failure, and *this*, rather than his successful commission of the Sin, drives Brand to suicide.

Several details in “Ethan Brand” have led readers to believe that Brand’s search for the Unpardonable Sin succeeds: (1) At the kiln, just prior to his search, Brand meets with the Devil, who supposedly gets Brand started on his search; (2) there was always something special, even unique within Brand (the “solitary” and “meditative” limeburner) that led him to his search and is still evident in Brand when he returns to Graylock; (3) the narrator emphasizes the magnitude and importance of the Unpardonable Sin and Brand’s commission of it; (4) late in the story, the narrator states what the Unpardonable Sin is and that Brand has committed it; and (5) Brand commits suicide because he has committed the Unpardonable Sin. A careful examination of the story, however, reveals that all of these “facts” are false. Ethan Brand does not realize his dream of finding the Unpardonable Sin.

One of the alleged proofs of Brand’s finding the Sin is the supernatural help he gets from the Devil, with whom he has allegedly made a “compact” (Stein 102) at the limekiln, “the abode of the Devil” (Davison 261). However, nothing supernatural takes place at the kiln, and neither does the kiln have any causal function in Brand’s search. What we are told about Brand’s pre-search musings at the kiln is that “he had thrown his dark thoughts into the intense glow of [the] furnace, and melted them, as it were, into the one thought that took possession of his life” (272). Brand’s “thoughts” were “dark” *before* they ever entered the kiln; *they* entered the

kiln, rather than entering Brand from the kiln; and *he* figuratively “melted” his “dark thoughts” into one obsessive Dream.

The common conception is that the kiln is a gateway to hell, but the narrator describes the kiln in language reminiscent of his description of Bartram, perhaps the most natural, unspiritual character in the story: “It was . . . rude, round, . . . heavily built of rough stones” (272). The limekiln is neither unusual nor unique; rather, it is a tourist attraction: “There are many such limekilns in that tract of country . . . [which] afford points of interest to the wanderer among the hills” (272). And, when the narrator refers to the limekiln in conjunction with anything supernatural, he qualifies the reference: “[The limekiln] door . . . *seemed* to give admittance to the hillside; it *resembled* nothing so much as the private entrance to the infernal regions” (272; emphasis added). Brand himself (who should know if he had met the Devil at the limekiln) belittles the significance of the kiln, claiming to “have looked into many a human heart that was seven times hotter with sinful passions than yonder furnace is with fire” (277). Like the tail-chasing dog, Brand begins his futile search “of his own mere motion, and without the slightest suggestion from anybody else” (282).

Thus, no outside agent, spiritual or otherwise, endorses Brand’s dream or sets him on his search. And as Brand’s search starts without supernatural instigation, if it succeeds it does so without outside intervention. After his search’s alleged success, it is Brand alone who keeps himself from rejoining the ranks of humanity; he has “enveloped himself” in “the bleak and terrible loneliness” in which he is still encased after his search ends (284).

What, then, makes Brand chase after the Unpardonable Sin? We need look no further than the tail-chasing dog and the motive for his absurd chase: “[he] saw fit to render himself the object of public notice” (282). This empty motive for an empty quest fits Brand, explaining, among other things, why he has come back to his old town to be admired (“offering his rough head to be patted by any kindly hand that would take so much trouble” [282]) and why the negative reception he gets leads him to commit suicide.

That Brand’s search has no supernatural instigation does not necessarily mean that there is not something special or unique about Brand himself that would suggest he has risen above humanity by finding the Unpardonable Sin. But is there such a quality in Brand?

At the outset, Bartram sits “watching the same limekiln that had been the scene of Ethan Brand’s solitary and meditative life” (271), an act that links the two men, regardless of the apparent difference in their levels of perception. The narrator’s calling Brand’s life “solitary and meditative” seems to the romantic reader to set Brand apart, but after describing the limekiln as one of “many such” and as merely “afford[ing] points of interest,” the narrator calls every limeburner “the solitary man”; he adds that, as a rule, limeburning is “a lonesome, and when the character is inclined to thought,

may be an intensely thoughtful occupation" (272). Neither quality, being "solitary" or "meditative," makes Ethan Brand unique or special. Most limeburners are "solitary" and "lonesome," and many are "meditative."

