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Becoming Real to Oneself: Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne

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Abstract: This paper focuses on three American Romantic writers: Emerson, Thoreau, and Hawthorne, examining the problem of ghostliness or life not fully lived present in their works. The point of departure for the present discussion is Arnold Weinstein's analysis of Hawthorne's short story "Wakefield," suggesting that the main goal of its protagonist is an attempt to become real to himself. This paper finds similar issues to the ones tackled by Hawthorne in the essays by R.W. Emerson and H.D. Thoreau, and argues that the method applied by Wakefield, which is looking at one's life from a distance, is also present in the two Transcendentalists' writings, though often as a danger rather than a wished-for solution of the problem.

Keywords: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, ghostliness, selfhood

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Nathaniel Hawthorne are three Romantic writers who, despite their differences, may be seen as sharing a common interest in the problem of living (or not living) one's life to the fullest despite the threat of a feeling of one's unreality. All three tackle the issue in various ways, concentrating on the act of witnessing one's life and looking at one's self from a distance, offering different answers to the question whether such a distance is a positive or negative phenomenon. The first half of the nineteenth century in particular is a period in which the problem of becoming as real to oneself as possible, is a vital one: literature of this time "is a gallery teeming with larger-than-life portraits of imperial selves," whose dream is "to break free of constraint, to stop time, to own one's life" (Weinstein 25–26). Before Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, Romantic writers, when faced with doubt about the epistemological possibilities of the human being, do not accept these constraints but look for a way out: philosophies or ways of life for becoming one's own person. Getting to know the world and getting to know oneself is the grand Romantic project, which, however, always takes place in the shadow of looming doubt or skepticism.

One important American short story that touches upon the subject of what it means to become real to oneself is Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Wakefield," published in 1835 in his collection *Twice-Told Tales*. One day, the eponymous character leaves his London apartment and his wife, only to spend the next twenty years living close by and observing her and his former abode. After twenty years, Wakefield ultimately decides to go back home; what the result of his decision will be remains, however, a mystery. The story finishes at the moment of his entering the house: we do not know the

reaction of his wife and friends, or how Wakefield himself is going to feel once he tries to live normally again. But the narrator offers a skeptical comment: "Amid the seeming confusion of our mysterious world, individuals are so nicely adjusted to a system, and systems to one another, and to a whole, that, by stepping aside for a moment, a man exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place forever. Like Wakefield, he may become, as it were, the Outcast of the Universe" (147). For the narrator, it is doubtful that Wakefield is going to be smoothly absorbed into his former life, since his former life is no more: the world does not wait for the one who has left it, keeping for him an empty spot; rather, the absence gets quickly built over, and Wakefield may have nothing to return to.

Yet, the most interesting part of Hawthorne's short story from the point of view of the present paper is the question why Wakefield decides to absent himself for twenty years, and not to start a new life but merely to put his old one on hold. In the beginning of the story, Hawthorne introduces his character as the dullest person imaginable: "Had his acquaintances been asked, who was the man in London, the surest to perform nothing today which should be remembered on the morrow, they would have thought of Wakefield" ("Wakefield" 137–38); a sort of "No Man" (Weinstein 14). With his "sluggishness" and a mind that "occupied itself in long and lazy musings, that tended to no purpose, or had not vigor to attain it," he may be seen as another version of Rip Van Winkle: a man who does not fit in the practical world of adult responsibilities (and is not Wakefield's twenty-year absence an equivalent of Rip's twenty-year sleep?). But it is this dull man that decides to live his life in an extremely unusual way, and the story never makes his motivation fully clear.

While Hawthorne's piece has received surprisingly little critical attention, one scholar in particular, Arnold Weinstein, offers an interesting interpretation of the protagonist's motives. In the few critical texts on "Wakefield" preceding Weinstein, Wakefield's bizarre behavior has been seen as a manner of spying on his wife, and interpreted as an expression of scopophilia (by Deborah and Michael West), or as an "experiment in loving" (by Herbert Purluck), according to which love requires separation (17). However, as Weinstein rightly notes, it is not Wakefield's relationship with his wife that seems central to the story. Rather, it is his connection to himself that truly matters; if anything, it is he who is his own "libidinal target" (18, 20). The goal of his strange escape is not getting closer (in a paradoxical way) to his wife; it is not becoming someone else (after all, why does he stay in close proximity to his house? Why does he not do anything other than watch during these twenty years?), but finding himself (19). Wakefield takes pleasure in spying on his own absence: he becomes "both the performance and the audience" (19).

