

Ruhr-Universität Bochum
Englisches Seminar

Walden Pond in the Heart of the City
The Ghost Behind *Ghosts*

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1 Introduction

At first sight, not much profound understanding can be gathered from *Ghosts*, second of three parts in Paul Auster's New York Trilogy: A private eye named Blue accepts a case in which he has to observe a man for several months, even years. Black, the target, does not seem to do anything except writing, reading and an occasional walk through New York. The story makes the novel hard to analyze and the author seems to make fun of that difficult task when he writes that "[...] he [Blue] looks Black in the eyes, but Black gives nothing away, looking back at Blue with utter blankness, dead eyes that seem to say there is nothing behind them and that no matter how hard Blue looks, he will never find a thing." (NYT 181) Does that allusion mean that literary scholars, all private eyes of their own, are not supposed to find anything to interpret in *Ghosts*?

On closer examination, however, the reader is struck by a series of secret hints that point out to the past, that is, straight to 19th-century New England and its transcendentalist scene around Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman, as will be explored in the following chapters. Literary centrepiece of this philosophical movement is Thoreau's *Walden*, written and rewritten in the middle of the 19th century and finally published in 1954, a book that also plays a big role in *Ghosts*, for both main characters are reading it almost simultaneously, and at the same time it acts as the key to the understanding of *Ghosts*, as will be seen in chapter 2.5. The literary scholar cannot help thinking that there must be a connection between those two works, and this hypothesis is supported by Auster himself, who once declared in an interview: "In *Ghosts*, the spirit of Thoreau is dominant—another kind of passionate excess. The idea of living with a kind of monastic intensity—and all the dangers that entails. Walden Pond in the heart of the City." (Jakubzik)

This essay's aim is to find out where the named spirit is visible, and where analogies between *Ghosts* and *Walden* can be drawn.

2 Hints to the American Renaissance

The American Renaissance was a literary movement in the 19th century. Knight describes its former restrictions:

For several decades, the term "American Renaissance" identified an accepted construct in our literary consciousness. Coined in 1941 by F. O. Matthiessen, the phrase referred to a handful of literary giants—Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, Poe, and Whitman—whose works dominated the literary landscape during the middle part of the nineteenth century. (Knight xi)

Concomitant with the American Renaissance, American Transcendentalism was developed by the above-mentioned writers, amongst several others. In his essay “The Transcendentalist”, Emerson explains the term as follows, yet with a rather inaccessible definition:

It is well known to most of my audience, that the Idealism of the present day acquired the name of Transcendental, from the use of that term by Immanuel Kant, of Konigsberg, who replied to the skeptical philosophy of Locke, which insisted that there was nothing in the intellect which was not previously in the experience of the senses, by showing that there was a very important class of ideas, or imperative forms, which did not come by experience, but through which experience was acquired; that these were intuitions of the mind itself; and he denominated them *Transcendental* forms. The extraordinary profoundness and precision of that man’s thinking have given vogue to his nomenclature, in Europe and America, to that extent, that whatever belongs to the class of intuitive thought, is popularly called at the present day *Transcendental*.¹ (Emerson, T)

Several passages and episodes of the novel point out to those transcendental minds, even the title itself, *Ghosts*, which refers to the dialogue between Black and Blue – disguised as Jimmy Rose – in which they talk about Thoreau and others coming to Orange Street to visit Plymouth Church, entitled by the speakers as “Ghosts. - Yes, there are ghosts all around us.” (NYT 176) Some minutes later, the topic comes to Hawthorne. “Another ghost.” (NYT 178) An unambiguous hint to what the novel is in fact all about: The spirits of the American Transcendentalism.

2.1 Ralph Waldo Emerson

Emerson appears rather late in the novel. There he acts as a reliable proof that reading (and understanding) *Walden* is a very hard thing to do: “no less a figure than Emerson once wrote in his journal that reading Thoreau made him feel nervous and wretched” (NYT 165) – that is, even the master struggles with the book his protégé has written. There is no better way to emphasize how difficult the text is.

2.2 Jimmy Rose

In *Ghosts*, Jimmy Rose used to be a beggar in Blue’s neighbourhood many years ago (NYT 173), and the detective adapts the character for his purpose to make contact with Black (NYT 173-179). Auster borrows Rose from Herman Melville’s short story “Jimmy Rose”, published in 1855, a little narration that tells us about the social fall of a once wealthy and popular nobleman who becomes a beggar (Ford 207).² The passage “poor Black. Poor soul. Poor blighted no one.” (NYT 184) as well as “Jimmy”’s reply

¹A full text can be found on <http://transcendentalism.tamu.edu/authors/emerson/essays/transcendentalist.html>.