Brand's laugh seems to evidence something supernatural or special about him, the true nature of which, in the view of some, only little Joe perceives. However, what causes Joe—whom the narrator calls "easily impressed and excitable" (282)—to stop playing when he hears Brand's laugh is not anything supernatural in it, but simply the incongruity Joe senses between what he recognizes as a laugh—which he knows is supposed to be a happy sound—and the sad tone of Brand's voice: "He does not laugh like a man that is glad. So the noise frightens me!" (271). Bartram, who is "obtuse," is also bothered by the laugh, in spite of the explanation with which he tries to allay little Joe's fears; when Brand laughs later, the narrator tells us that "it was the same slow, heavy laugh that had almost appalled the limeburner when it heralded the wayfarer's approach" (275). Little Joe's reaction to Brand's laugh, then, is not unique; if, as some suggest, little Joe has some sort of spiritual intuition, so does everyone else. More likely, Bartram's and little Joe's reactions are nothing more than the common human reaction to a not-uncommon human phenomenon, as the narrator suggests: "Laughter, when out of place, mistimed, or bursting forth from a disordered state of feeling may be the most terrible modulation of the human voice" (275). Brand's laugh is no more indicative of anything special in him than are the reactions of everyone who hears it. It should, however, cause us to question why this outwardly proud and supposedly successful dreamer seems mirthless and "gloomy" (273).

Brand's only other physical feature that might be construed as unusual and indicative of some supernatural quality is his eyes, "which were very bright" and "deeply sunken" (273). They are obviously physically striking, but Brand's eyes do not prove that he has committed the Unpardonable Sin. Interestingly, though the narrator observes about Brand that "To a careless eye, there appeared nothing very remarkable in his aspect" (273), he never adds that there is anything remarkable about Brand that a *careful* eye *would* see; the phrase "To a careless eye" may be the narrator's intentional deception, similar to misleading clues used by the narrator of "The Wives of the Dead." Bartram, for all his superstitious discomfort in being alone with Brand (which increases as Bartram partakes of the "black bottle" throughout the evening), nevertheless comes to "feel as if [Brand] were a sane and sensible man, after all" (274), i.e., normal. The village youth, also, see "nothing . . . very remarkable in [Brand's] aspect—nothing but a sunburnt wayfarer, in plain garb and dusty shoes, who sat looking into the fire as if he fancied pictures among the coals" (281). In everyone's eyes but his own, Brand is not unique or special. This fact should make us doubt the validity of his claims.

Confusion of Bartram's or Brand's voices with the narrator's has also contributed to the illusion that there is evidence Brand has found the Sin. Such confusion of voice leads readers to assume that they are supposed to accept Bartram's or Brand's perceptions. For example, it is superstitious Bartram, not the narrator, who, when left alone with Brand, feels "that he must now deal . . . with a man who, *on his own confession*, had committed the one only crime for which Heaven could afford no mercy" (275; emphasis added). This is Bartram's fear based on Brand's unproven claims; the narrator does not tell us that Brand has committed the Unpardonable Sin. And, to amend Jack B. Moore's statement (282) that *Brand* "says" he "evoked" "a fiend from the hot furnace of the limekiln . . . in order to confer with him about the Unpardonable Sin," it is from *Bartram's* thoughts, not from the narrator's or Brand's, that we get the legends that have evolved over the years about Brand's supposed meetings with the Devil at the kiln:

Bartram remembered the stories which had grown traditionary in reference to this strange man, who it was said, had conversed with Satan himself in the lurid blaze of this very kiln. The legend had seen matter of mirth heretofore, but looked grisly [to Bartram] now. (276)

The legend is fiction, and since the narrator wants it to be seen as such, he presents it (and all subsequent mention of Brand in connection with the Devil) in the context of dull, superstitious (and later, drunk) Bartram's thoughts. Nothing, then, special or supernatural, is evident in Brand either when his search begins or after it supposedly succeeds. And if nothing special inside or outside Brand was involved in his search, then the search itself lacks the significance Brand and many readers have attributed to it.