But his behavior is not only hedonistic; there is a purpose to it, and that is to become real to himself: "He is made real by dint of observing his own absence, the vacancy he has 'crafted,' which is the very shape of life, a shape he could not see as long as he lived it"—shape of his own trace (Weinstein 20). In order to know that he exists, and how he exists, Wakefield needs a distance from which he can observe the gap he has left in the world by vacating it (a gap which, if we are to believe the narrator's final words, may not even be there, at least not after twenty years). To put the story in a more contemporary context, Weinstein points to the fact that Wakefield's behavior

mirrors what Marshall McLuhan says about media and technology as extensions of the human brain (25). Perhaps an even more specific comparison would be in order: reading "Wakefield" today one may assume that had the protagonist lived in the twenty-first century, he would have certainly had a Facebook account. It is enough to think of people posting all the details about themselves on social media as if to see the figure their lives make or to get a confirmation that they truly exist, to understand the sort of psychological need motivating Wakefield.

Wakefield's "adventure" may be seen as a response to a problem preoccupying not only Hawthorne, but also other writers of the same era. Weinstein points to the fact that Wakefield's story is in fact more significant than it might seem at first glance: "He has traveled far, rather as Thoreau was said to have traveled a great deal in Concord" (22).[1] That Weinstein chooses to compare Wakefield to Thoreau is not insignificant: Thoreau and his friend and mentor Emerson are two nineteenth-century writers who are as concerned with the problem of experiencing one's self as Hawthorne is. As Weinstein stresses, a central problem not only in "Wakefield" but in Hawthorne's thinking in general is the feeling of inauthenticity, thus expressed by the writer: "A man tries to be happy in love; he cannot sincerely give his heart, and the affair seems all a dream. In domestic life, the same; in politics, a seeming patriot; but still he is sincere, and all seems like theatre" ("American Notebooks" 618). This "living in a permanent haze, a gauzy world with nothing vital in it, nothing searing, nothing that cuts through" (Weinstein 19) is a state that concerns also the two Transcendentalists, and neither wants to live in such "permanent haze." For Emerson and Thoreau, however, the problem lies not only in one's relation to one's self, but also the connection between the self and the world.

Emerson speaks of a feeling similar to Hawthorne's "dream": of man gliding through the world "ghost-like," as if lost in the middle of a stair, unable to discern where and what he is ("Experience" 228). This ghostly quality of human experience is due to the fact that we live unconsciously, unable to focus on the present, since "[s]o much of our time is preparation, so much is routine, and so much retrospect" ("Experience" 229).[2] It is a state of being unable to live fully: "on the brink of the waters of life and truth, we are miserably dying" ("The Poet" 463). Emerson's vision of the world could be compared to the one expressed in the famous parable in Franz Kafka's *The Trial*. The man portrayed by Kafka comes to the gates of the Law and waits for the doorkeeper to let him in so long that he finally dies, informed at the very end that the entrance he spent most of his life at was meant only for him. Similarly, in Emerson's essays man is waiting on the doorpost of life, just a step away from his destiny, but unable to make the final decision and enter the gate.

Another, and possibly more important, component of man's ghostliness is a sense of detachment or distance between himself and the world, his feelings, and his experience: "An innavigable sea washes with silent waves between us and the things we aim at and converse with" ("Experience" 230); or, in another passage of the same essay: "I know that the world I converse with in the city and in the farms, is not the world I

1 Thoreau makes this statement about himself in Walden (6).

2 In fact, this spectrality may be seen also in passages dealing with Emerson's skepticism and his attempts at fighting against the suspicion that we may not exist (see Cavell, Etudes 86).

think. I observe that difference, and shall observe it" ("Experience" 251, emphasis in the original). The key term here is "difference," pointing to the fact that no immediate access to reality is possible, no Romantic Unity with the world that Emerson hopes for throughout his writings. "Totality can only manifest itself in fragments and under aspects" (Salska 189), or its availability is constantly deferred. In such a state "[a]ll is riddle, and the key to a riddle is another riddle" (Emerson, "Illusions" 1117)—this observation is not just a sad pun, but a description of the experience of the Real forever escaping human cognition, on the one hand infinitely unfolding and promising a final epistemological satisfaction, but on the other—never in fact granting it.

If then Wakefield, in order to stop living in a haze, and as it were to become materialized to himself, must detach himself from his own life and look at it from a distance, for Emerson this very distance may be the source of the problem—even, as Stanley Cavell claims, a source of pain (*Passages* 29). It makes him unable to become one not only with the material world, but also with his experience of it: the essay "Experience" is not only about the gap between the world-in-itself, which he wants to reach, and the world as he thinks it, but also about being unable to grieve fully after the death of his son Waldo, estranged from his own emotions. The feeling of a discrepancy (between thoughts and objects, self and the world, self and self) is thus the key concept of the Emersonian experience.

