

# The Circular Images and Community in “Ethan Brand” and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*

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## Introduction

Nathaniel Hawthorne published “Ethan Brand” in 1850 and Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, in 1849. The images of the circle in “Ethan Brand” come from Brand’s leaving to search for the unpardonable sin and returning to his lime-kiln in Mount Greylock, and an old dog chasing his tail. Brand comes back to his lime-kiln to tell his community that he found the unpardonable sin. The journey in *A Week* starts from the town of Concord in 1839 and returns to it just like Ethan Brand returns to the starting point. J. J. Boies mentions that the “controlling metaphor in *A Week* is the circle” (350).

Both Hawthorne and Thoreau visited Mount Greylock. Hawthorne visited there in the summer of 1838. The burning lime kiln at Mount Greylock inspired him to write “Ethan Brand” in which Brand’s lime-kiln is associated with the inferno. Dante’s “Inferno” in *Divine Comedy* contains circular images too. The meaning of the circular images in Dante’s “Inferno” will be helpful when interpreting “Ethan Brand.”

On the other hand, Thoreau visited Mount Greylock in July of 1844 and describes the memory of Mount Greylock in “Tuesday” in *A Week*. Thoreau imagines a stream as a road to “the gates of heaven” (181), and the trees with “a scraggy and inferno look” on the mountain (184). However, after that Thoreau saw “one fair view of the country” (184). Moreover, at the summit of Mount Greylock he started reading a newspaper which connects him with real society. It seems that the experience of Mount Greylock did not necessarily

give Thoreau the same image as Hawthorne who imagined Dante's "Inferno."

On "Ethan Brand," Richard Harter Fogle, Terence Martin, Mark Harris and other scholars argue about Brand's searching for the unpardonable sin. On *A Week*, Steven Fink argues about one's union with Nature. There is little argument to compare "Ethan Brand" with *A Week*. The purpose of this paper is to compare the meaning of the circular images and community in "Ethan Brand" with that in *A Week*.

## I. The Images of the Circle in Dante's "Inferno"

Hawthorne's friend, Longfellow translated *Divine Comedy* into English and it was published in 1867, though Hawthorne could not read it since he died in 1864. Since Longfellow translated it, *Divine Comedy* has become well known in the USA. Before that, *The Vision of Dante Alighieri* translated by Henry Francis Cary in 1814, or an Italian version of *Divine Comedy* were the only versions available. However, Hawthorne mentions Dante in "Rappaccini's Daughter," too. According to Julian Hawthorne, Hawthorne could read French, Spanish and Italian (Hawthorne, *Hawthorne and His Circle* 231). Similarly, Thoreau mentions Virgil and Dante in "Monday" in *A Week*. It seems in those days Dante was popular among the intelligentsia.

In "Inferno", canto 7, people who squander and skim clash together, and then at one point "Each one turned backward, rolling retrograde, / Crying, "Why keepest?" and, "Why squanderest thou?" They repeat this act endlessly. The following quotations from "Inferno" are Longfellow's translation.

Here saw I people, more than elsewhere, many,  
On one side and the other, with great howls,  
Rolling weights forward by main force of chest.

They clashed together, and then at that point

Each one turned backward, rolling retrograde,  
Crying, "Why keepest?" and, "Why squanderest thou?"

Thus they returned along the lurid circle  
On either hand unto the opposite point,  
Shouting their shameful metre evermore.

Then each, when he arrived there, wheeled about  
Through his half-circle to another joust;  
And I, who had my heart pierced as it were, (7. 25-36)

In canto 24, thieves are bitten by serpents and burn to ashes which draw together, and they become as they were. And then the serpents entangle them again as follows.

Among this cruel and most dismal throng  
People were running naked and affrighted.  
Without the hope of hole or heliotrope.

They had their hands with serpents bound behind them;  
These riveted upon their reins the tail  
And head, and were in front of them entwined.

And lo! at one who was upon our side  
There darted forth a serpent, which transfixed him  
There where the neck is knotted to the shoulders.

Nor 'O' so quickly e'er, nor 'I' was written,  
As he took fire, and burned; and ashes wholly

Behoved it that in falling he became.