²A full text can be found on http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Jimmy_Rose.

“God bless you. [...] Never fear, [...] God blesses all.” (NYT 174) evokes a resemblance with the recurring exclamation “Poor, poor Jimmy—God guard us all—poor Jimmy Rose!” in Melville’s short story.

2.3 Nathaniel Hawthorne and *Twice-Told Tales*

Nathaniel Hawthorne is first mentioned during the chat of Blue disguised as Jimmy Rose and Black, fairly late in *Ghosts*’ plot, but in a remarkable context: Black has just confided that his hobby is “to know how writers live, especially American writers,” with the aim to “understand things.” (NYT 177) As an example, he names Hawthorne, who shut himself up in his room for twelve years and did nothing but writing stories (NYT 177). Black summarizes Hawthorne’s narration “Wakefield”³. On closer examination, it becomes clear that the story of Mr. Wakefield renting an apartment and not wanting to return to his wife bears a strong resemblance to *Ghosts*. Mentioning the twelve years during which Hawthorne is locked up in his room and the 20 years Wakefield chose to separate himself from social life, one might suspect that for Blue a similar fate is about to come. Last but not least, a copy of Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales* is in Black’s bookcase (NYT 187).

2.4 Walt Whitman and *Leaves of Grass*

Walt Whitman is first mentioned right at the beginning of the novel, when the narrator states the setting of the story more precisely than before: “The address is unimportant. But let’s say Brooklyn Heights, for the sake of argument. Some quiet, rarely travelled street not far from the bridge – Orange Street perhaps. Walt Whitman handset the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* on this street in 1855, and it was here that Henry Ward Beecher railed against slavery from the pulpit of his red-brick church. So much for the local colour.” (NYT 138-139)

It takes some weeks until the reader meets Whitman again in the plot: It is mid-summer 1948, and Blue disguised himself as the beggar Jimmy Rose. On the street, he meets Black, who starts a dialogue with the question “Has anyone ever told you that you look just like Walt Whitman?” (NYT 174) Black tells the person opposite that the named poet used to work in Orange Street and continues with the story about Whitman’s brain being dropped by an assistant in a laboratory. After that, he adds another anecdote, in which Thoreau paid Whitman a visit – together with Bronson Alcott, another transcendental writer – and was disgusted by the chamber pot in the room (NYT 174 - 177).

When Blue enters Black’s room later, he notices that there is a copy of Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* in Black’s bookcase (NYT 187). Finally, the narrator mentions a

³A full text can be found on <http://www.online-literature.com/poe/156/>.

portrait of Whitman hanging between a photograph of Jackie Robinson and Robert Mitchum on one of the walls in Blue's apartment (NYT 192).

2.5 Henry David Thoreau and *Walden*

Again and again we come across Thoreau and his most famous piece of work, *Walden*. It runs through *Ghosts* like a common thread. On the very first day of the case, Blue looks through his binoculars and notices that Black is reading a book – “*Walden*, by Henry David Thoreau. Blue has never heard of it before and writes it down carefully in his notebook.” (NYT 141) The next morning at breakfast Black goes on with reading it (NYT 142). One week later, the day after Blue's first report about Black, the two of them take a walk and wind up in a bookstore. There Blue comes across a copy of *Walden*, which was published by Walter J. Black, Inc. in 1942, a confusing coincidence. The detective decides to buy it – for “[i]f he can't read read what Black writes, at least he can read what he reads. A long shot, he says to himself, but who knows that it won't give him some hint of what the man is up to.”(NYT 154) He realizes that at this point the book is his only connection to Black's mind.

Some weeks later, Blue watches a movie called *Out of the Past* and is caught by the story. The name of the main character, Jeff Markham, triggers a train of thoughts he cannot resist:

His real name is Markham – or, as Blue sounds it out to himself, mark him – and that is the whole point. He has been marked by the past, and once that happens, nothing can be done about it. Something happens, Blue thinks, and then it goes on happening forever. It can never be changed, can never be otherwise. Blue begins to be haunted by this thought, for he sees it as a kind of warning, a message delivered up from within himself, and try as he does to push it away, the darkness of this thought does not leave him.