This idea of a gap between the world thought and the world out there is something that Emerson inherits from Kant's distinction between the phenomena and the noumena. However, for Emerson the fact that man does not have access to things-in-themselves is not merely a neutral characteristic of human perception, but a tragic condition, which makes us forever estranged from the world.[3] He refers to it as "this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest," and calls it "the most unhandsome part of our condition" ("Experience" 231). The material world withdraws or shrinks from us (Cavell, *Etudes* 118); it dissolves into thin air when we try to grab it with our minds, because thought and matter are not of the same substance, or do not belong to the same logical order.[4]

The feeling of separation from the world and from one's self are for Emerson interlinked: when he speaks of self-consciousness, or the discovery that we exist, he refers to it as "the Fall of Man," and explains its consequences for how one experiences life: "Ever afterwards, we suspect our instruments. We have learned that we do not see directly, but mediately, and that we have no means of correcting these coloured and distorting lenses which we are" ("Experience" 246). Such is his distrust of these "distorting lenses" that it leads him to a solipsistic fear that "these subject-lenses have a creative power: perhaps there are no objects"; like a Baudrillardian simulacrum they do not refer to any external reality, or in this case do not distort any external reality but

3 Cavell sees Thoreau too as having a Kantian vision of the world, when he declares: "I had been impressed by Thoreau's sentence running 'The universe constantly and obediently answers to our conceptions' as being in effect an elegant summary of the Critique of Pure Reason" (Cavell, Etudes 11).

4 At least, though, in this passage the world exists: "This very evanescence of the world proves its existence to me; it is what vanishes from me. I guess this is not realism exactly; but it is not solipsism either" (Cavell, Etudes 13, emphasis in the original).

only cover its lack. This is why there is a longing in Emerson's writings for an Edenic pre-reflective state of innocence, in which, apparently, one would know the noumena not intellectually, but through a metaphysical Unity with all being. By cultivating this dream he stays within the frame of the Romantic tradition, characterized by M. H. Abrams as fascinated by the myth of the Fall and aspiring to the return to Paradise (Abrams 217-19). This is the very opposite desire of Wakefield's: while Emerson wishes to reduce the distance between himself and the external world in order to appear less "ghostly," Hawthorne's character feels unreal precisely when he is too near to himself. The difference seems to lie in the fact that Wakefield wants to know himself intellectually, which is a kind of knowing that Emerson, being mystically-inclined, deems insufficient.

Thoreau is just as concerned with this state of permanent haze, or of a life half-lived, when he famously declares that "[t]he mass of men live lives of quiet desperation" (*Walden* 10)—a condition which Cavell sees as an equivalent of Emerson's "secret melancholy" (*Etudes* 39). In his Journal, Thoreau speaks of a state which is perhaps less acute, but nonetheless similarly unwanted: "I lagged or tagged after myself" (*Journal* 15), being unable to catch up with his own self. As F.O. Matthiessen puts it, Thoreau's concern is that "life wastes itself while we are preparing to live" (60)—it is yet another form of spectrality that needs to be remedied.

Thoreau's answer to the problem is to an extent similar to Wakefield's: although he does not move out to spy on his former life, he moves out nevertheless, opting out of social responsibilities in order to find a newer and keener sense of the Real: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived" (*Walden* 98). The experiment means confronting life in whatever shape it presents itself: "if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion" (*Walden* 98-99). It is a passage which strongly resembles Emerson's declaration in "Self-Reliance": "I am the devil's child, I will live them [my impulses] from the devil" ("Self-Reliance" 33). Both writers speak of an openness to accept the Truth however it will look, since even its meanest form is better than its alternative: a feeling of being not entirely alive. Trying to regain a lost intimacy with the world (Cavell, *Etudes* 34), Thoreau wishes not to "tread on the heels of [his] experience" but to become one with it at the moment of it happening (*Journal* 63). This is where his passion for physically checking things stems from: in *Walden* he speaks of measuring the depth of the pond by himself (307); in the Journal he expects people living on riverbanks, drawn by natural curiosity, to "follow in the trail of their waters to see the end of the matter" (*Journal* 7). Seeing, touching, and measuring the world are the readiest ways to ensure that one is no ghost but part and parcel of the external, material reality.

