

Problems of Reality in "Young Goodman Brown" and "The Real Thing"

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I. What is Reality?

Ever since Pilate's taunting question ("What is Truth?") to Jesus, the problem of reality has been the centre of philosophical speculation. It has also led to various isms—conceptual realism of Plato, Platonic-Aristotelian kind of realism, nominalism, empirico-idealism, subjective and objective realism, to mention a few—which turned this kind of inquiry into a tautology, if not foolish pedantries. Moreover, the critics' perplexity over the literary term "realism" added much to the misconception and obscurity of the word "reality." So I am not going to define "realism," as many critics have tried, to little purpose. I would rather point out the crucial part reality plays in American literature by analyzing two short stories.

Before we go on, it will be necessary to ascertain what I mean by the word "reality." Many critics agree on the complexity and multiplicity of its meanings; "it is a word which can, in the same context, have a multiplicity of meanings."¹ Since reality changes perpetually according to human consciousness, it has no chance of stable meaning. Thus as Loofbourow says, "If the 'realistic' novel is taken to mean a kind of fiction that results when the artist and his audience share the

1) Alice R. Kaminsky, "On Literary Realism," in John Halperin, ed., *Theory of the Novel: New Essays* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974), p. 214.

same assumptions, ... there will ... be different realisms at different times and in different contexts."²⁾

What seems natural in one period becomes artificial in another period. Each person also has his own version of reality as "it cannot bear precisely the same significance for any two human beings." Thus Levin suggests that "we should pluralize our subject."³⁾ In this case, we must be careful not to obscure our problem by too many divergences. Anyway, our fundamental viewpoint should be this; as fiction has continually adapted itself to man's changing concept of reality, our probings into reality should be limited to a period or a context.

In spite of its diverse meanings, the problem of reality has been central to nearly all works of fiction, and the aim of fiction is to distinguish what is real from what is counterfeit. This has been the criterion of good fiction from the great forefather of the novel, *Don Quixote*. Trilling aptly notes that "Cervantes begins to show that the world of tangible reality is not the reality at all. The real reality is rather the wildly conceiving, the madly fantasizing mind of the Don. People change, practical reality changes, when they come into its presence."⁴⁾ The novel, including the two short stories I'm going to analyze, is a perpetual quest for reality, its material being society on the one hand, and man's soul on the other.

II. Reality in America

Henry James's famous enumeration of the things lacking in American scenes implies the tenuity of social texture in American fiction as well as the writer's disregard of their social circumstances. It is not that

2) John W. Loofbourow, "Realism in the Anglo-American Novel: The Pastoral Myth," in John Halperin, ed., *Theory of the Novel: New Essays* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974), p. 257.

3) Harry Levin, *Contexts of Criticism* (New York: Atheneum, 1963), p. 68 and p. 70.

4) Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1953), p. 203.

American fiction is socially indifferent in its political values, but that it features the conflict between individual freedom and social compulsions. Karl Manheim has also pointed by drawing a clear line between European reality and American reality.

In Europe it meant that sociology had to focus its attention on the very severe tension between the classes, whereas, in America, where there was more free play in the economic realm, it was not so much as the class problem which was considered as the 'real' center of society but the problems of social technique and organization.⁵⁾

The reasons for this difference cannot be elucidated in this short essay. Trilling points out this lack of social texture by saying that "the novel in America diverges from the classic intention, which ... is the the investigation of the problem of reality beginning in the social field. The fact is that American writers of genius have not turned their minds to society.... the reality they sought was only tangential to society."⁶⁾

American writers did not have the privilege of a complex social structure, together with the tradition of legend and myth on which to depend. Thus the problem of reality becomes the greatest burden to them, because the relationships between the author and his reader are not yet established. Reality, even the tangible reality cannot be taken for granted, not to speak of speak of imagined reality. The distinguishing marks of American writers, therefore, are "the uneasiness with the real, the emphasis on quest rather than completion, the excessive concern with the aesthetic problems of portraying an experience that has always seemed in transition."⁷⁾

III. Reality in "Young Goodman Brown" and "The Real Thing"

It is natural that fiction dealing with reality should be concerned

5) Karl Manheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, tr. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1936), p. 228.

6) Trilling, p. 206.

7) Donald M. Kartiganer and Malcolm Griffin, ed., "Introduction" to

with the attempt to unravel the complexities of experience. As the American writers' interest is focused on the individual, and their theme tending to isolation (not physical, but moral alienation), the ultimate theme of "Young Goodman Brown" and "The Real Thing" can be safely summed up as the quest for reality. In the former, we see a young man who goes on a night journey to face and experience what reality is. In the latter, we see a painter who gropes for the reality of art and life.

I've tried to circumscribe the meaning of the word "reality" but I think it is one of the most elusive term. Henry James remarks on this difficulty: "The characters, the situations, which strike one as real will be those that touch and interest one most, but the measure of reality is very difficult to fix." He adds that "reality has a myriad forms,"⁸⁾ so it will be rash to discard Hawthorne a romance writer building castles in the air. Hawthorne placed himself in "a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet..."⁹⁾ but he also had enormous respect for common-sense reality.

