

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

The World Turned Strange: Rereading Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'Wakefield' in Self-Isolation

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The academic year begins in April here in Japan. Since mid-March this year, like many teachers and researchers around the world, I have been struggling to survive and cope with the shift to remote teaching. Barely having the time to reflect on the strangeness of our current situation, and almost forgetting that I am supposed to be a literary scholar, I have been forced to look for answers to pressing questions such as how to conduct our EFL classes on Zoom, how to provide a fair testing environment when we cannot ask our students to come to campus, and how to take care of my students, who are eager to learn but are also frustrated and sometimes depressed in their own struggle with loneliness and social distancing. Reading became a luxury. Along with the relationships with my colleagues and students, the fictional worlds of novels and films, in which I used to immerse myself, felt remote and distant.

One of the authors I was determined to reread once the spring semester was over was Nathaniel Hawthorne. There was a reason for this. One day in June, going to campus for the first time in about two months, I looked at the faces of my fellow passengers on the train, when a line from Hawthorne's 'The Minister's Black Veil' (1836) suddenly came back to me, albeit in a slightly different form: 'I look around me, and, lo! on every visage a White Mask!' I, too, had my own mask, observing them with my face partially hidden. A couple of weeks earlier, in a survey course on U.S. literature, my students and I had read the same author's 'Wakefield' (1835), a story about another mysterious man of self-isolation who, like Washington Irving's Rip Van Winkle, alienates himself from his wife for twenty years, suffers from loneliness, and courts the danger of turning into 'the Outcast of the Universe'

(Hawthorne 1982: 298). Having reread this story in my class, I was probably aware of Hawthorne's uncanny relevance in the current circumstances when I recalled and altered Hooper's dying words on the commuter train. As Brenda Wineapple remarks, some of Hawthorne's 'stories penetrate the secret horrors of ordinary life, those interstices in the general routine where suddenly something or someone shifts out of place, changing everything' (Wineapple 2004: 86). Now everything or everyone seems to have shifted out of place. How would this nineteenth-century writer react to a time of social distancing if he were alive now? We can only guess, but at least Hawthorne and his enigmatic figures of loneliness seem to speak to us across a spatiotemporal distance, crossing the boundary between the actual and the imaginary.

Hawthorne is a master of the uncanny, adept at transforming the familiar into the strange or, as Wineapple's words imply, the ordinary into the extraordinary. In 'The Custom-House,' his well-known preface to *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), he explains his creative principle as a writer of romance by describing how '[m]oonlight' can change 'a familiar room' into 'a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet.' This 'neutral' space, where everything is 'invested with a quality of strangeness and remoteness,' is regarded as an appropriate environment 'for a romance-writer to get acquainted with his illusive guests' (Hawthorne 2005: 29). Hawthorne's favorite realm therefore presupposes a certain distance from the everyday world and the solitary presence of the writer-observer. He has to be alone; otherwise, the spell of the moonlight will be broken. A similar experience is recounted by Philip Koch in his philosophical meditations on solitude. Struggling to find a moment of solitude amidst the bustle of professional and family life, Koch, alone at night, listens to 'the house creak and the wind moan through the darkness of the hours of the wolf.' He feels 'the uncanny nature of the silence' and asks himself, 'maybe these silent spaces where ordinary things become numinous, where feelings become spruce boughs and scattered stars—maybe this, not relationship, is where I should find my place' (Koch 1994: xi-xii). What is described here bears a striking resemblance to Hawthorne's neutral territory. Here again, a moment of solitude and a distance from everyday life enable the philosopher to make the homely unhomely, to merge reality with imagination.

Such blurring of the boundary between the actual and the imaginary, between the familiar and the strange, is exactly what happens in 'Wakefield' at multiple levels. As befitting the title of the book in which it is collected, 'Wakefield' is a tale told twice, made stranger when told for the second time. In the first paragraph of the story, Hawthorne's narrator states the story's outline in a nutshell, claiming to be only summarizing the actual story of a husband and his wife living in London, published '[i]n some old magazine or newspaper' (Hawthorne 1982: 290). The narrator insists on the factual basis of the story here, but at the same time, since it is an 'old' story that takes place in London, the tale is already doubly distanced from Hawthorne's contemporary New England readers—and from twenty-first-century readers who (re)read this story elsewhere—in terms of both space and time. Convinced that this story of 'the strangest instance, on record, of marital delinquency' has to be 'true,' and that it contains something that 'appeals to the general sympathies of mankind,' the narrator decides to tell it again, fleshing it out with the power of imagination (290). The narrative's shift from

the past tense to the present marks a departure from the allegedly factual source of the story and into Hawthorne's favorite space for creation, 'where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet.' The reader is now invited to follow Wakefield's footsteps through the twenty years of his self-isolation.