Another, connected remedy for the feeling of (one's or the world's) flimsiness is a passion for what is common or low, shared by both Emerson and Thoreau. The latter declares his loyalty to things which are "apparently near and small" as opposed to those "distant and sounding" (Thoreau, *Journal* 106). The former believes that "in the speech of men in the barber shop or in Bigelowe and Wesson's barroom" he succeeds at "grasping… facts" (Matthiessen 35), and, according to Cavell, "[b]y 'embracing the

common,' by 'sitting at the feet of the low,' Emerson surely takes his stand on the side of what philosophers such as Berkeley and Hume would have called the vulgar" (*Etudes* 23-24). "The vulgar" has the undeniable value of giving one something firm to hold on to, and a basis for future philosophy. He clings to the low as to the best embodiment of factual reality. That is also why Emerson insists that "[t]hinking is the function. Living is the functionary" ("The American Scholar" 62), as "[l]ife is not intellectual or critical, but sturdy," and "[i]ntellectual tasting of life will not supersede muscular activity" ("Experience" 236). As Cavell observes, to Emerson thinking is true when done with the whole man, when it is almost physically filtered by the body (*Etudes* 142). Such an ability to act rather than think, or think with the whole man rather than with the mind only, provides a sensual barrier to the feeling of unreality. Matthiessen puts this combination of thought and action in simpler terms: "The reconciliation of the two strains, of untrammelled speculation and Yankee practicality, was what he [Emerson] wanted most in his own writing" (15).

In "Experience" Emerson's way of getting closer to the Real is through trying to properly feel grief after his son's death: "There are moods in which we court suffering, in the hope that here, at least, we shall find reality, sharp peaks and edges of truth"—a reality "for contact with which, we would even pay the costly price of sons and lovers" (230). This is why the first part of the essay is filled with despair: not only because Waldo is dead, but because his father, Emerson, is alive and well, thinking about his loss but unable to "get it nearer to [himself]." As Cavell notes, this has serious consequences for Emerson's entire philosophy, since being unable to get Waldo and his death nearer means also being unable to bring the world nearer to oneself (*Etudes* 244). Yet again, the problem is a feeling of a distance between self and the world, and the feeling of pain gives hope for bridging the disconcerting gulf.

Another strategy for getting experience "nearer" is not through suffering, but through a somewhat contradictory practice: self-annihilation, or annihilation of the ego. Here, in order to cross the gap between self and the world, the self must dissolve into the world and become one with it. This is the meaning of the famous passage from *Nature*, in which Emerson declares: "I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God" ("Nature" 10). In "The Over-Soul," he conveys a similar experience: "From within or from behind, a light shines through us upon things, and makes us aware that we are nothing, but the light is all" (151). In this passage, Emerson plays with a similar optical effect as in the "American Scholar," where he explains that a correct process of reading means that "the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusion" (59). The latter passage creates an image of being blinded by revelation (Bloom, *Anxiety* 109), but also of a process during which the text on the page that disappears after the page starts glowing. It is a metaphor for the scholar getting an initial impulse from the book but later discarding its content in favor of his own ideas, during which "every trope [is] burning away [its] context" (Bloom, *Kabbalah* 63). In the quotation from "The Over-Soul" mentioned before, a parallel process during which the self casts light on objects makes it disappear like a luminous page too.

Seen from this perspective, Emerson's goal appears to be anything but similar to Wakefield's. What Wakefield needs for himself is a double role of a spectator and a

spectacle; what Emerson wants is its very opposite: for him, "the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one" ("The Over-Soul" 150). While Wakefield needs to generate a split within himself in order to confirm the reality of his existence, Emerson aims at abolishing the distinction that already exists: one between "me" and "not-me." Emerson's project for the self to become one with the world is not only a Transcendentalist version of the Hinduist and Buddhist view on the ultimate unity of all things. It is also a dream of proving Kant wrong, or, to be more precise, of finding a plane on which Kant's epistemology would not apply. In "The Over-Soul" Emerson refers to time and space, seen by Kant as the necessary structuring categories imposed by the human mind on the world. For Emerson, the soul "abolishes time and space" (152): experiencing the world directly through the soul rather than reason allows one to bypass these mediating categories, and get direct access to the world as it really is. In almost all of his essays Emerson writes of experiencing the world intuitively, one might say "selflessly," which may be seen as his attempt at getting directly to the noumena, to the unthinkable things-in-themselves, rather than phenomena, produced by the constraints of the human senses and mind.[5]