One might ask: "Are his characters real or normal in any sense?" This kind of question is misleading because the writers dealing with reality concern themselves "with characters and events which are *imaginatively representative of the common experience*, even though the character and events themselves may be somewhat out of the ordinary, outside the range of the statistical norm." (my italics)¹⁰⁾ His short and quick probings at the very axis of reality shows that like all classic writers, he was dealing with realities, with substantial things.

Theories of American Literature (New York: Macmillan, 1972), p. 5.

- 8) Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," in Morris Shapira, ed., *Henry James: Selected Literary Criticism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 85.
- 9) Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (New York: A Signet Book, 1959), p. 45.
- 10) Harold H. Kolb, Jr., *The Illusion of Life: American Realism as a Literary Form* (Charlottesville: The Univ. of Virginia, 1969), p. 43.

As to James, he was more conscious of the reality of art than life. Cunliffe states: "James is not a moralist or a thinker: he is a writer for whom the truth of art and the truth of life are the same thing. Hence, his characters' search for meaning in life is equated with the artists' creative processes,"¹¹⁾ and vice versa. In "The Real Thing" he displays his belief that what we call reality is a personal refraction, an involuntary "point of view" and the mature artist must adopt the voluntary "point of view" in his delineation of life. In other words, the reality in art should be revealed and transformed by the consciousness of an artist. Brooks affirms this fact: "Aristotle himself did not make the artist's 'imitation' a literal mirroring. It is in some sense a transformation as well."¹²⁾ On this level, reality is achieved not by imitation, but by creative awareness; an awareness which, working with the materials of life, absorbs them by the intercession of imagination, and translates them from mere factuality to a higher order of reality.

Thus the question presented by the author in "Young Goodman Brown" has its significance. "Had Goodman Brown fall asleep in the forest and only dreamed a wild dream of witch meeting?" The story is built round this puzzle of dream-against-reality, "the subtle modulation of the journey from a physical fact to a moral symbol of deepening fascination with evil, and the allied notion that the penetration of the dark forest is a penetration of the universal unconsciousness."¹³⁾ Dream or not it is an aspect of reality, an experience that must be accepted and digested. Goodman Brown is shocked by a facet of reality—common sinfulness of mankind—and instead of realizing the higher reality, returns from the quest not only empty-handed but as a broken man.

11) Marcus Cunliffe, *The Literature of the United States* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 236.

12) William K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History*, Bk. IV (London: RKP, 1970), p. 692.

13) Charles Child Walcutt, *Man's Changing Mask: Modes and Methods of Characterization in Fiction* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1968), p. 129.

"The Real Thing" deals with the relation between the artist and reality. The painter in this story goes through a similar experience. He is presented with two real things: Mr. and Mrs. Monarch who represent the social reality, and Miss Churm and Oronte who represent the aesthetic reality. Neither of them fulfills the qualification of higher reality which is indispensable to a conscious, mature artist. But by having experiences with them, he shows the potentiality of the power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implications of external meanings. The revelation comes with the last impressive scene. "But she quieted me with a glance I shall never forget—I confess I should like to paint that..." This shows James's superb use of ambiguous indirection. Mrs. Monarch reaches out to him with the most delicate of antennae; something passes between them, beyond the reach of words. And from this experience, we can deduce that a craftsman is turned into an artist—though James does not clarify the point in so many words.

In short, the reality in these two short stories is not to be modified by words like "art" and "life." If is a higher reality involving both.

IV. Quest and Initiation

I've tried to explain in the former section that "Young Goodman Brown" and "The Real Thing" show us what reality is and to define what it ultimately means. These two short stories also have the external frame of quest and initiation into life. The fall from innocence to experience is an inevitable progress of mankind. The protagonist in the process of this initiation should be unestablished and must retain his youthfulness. And initiation involves pain and awareness of evil and death in the world. Mircea Eliade states: "Through the puberty rites, the novice gains access to the sacred world, that is to say, to what is considered *real* and *meaningful* in his culture, just as through phenomenological reduction of the subject-as-cogito succeeds in grasping

the reality of the world." (my italics)¹⁴⁾

This is typical of "Young Goodman Brown." Goodman Brown lives with his wife Faith in the village, but he cannot be content with the feminine world forever. He must attain his manhood by the knowledge of sin and death, by experience and pain. So he makes a covenant with the Devil and plunges into the masculine world of the forest. For Hawthorne, forest was "the ambiguous setting of moral choice, the scene of reversal and discovery in his characteristic tragic drama. The forest was the pivot in Hawthorne's great recurring pattern of escape and return."¹⁵⁾ To Goodman Brown, the Devil appears as a Father Image and Faith as a Mother Image. Hawthorne describes the Devil thus:

As nearly as could be discerned, the second traveller was about fifty years old, apparently in the same rank of life as Goodman Brown, and bearing a considerable resemblance to him, though perhaps more in expression than in features. Still they might have been taken for father and son.

In this sense, it can be said that the journey takes the form of "the search for Father."