The very structure of "Ethan Brand" diminishes the importance of Brand's search for the Unpardonable Sin and its supposed moment of success. As Peter Thorslev notes, Hawthorne's

most usual method of de-emphasizing the "moment" is to have it occur antecedent to the story's main action. . . . Ethan Brand's decision to succumb to the particular "Idea that possessed his life," as well as most of the action dictated by that compulsion, are all antecedent to the action told in the tale. (149)

As Brand boasts to Bartram about his successful search for the Unpardonable Sin, the narrator simultaneously undercuts Brand's claims, suggesting in a scornful tone that Brand is not unique and has not been successful: "Ethan Brand [stood] erect, with a pride that distinguishes all enthusiasts of his stamp" (277). The terms "Pride" and "enthusiasts" suggest that Brand's dream of grandeur is self-delusion, while the words "distinguishes," "all," and "stamp" suggest that Brand is just one of many deluded people who are

basically the same. Brand's illusion, the "sin" he is perhaps most guilty of, is that he ever thought he was something other than an ordinary person. His later recognition that he is nothing but a common failure is what will cause him to kill himself.

The three villagers, whom critics have also sometimes misunderstood, function to attack the ridiculousness of Brand's Idea and his claims of success. They parallel Brand in that they, too, are types of one "stamp" rather than special in any way: the stage agent is "the present specimen of the genus" (278); Giles is labeled "Lawyer" (even after he stops being one); "the doctor" has no other appellation but that. The three are has-beens, failures, like Brand; what distinguishes them from Brand is that they are *acknowledged* failures. Because these men (and the tail-chasing dog) recognize their shortcomings, the townspeople allow them a degree of self-worth sufficient for their survival, giving the stage agent "great fame as a dry joker," calling Giles a lawyer "in courtesy," and imparting to the doctor "native gifts of healing, beyond any which medical science could impart" (278-79).

Contributing to the material failure of all three men and, ironically, now allowing them to live with their failure, is the "black bottle," which allows all humanity to create illusions that make reality more palatable (recall the passage in *Blithedale Romance* in which Coverdale approves of this property of alcohol). Since alcohol can thus unite people in acknowledging their common human frailties and failures, Brand, who (at this point) still refuses to acknowledge his Idea's failure, scoffs at and refuses it. The doctor then diagnoses Brand as having "no more found the Unpardonable Sin than yonder boy Joe has" and as being nothing "but a crazy fellow" (280), and I follow Alfred Levy in arguing that "the doctor be accepted as a valid spokesman[;] . . . by bringing him into direct contrast with Brand, Hawthorne has made him so" (190). By this point in the story, Brand has received sufficient rejection and disbelief from the narrator and the other characters to discredit him as a "valid spokesman" for the narrator, whereas the doctor represents the failed but united humanity that the narrator and Hawthorne seem to endorse. Brand's dream has not been realized, and the narrator wants us to know that.

No one but Brand places any importance on the Unpardonable Sin. Bartram may be "obtuse," but the laugh with which he mentions "The man that went in search of the Unpardonable Sin" (274) is typical of the responses to Brand. Thus, the ultimate irony may be that it would not matter even if Brand had found the Sin. Who cares? Have a drink!

However, Brand *wants* people to care, and paradoxically, this desire proves that he has not committed the Sin. To wit, why would a man who has divorced himself from human sympathy return to his fellows for their approval, unless he still desired that sympathy? Brand protests his uniqueness but willingly returns to the tasks of a lowly limeburner. Why would a man

who has left the Devil behind him be interested in trimming a lime fire? Why would one who had stood “on a starlit eminence” (284) again return to the company of ordinary people? A man who had rid himself of his desire for human sympathy would not return to his former village and his “own fireside” (273). Brand is mirthless because he has devoted 18 years of his life to a search that has failed, but also because he does not receive the welcome, approval, and awe that could restore his belief; these are what he has come back for. Brand has not found the Unpardonable Sin, and having failed, he returns to receive consolation by romanticizing himself and his search in the eyes of Graylock’s residents. To do so, he needs their awe and approval; he gets neither.