The discussion so far might suggest that Emerson's and Thoreau's answer to the problem of becoming real to oneself is contrary to Wakefield's: while Hawthorne's character needs to look at his own life from the outside in order to feel its reality, the two Transcendentalists write of getting closer to one's life in order to bridge the gap between one's self and the world. This, however, is not always the case. Thoreau accepts that alongside his pragmatic self, focused on a direct sensory experience of the material world, there is another part of this psyche, which he refers to as a spectator:

> I only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts and affections; and I'm sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as another. However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it; and that is no more I than it is you. (*Walden* 146)

Thoreau does not seem upset about the presence of this "detached" part of his inner self; rather, he experiences life cultivating this meditative "witness" and aware that it allows him to enter another plain of thinking about his actions. Here, distance does not work the same way as it does for Wakefield: instead of bringing Thoreau nearer to understanding his place in the world, it makes him see everyday life as play: an equivalent of the Hindu *Maya*, or illusion. Neither does this mean that realizing the

5 At the same time, it is possible to identify in Emerson the very opposite tendency, when he does not seem to care about the thing-in-itself, but only how it appears to the human mind: "Not he is great who can alter matter, but he who can alter my state of mind. They are the kings of the world who give the color of their present thought to all nature and all art" ("The American Scholar" 65). In Nature he speaks of the poet who "conforms things to thoughts" and "unfixes the land and the sea, makes them revolve around the axis of his primary thought" ("Nature" 34), which would suggest that, unlike in "Experience" or "The Over-Soul," what matters here is projecting one's self on the world; not aiming for the noumenon but making sure that the phenomenon agrees with one's genius.

"spectator's" presence he becomes less real to himself; rather, he starts to believe that the real (or permanent) "me" is to be found on a different plain of existence.

Emerson goes even a step further, when he admits that distance is not always tantamount to an "innavigable sea" between himself and the world, but that it may be necessary in order to see things better. In the "American Scholar" he explains that we see our childhood clearly, but "[n]ot so with our recent actions," because "[t]he new deed is yet a part of life" (61). If being one with the world is in general desirable as a meditative state, he is aware that at the same time it is a place from which one cannot say anything reasonable about reality. In order to see things one cannot be living them; like Wakefield, one needs a distance from which to observe one's life. The same idea, of the human being as unable to know the meaning of his life in the moment of its happening, is present in "Experience" and in "Self-Reliance," where Emerson advises not to worry about consistency in one's life, since any zigzag line made by a ship, when seen "from a sufficient distance … straightens itself to the average tendency" ("Self-Reliance" 38). Once again, it is distance (this time not temporal but spatial) that allows one to understand fully the meaning and direction of one's life.

Emerson's and Thoreau's answers to the problem of ghostliness are different than Wakefield's, or, at least, more varied. Hawthorne's character, being a protagonist of a work of fiction, has the luxury of trying out one simple experiment, which provides enough of a solution for his ten-page-long life. Mysterious as the story remains, it seems to be well-explained by Weinstein's interpretation, according to which Wakefield, the quintessential No-Man, needs to step out of his own life and start spying on his absence in order to fully grasp the essence of his existence: to become real to himself. Emerson and Thoreau may be seen as plagued by a similar feeling of spectrality; however, the way they deal with it varies throughout their work, oscillating between a need to reduce the distance between self and the world and to reaffirm it. Especially Emerson's writings contain at times contradictory ways of approaching the problem—which is as true of his attitude towards spectrality as towards almost any other subject.

On the one hand, in many of his essays (or passages thereof) the feeling of ghostliness does not apply to Emerson at all. "I am always environed by myself," he states ("Character" 500): his self is as real as can be, which is why there is no need for him, like for Wakefield, to look at himself from a distance. Rather, it is the reality of the external world that can be put into question, as chances are that it may be a mere emanation or projection of his strong self. In such a case, distance is dangerous rather than healing, since it only adds to the overall feeling of the world's illusoriness. If for Wakefield looking at his life from the outside allows him to get to know it better, for Emerson it traps him within his own mind, which results in a sense of unwanted detachment. On the other hand, for Emerson too distance may be necessary, albeit in a less straightforward sense. Cavell comments on the passage from "Experience" where Emerson laments the "unhandsomness" of things slipping through our fingers when we clutch at them in the following way: "the unhandsomness is rather what happens when we seek to deny the standoffishness of objects by clutching at them, which is to say, when we conceive thinking, say the application of concepts in judgements, as grasping something, say synthesizing" (*Etudes* 117). In other words, Cavell sees Emerson's problem not in the gulf between the self and the world, but in an impulse trying to

reduce this gulf, as only then does one discover that the gap is unbridgeable. In the end, just like for Wakefield, distance is needed, be it a distance between the human being and his own self, or the self and the world.

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