In a sense, Wakefield repeats the narrator's gesture by distancing himself from what he has had at hand. Corresponding to the narrator's move away from the story's source, Wakefield walks away from his familiar territory, away from everything that has been close to him. He almost disappears among 'the great mass of London life'—an urban milieu that is full of close but distant strangers—but is rescued from anonymity by the narrator's observant eyes (292). Then he finds an apartment on the street next to where his home is located, making himself into an invisible observer of his own household. Wakefield's self-imposed role as an isolated observer seems to forge a kind of kinship between him and Hawthorne's narrator, and his eyes soon observe what has been familiar to him from a new angle. One day after the beginning of his self-banishment, Wakefield approaches and almost enters his house but decides not to at the last minute:

He gathers courage to pause and look homeward, but is perplexed with a sense of change about the familiar edifice, such as affects us all, when, after a separation of months or years, we again see some hill or lake, or work of art, with which we were friends, of old. In ordinary cases, this indescribable impression is caused by the comparison and contrast between our imperfect reminiscences and the reality. In Wakefield, the magic of a single night has wrought a similar transformation, because, in that brief period, a great moral change has been effected. But this is a secret from himself. (294)

The narrator says that Wakefield is unaware of a change that has occurred within himself, but he is at least aware of a change in his perception of 'the familiar edifice.' The home, in other words, has become unhomey as a result of his self-distancing. One night's absence has produced an effect of defamiliarization, of things made strange.¹ He has acquired a new way of looking at a familiar space through his absence. Instead of going back to his wife, however, Wakefield continues his life of self-isolation for twenty more years. The life as a solitary observer, for this 'man of habits,' becomes a new routine (293).

The passage quoted above is also interesting in admitting that such a moment of estranged perception could be an 'ordinary' experience. Indeed, anyone who has revisited a childhood home or school can probably recall the uncanny feeling brought about by a gap between the memory of the place and its reality in the present, a gap that takes shape 'when the eyes reopen and find that what we thought was the past is, in fact, altogether *different*' (Trigg 2012: 69; italics in original). But what we are going through now is perhaps closer to Wakefield's 'magic of a single night.' Over a short period of time, we have become alienated from our familiar spaces and relationships, which are now remote, distant, and sometimes out of reach. The familiar and the strange, the ordinary and the extraordinary, seem to have changed places. Teaching my classes on Zoom and looking at the small black squares—or

black veils?—that are supposed to represent the absent presence of my students' faces, I sometimes put myself into Wakefield's shoes: 'It was Wakefield's unprecedented fate,' the narrator says, 'to retain his original share of human sympathies, and to be still involved in human interests, while he had lost his reciprocal influence on them' (Hawthorne 1982: 297). Someday, when we can finally retrieve those familiar spaces and relationships, we, like Wakefield, might be able to look at them with different eyes.

And I have certainly acquired a new way of looking at a 'work of art.' Contrary to what Hawthorne's narrator has said in the passage above, 'Wakefield,' which has always struck me as puzzling and strange, is now somewhat familiar and approachable, without totally losing its strangeness. I feel that Wakefield, as it were, has come home to me. Situated in the here and now of everyday life made strange, I cross paths with Hawthorne's 'crafty nincompoop,' and the current world of social distancing begins to interact with the doubly or triply distant world of Hawthorne's twice-told tale (Hawthorne 1982: 294). This renewed encounter with 'Wakefield,' for me, is 'both unprecedented and contingent' (Hones 2008: 1311). It is an uncanny spatial event that marks the beginning of a new relationship with literary texts and the world itself.

Notes

¹ In their discussions of the concept of the uncanny, both Nicholas Royle and Anthony Vidler connect it with the Russian formalist notion of defamiliarization, an aesthetic device that destabilizes automatic or routinized perceptions (Royle 2003: 4-6; Vidler 1992: 8).

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