Goodman Brown starts for the journey of initiation but he does not devote himself wholeheartedly to the given situation. He has his doubts and he is timid. But for the persuasive urgings of the Devil, he would have returned and would have clung "to her [Faith's] skirts and follow her to heaven." He goes on unwillingly, and when he is shown the ubiquity of sin he breaks down. Mere knowledge is not enough for the test of manhood; he must not shrink from reality. His return to the village completes the pattern of escape and return, but he comes back as an old man who, having lost his innocent self, has failed to gain the wiser self. Lewis remarks to similar effect:

There is more than the darkness, monsters, the divers shapes which

14) Mircea Eliade, *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 125.

15) R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam* (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 114.

tormented the souls of the lost and guilty.... There was still some fulfillment of the spirit, some realization of the entire self which it was worth losing one's self to find; only the lost, indeed, were likely to find it on their return journey, though a soul might shrivel, like young Brown's, in the process.¹⁶⁾

The journey of initiation is worth taking and must be taken. While Goodman Brown fails disastrously and irredeemably, the painter in "The Real Thing" shows some sign of success. He is presented as a young man, too; he is not married, he is not established, and he aspires to be a "great painter of portraits" some day. To him, there appear two aspects of reality. The one is the Monarchs the real thing in life, and the other is Miss Churm and Oronte, the real thing in art. They are in polar situations. The former stands for aristocracy and upper-class life, while the latter are shabby lower-class people. When the painter tries to illustrate the lives of high society, however, he finds Mr. and Mrs. Monarch too "real" to be the "real thing" in art. He prefers Miss Churm and Oronte in the end.

Adeline Tinter refers to this point: "The painter of 'The Real Thing' finds that the real aristocrats are useless models for their 'types', since they leave no room for the artist's creative imagination."¹⁷⁾ But I think this kind of interpretation superficial because it does not pay homage to the intrinsic structure that lies in the word "real." We must, therefore, look into this work more carefully. The pattern of action is circular as it was with the journey of Goodman Brown; from Miss Churm and Oronte to the Monarchs, and return to the former. In the beginning, the painter is quite satisfied with his professional models. Then Mr. and Mrs. Monarch offer themselves as models and the conflict breaks out. The painter comes to realize that they are "the real thing, but always the same thing." He cannot filter them in his artistic unconsciousness because he regards his models as "types." Prompted by his friend Hawley's advice, he dismisses them;

16) *Ibid.*, p. 116.

17) Adeline Tinter, "The Museum World," in Leon Edel, ed., *Henry James: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 149.

but unlike Goodman Brown, he returns transfigured. The revelation of higher reality that is not mere imitation or clever touches elevates him from the state of *alchemy of art* to that of *real art*.

Two young men shed off their innocence; the painter sees a glimpse of higher reality through the experience, but Goodman Brown fails and, stark naked in the world, he shivers and shrivels to death.

V. Conclusion

Many critics have recognized the affinities between Hawthorne and Henry James. First of all, they hold the American heritage in common. In being American, their past becomes three-fold: the Adamic past of all humanity, the European past of America, and the New England past of their own community. This sense of the past has helped them to see the present in terms of the past, and thus, cultivated their historical consciousness which comes to be inveterated in the depth of their mind.

With none of James's sophistication or social experience, Hawthorne devotes himself more deeply to the exploration of morality and psychology in an art of fiction. Thus James's statement as to Hawthorne is that "he cared for the deeper psychology.¹⁸⁾ How could this be? The keyword here is "experience." What we call an experience is not an end in itself, but the process by which the artist is assisted in his creative work. Besides, a culture is a dialectic and the American culture has the European culture as an antithesis. So forty years' residence in Europe does not count much in the essential formation of an artist. For the artist who contains a large part of the dialectic of a culture within himself, comprises both thesis and anti-thesis, and in the long run, settles himself in the synthesis. The sense of Europe involved James, as Puritanistic background involved Hawthorne, in a continuing dialectic between present and past, innocence and experience, good and evil.

18) Henry James, *Hawthorne* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1879), p. 65.

"Young Goodman Brown" and "The Real Thing" involves this dialectic. They show us how a young person, in search for reality goes through his initiation. The initiation itself is a dialectic. In its process, a person moves from the state of innocence to that of sophistication. Goodman Brown reaches the state of sophistication without understanding and sympathy, while the painter of "The Real Thing" takes a step toward the state of maturity. In this sense, James's rendering of his characters is far more successful than that of Hawthorne. James's interest in the enrichment of life by art caused him to concentrate on art as the subject of his work. "The Real Thing" represents this art-life dialectic perfectly. The point here is clear enough but not so crudely clear as in "Young Goodman Brown."

The characters embody different attitudes toward art but they are not mere symbols. They are given a tender independent life, and they have the vitality which comes from the sympathetic accuracy of incidental and external touches. In conclusion, "Young Goodman Brown" can be regarded as an ironic reversal of *Bildungsroman*: the first-person account of the life of protagonist as a minor. "The Real Thing" is, on the other hand, a *Kunstlerroman*: the first-person account of the artist-in-the-making. Hawthorne and James come to the same effect in their respective stories: that what we call reality is not the reality and by gaining the higher reality, we can achieve our identity as an individual.

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