And when he on the ground was thus destroyed,  
The ashes drew together, and of themselves  
Into himself they instantly returned. (24. 91-105)

In canto 28, "Disseminators of scandal and of schism" are running and a devil cruelly puts falchion's edge on them, but their wounds are closed again and then they repeat the same thing as the following quotation.

While I was all absorbed in seeing him,  
He looked at me, and opened with his hands  
His bosom, saying: "See now how I rend me;

How mutilated, see, is Mahomet;  
In front of me doth Ali weeping go,  
Cleft in the face from forelock unto chin;

And all the others whom thou here beholdest,  
Disseminators of scandal and of schism  
While living were, and therefore are cleft thus.

A devil is behind here, who doth cleave us  
Thus cruelly, unto the falchion's edge  
Putting again each one of all this ream,

When we have gone around the doleful road;  
By reason that our wounds are closed again  
Ere any one in front of him repass. (28. 28-42)

In Dante's "Inferno," torture is repeated again and again, constructing a circle. The meaning of the circular images of "Inferno" is torture.

In "Ethan Brand," it is written that a lime kiln "resembled nothing so much as the private entrance to the infernal regions" (84). The circular images of "Inferno" are closely connected with "Ethan Brand."

## II. The Images of the Circle in "Ethan Brand"

One of the circle images of "Ethan Brand" is that Ethan Brand left his lime-kiln in Mount Greylock to search for the unpardonable sin and then he returned there again. When we think about the reason of his return after an 18-year absence, it has a significant meaning. Ethan Brand says, he came back from his search "for, at last, it is finished" (86). Moreover, Brand says that he has found "what he sought, and therefore he comes back again" (87). And when he is asked by Bartram where it might be, he lays "his finger on his own heart" (87).

Brand's words, "it is finished" are as if he has arrived at the terminal. However, Brand has not been released from the sin. Sensitive Joe says "he does not laugh like a man that is glad. So the noise frightens me" (83). Joe feels sensitively that Brand has no feeling of release. Brand says that the unpardonable sin is the only sin "that deserves a recompense of immortal agony! Freely, were it to do again, would I incur the guilt. Unshrinkingly, I accept the retribution" (90).

Brand seems to be conscious that he cannot stop searching for the unpardonable as long as he is alive and that it has "immortal agony," just as the circular image of "Inferno" is torture.

It is three low and vulgar community men who deepen Brand's doubt of finding the sin and everything looks like delusion for him as follows.

No mind, which has wrought itself, by intense and solitary meditation, into a high state of enthusiasm, can endure the kind of contact with low and vulgar modes of thought and feeling, to which Ethan Brand was now subjected. 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.(93)

The reason why his doubt becomes “a painful doubt,” is that Brand wants to stop the search for the unpardonable sin. His endless search becomes a punishment, torture for Brand like the sinners in Dante’s “Inferno.” Moreover, a community doctor perceives Brand’s uncertainty and judges that he did not find the unpardonable sin.

Only Brand’s memory of Esther makes him certain. The narrator tells us “Ethan Brand had made the subject of a psychological experiment, and wasted, absorbed, and perhaps annihilated her soul, in the process” (94). He murmurs “it is no delusion. There is an Unpardonable Sin” (94).

Moreover, the narrator states, “he had produced the Unpardonable Sin!” as in the following(99).

Thus Ethan Brand became a fiend. He began to be so from the moment that his moral nature had ceased to keep the pace of improvement with his intellect. And now, as his highest effort and inevitable development—as the bright and gorgeous flower, and rich, delicious fruit of his life’s labor—he had produced the Unpardonable Sin! (99)

Hawthorne tells us about the unpardonable sin in *The American Notebooks*.

The Unpardonable Sin might consist in a want of love and reverence for the Human Soul; in consequence of which, the investigator pried into its dark depths, not with a hope or purpose of making it better, but from a cold philosophical curiosity,—content that it should be wicked in what ever kind or degree, and only desiring to study it out. Would not this, in other words, be the separation of the intellect from the heart? (251)

Hawthorne tells us that "the Unpardonable Sin might consist in a want of love and reverence for the Human Soul." According to Hawthorne's definition of the unpardonable sin, what Brand did to Esther is the unpardonable sin. However, he is not sure he found the sin. If his community admits he found the sin, he can stop searching for it. One of the reasons of his return is to tell the community he found the sin and to complete and stop the search. It is sure that Brand has been solitary but wanted to be accepted by the community. In this sense, the community is important for him.