In analyzing the Puritan view of sin in relation to “Ethan Brand,” Michael Colacurcio notes that “in psychological practice, a wild, desperate, overly willful embracing of unconditional and irrevocable reprobation is probably no easier to protect from doubt or change of mood than the astonished and relieved acceptance of one’s election.” Ethan Brand’s “wild, desperate, overly willful embracing” of his Idea survives only until he asks others to believe in its success. His faith begins to weaken with his first encounter at Graylock. He seems to expect Bartram to recognize him and know all about him: “I come from my search!” Brand exclaims melodramatically. “For, at last, it is finished” (274). Bartram naturally has no idea who Brand is or what he’s talking about; Brand realizes this and begins trying to pique the limeburner’s curiosity by alluding to his own limeburning knowledge. When Bartram still does not make the desired recognition, Brand identifies himself, self-importantly using the third person: “He has found what he sought, and therefore he comes back again” (274). If Brand had gone in search of something else, this syllogism might make sense. In this context, it is self-contradictory. If Brand had committed the Unpardonable Sin by divorcing himself from human sympathy, he would not come back. Brand’s statement simply shows his escalating melodramatics as he tries to offset Bartram’s escalating lack of awe. The narrator belittles Brand’s search by having Bartram refer to it as an “errand” (274), the same term the narrator uses shortly afterward to describe little Joe’s “scamper down to the tavern” (275).

Nina Baym observes that “The various encounters making up most of the text have a common tendency. They call Brand’s commission of the unpardonable sin into question” (42). As other villagers arrive, Brand’s claims lose credibility, and Brand’s doubts grow. Brand’s mind, the narrator tells us, “had wrought itself by intense and solitary meditation into a high state of enthusiasm” (279), but such states are intrinsically precarious, and something as seemingly silly as the claim that alcohol is more important than the Unpardonable Sin is enough to shake Brand’s wavering belief:

It made him doubt—and strange to say, it was a painful doubt—whether he had indeed found the Unpardonable Sin, and found it within himself. The whole question on which he had exhausted life, and more than life, looked like a delusion. (279)

The three village “worthies” are failures, but they are apparently the villagers most worth note, and their slighting attitude toward the Unpardonable Sin, Brand, and his search should be valued accordingly. And Brand’s consequent doubt suggests that the three men are right. He realizes that things that unite humanity in its common frailty are still important to him, but he continues to speak of his search as successful, important, and meaningful, postponing recognition of his failure. After the Doctor tells Brand he has failed, seeing Humphrey reminds Brand of something he did to Esther, and his doubt seems to fade as he reasserts his “Enthusiasm”: “Yes, it is no delusion. There is an Unpardonable Sin!” (280). However, that Brand restates his belief in the existence of an Unpardonable Sin does not mean he has found it, just as (as Brand himself suggests earlier) even if he has found the Sin, he has not necessarily found it within himself. At any rate, though Brand may temporarily reaffirm his belief in his Idea, his continued presence with and desire for sympathy from the others continue to belie his claims. Two more important characters cast further doubts.

The German Jew, regardless of his identity (traveling entertainer, the Wandering Jew, the Devil), ridicules Brand’s search and its object by having Brand look into the empty diorama and telling him the Unpardonable Sin is there, implying that nothing is the Unpardonable Sin. Brand responds to this attack on his claims as he did to that of the three villagers, stifling it but obviously affected by it. He does not quiet the Jew to keep him from revealing some sin Brand has committed (Brand wants the people to believe he has committed a terrible sin!); rather, he silences the villagers and the Jew because their doubts pierce holes in the thin fabric of his own waning belief.