Another image of circle in "Ethan Brand" is an old dog chasing his tail. Suddenly, "this grave and venerable quadruped, of his own mere motion, and without the slightest suggestion from anybody else, began to run round after his tail" (96). And then "the foolish old dog ceased his performance as suddenly as he had begun it. The next moment, he was as mild, quiet, sensible, and respectable in his deportment, as when he first scraped acquaintance with the company" (96-97). It has been said that the chasing performance of the dog symbolizes Ethan Brand.

The obstinacy of the old dog is the same as that of Brand's search for the unpardonable sin. Besides the old dog cannot bite his tail and Brand is not sure he found the sin. The difference is the dog can stop chasing his tail by himself and has not committed a sin, but Brand cannot stop his search and he committed the unpardonable sin.

### III. Thoreau in *A Week*

Though Hawthorne does not mention Dante directly in “Ethan Brand,” he associates the tale with Dante’s “Inferno.” On the other hand, Thoreau mentions Dante in “Monday” in *A Week* (118). When Thoreau sees ministers cross the Merrimack River on Monday, he imagines the two of them may be Virgil and Dante who are associated with the inferno. However, as Virgil is the guide of Dante to Beatrice, their image does not evoke the inferno.

There are two of them. May be, they are Virgil and Dante. But when they crossed the Styx, none were seen bound up or down the stream, that I remember. It is only a *transjectus*, a transitory voyage, like life itself, none but the long-lived gods bound up or down the stream. Many of these Monday men are ministers, no doubt, reseaking their parishes with hired horses, with sermons in their valises all read and gutted, the day after never with them. (118)

In Mount Greylock, looking at a stream, Thoreau thinks that it seems “a road for the pilgrim to enter upon who would climb to the gates of heaven.” Moreover, Thoreau is filled with “indefinite expectations” (181).

There were a few farms scattered along at different elevations, each commanding a fine prospect of the mountains to the north, and a stream ran down the middle of the valley, on which near the head there was a mill. It seemed a road for the pilgrim to enter upon who would climb to the gates of heaven. Now I crossed a hay-field, and now over the brook on a slight bridge, still gradually ascending all the while, with a sort of awe, and filled with indefinite expectations as to what kind of inhabitants and what kind of nature I should come to at last. (180-81)



On the other hand, Thoreau mentions "the trees began to have a scraggy and inferno look" at the summit of the Mount Greylock (184). However, soon Thoreau saw "one fair view of the country" (184).

I made my way steadily upward in a straight line through a dense undergrowth of mountain laurel, until the trees began to have a scraggy and infernal look, as if contending with frost goblins, and at length I reached the summit, just as the sun was setting. Several acres here had been cleared, and were covered with rocks and stumps, and there was a rude observatory in the middle which overlooked the woods. I had one fair view of the country before the sun went down, but I was too thirsty to waste any light in viewing the prospect, and set out at once to find water. (184)

In *A Week*, the image of the inferno is not continuous like Brand who cannot stop thinking of the unpardonable sin. Though Thoreau is solitary, he has a connection with society. At the summit of Mount Greylock he started reading a newspaper. Thoreau's interest moves to readings and opinions which he criticizes.

## Conclusion

Though both Hawthorne and Thoreau visited Mount Greylock, they had a different inspiration from the journey. Hawthorne imagines the inferno in Mount Greylock but Thoreau both the inferno and a fair view. *A Week* is a memory of Thoreau's journey with his brother written two years after his brother's death. Boies interprets Thoreau applying "the circular movement" to life (355). The image reflects rebirth, too. In fact, Thoreau goes back to a real community, society. However, the circular image in "Ethan Brand" is torture and Brand commits suicide to escape his torture. For Brand to stop searching

for the unpardonable sin, torture, it is necessary for his community to admit he found it and accept him.

### Note

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