The tail-chasing dog, paralleling Brand’s search, completes the attack on Brand’s illusion. The dog finishes his chase in failure, “as far from his goal as ever” (283), and Brand, “moved, it might be, by a perception of some remote analogy between his own case and that of this self-pursuing cur, . . . broke into the awful laugh which, more than any other token, expressed the condition of his inward being” (283). That laugh, the narrator has told us, is mirthless, scornful, and “moved by an involuntary recognition of . . . infinite absurdity” (275). Curtis Dahl sees Brand’s laugh as “proof of his understanding of his terrible and ironic predicament. [His] understanding of his sin of lack of love and moral sympathy with others is itself very close to a revived sympathy” (56). I would differ with Dahl in doubting that Brand ever fully embraced such a “sin” or that his need for “sympathy with others” has ever left him. The narrator later describes Brand as “lonely” (rather than

“lone”); if Brand is outside human sympathy, it is against his real desire, not because of it. If Brand is cold, it is the cold of loneliness, not of unfeeling: “Coldness, beyond human feeling, is said to characterize [Brand’s] sin, but he suffers intolerably by the knowledge that he is cold” (Geist 202).

Brand finally acknowledges, in his laugh of self-scorn, that his search has been an absurdity and has ended in failure. He scorns himself and later kills himself, not because he has found and committed the Unpardonable Sin, but because he has not. And his pride will not allow him to acknowledge his failure out loud, even to himself.

But doesn’t the narrator later *tell* us that Brand is guilty of that divorcing of head from heart that seems to be Hawthorne’s Unpardonable Sin? No. As Baym also observes (45), the entire passage (284–85) that follows everyone’s abandoning Brand—from the description of Brand’s forming his dream, to the intellectual heights he reached in his search, to the claims that his “moral nature had ceased to keep the pace of improvement with his intellect” and that he had “produced the Unpardonable Sin,” through the conclusion that Brand’s “task is done, and well done”—represents *Brand’s* thoughts, not the narrator’s. These thoughts are the final, pathetic attempt of a failure to pretend he has succeeded. In the ultimate application of Aesop’s “sour grapes” fable, Brand, having been rejected by everyone, turns around and rejects everyone, proclaiming to himself that he has not failed. However, the very fervor with which he protests his success confirms for us his failure.

But Brand cannot maintain this self-deception, and so he searches for acceptance, if not approval, by turning to the kiln, “Mother Earth,” and “Fire,” personifying the latter and asking it to accept him into the “embrace” of its “bosom” (286). Here, at last, is a place where Brand can find guaranteed acceptance.

If Brand dies a common failure, though, what then explains the apparent change over the landscape the next morning, which so strongly appears to be a universal reaction to the passing of devilish Ethan Brand?

Stepping from one to another of the clouds that rested on the hills, and thence to the loftier brotherhood that sailed in air, it *seemed almost as if* a mortal man might thus ascend into the heavenly regions. Earth was so mingled with sky that it was a daydream to look at it . . . Little Joe’s face brightened at once. “Dear Father,” cried he, skipping cheerily to and fro, “that strange man is gone, and the sky and the mountains all *seem* glad of it!” (286–87; emphasis added)

Since we have seen that there was nothing supernatural or evil in the kiln or in Ethan Brand, why should there be anything supernaturally good in a sunny morning, *appearances* notwithstanding? The narrator’s description of the morning scene is qualified—“seemed,” “almost,” “as if.” And it is not the

narrator, but little Joe, "easily impressed and excitable" (281), "a child and an observer only" (Fogle 201), who interprets the bright morning as nature's happiness that Brand is gone. We do not have to be similarly deceived; "all Nature and Providence" do not rejoice "at the revelation of the Unpardonable Sin" (Pedersen 313). The overtly and overly romantic description of the morning's beauty contradicts the theme, tone, and mood of the rest of the story and is simply another ironic deception by the narrator.

If Brand's search were successful, he would not be upset by the rejection he receives at Graylock; he would revel in it, or more likely still, he would never have come back to receive it. He claims to have "produced the Unpardonable Sin" (285), and he probably thought he had until he came back to Graylock and met both with an unwelcoming reception and the realization that he wanted a better one. Brand is unable to accept that he is not a legend after all, that his very return has deromanticized him in everyone's eyes rather than having the opposite, intended effect. He would have been content to have others believe he had committed the Sin even though he knew he had not. Having failed to embrace the Unpardonable Sin and to convince anyone else that he has realized it, he ends his life still refusing to admit his failure.

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