One night, therefore, Blue finally turns to his copy of *Walden*. (NYT 164)

He struggles with whole chapters and does not enjoy reading; he cannot concentrate on the text but just wants it to end and himself to escape. Thoreau's world is inaccessible to him, he cannot retrace why someone would live like that voluntarily. He is disappointed: “Blue thought that he was going to get a story, or at least have something like a story, but this is no more than blather, an endless harangue about nothing at all” (NYT 165) – a feeling which might be familiar to readers of *Ghosts*!

Interestingly enough, Blue is wondering about “all these interminable descriptions of birds” right after an exhaustive monologue of the narrator concerning the movies Blue went into (NYT 162 - 164) – a long-winded passage which could bore the reader of *Ghosts* and might let him question the necessity of that part of the story.

However, Blue continues reading, even starts again, and gains a better understanding. The sentence “Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written”

which he notices in the third chapter of *Walden* (“Reading”) wises him up to the fact that his approach is wrong.

Now Auster put in his most conspicuous hint:

What he [Blue] does not know is that were he to find the patience to read the book in the spirit in which it asks to be read, his entire life would begin to change, and little by little he would come to a full understanding of his situation – that is to say, of Black, of White, of the case, of everything that concerns him. (NYT 165)

It is not merely the narrator talking about the character but rather the author addressing the reader directly and giving him instructions of reading the story properly in order to understand it: Read closely, notice the hints, think!, Auster seems to say.

After the incident in the post office (NYT 168 - 170), Blue suspects that he is the one being observed, and not the observer himself. This thought reminds him of a sentence he read in *Walden* and he reads it from his notebook: “For the most part, we are not where we are, but in a false position. Through an infinity of our natures, we suppose a case, and put ourselves into it, and hence are in two cases at the same time, and it is doubly difficult to get out.”⁴ (Walden 461) This leads to a train of thought in which Blue desperately realizes that he “feels like a man who has been condemned to sit in a room and go on reading a book for the rest of his life. [...] But if the book were an interesting one, perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad. He could get caught up in the story, so to speak, and little by little begin to forget himself. But this book offers him nothing. There is no story, no plot, no action – nothing but a man sitting alone in a room and writing a book” (NYT 171 - 172) and at the same time he wonders: “How to get out of the room that is the book that will go on being written for as long as he stays in the room?” (NYT 172) Blue is puzzled, it dawns on him that he is part of a story that is rewritten, with him as a protagonist. First he thinks about “reading a book” – a book that bores him, that has no content at all –, just to refer to “this book” as a piece of work in which someone does nothing but sitting and writing, which is exactly what he does. The mentioned book transforms from a book he is reading – *Walden* – to the story of his own life, and Blue realizes that he is nothing but the spineless marionette in a book that he cannot escape with his own free will. He cannot see further than the end of his nose, so he does not see the author in his fictional world. Out of desperation, in order to understand why and how he is trapped, he assumes that the ever-writing and -reading Black must be “the so-called writer of this book” (NYT 172). Blue questions the possibility of that fact, and concludes that although he adapted Black’s lifestyle and spent months in his presence, “[h]e has learned a thousand facts, but the only thing they have taught him is that he knows nothing. For the fact remains that none

⁴This implies that Blue has managed to finish the book, since this quotation appears in the very last chapter of *Walden*, “Conclusion”.

of this is possible. It is not possible for such a man as Black to exist.” (NYT 172) This declaration is reminiscent to Thoreau’s contemporaries, who cannot understand how it should be possible to live a spartan life alone in the woods. Thoreau is confronted with this lack of understanding and mentions it in *Walden*:

I should not obtrude my affairs so much on the notice of my readers if very particular inquiries had not been made by my townsmen concerning my mode of life, which some would call impertinent, though they do not appear to me at all impertinent, but, considering the circumstances, very natural and pertinent. Some have asked what I got to eat; if I did not feel lonesome; if I was not afraid; and the like. Others have been curious to learn what portion of my income I devoted to charitable purposes; and some, who have large families, how many poor children I maintained. (Walden 245)

Blue begins to doubt if what he sees is really what he gets. Common sense tells him that it cannot be possible to live like Black. “Perhaps all that writing is merely a sham,” the detective thinks, “– page after a page of it: a list of every name in the phone book, for example, or each word from the dictionary in alphabetical order,” and again a hint from Auster: “or a handwritten copy of *Walden*.” (NYT 172 - 173)

We meet Thoreau again several months later, in a speech Black delivers to “Jimmy Rose”: Black tells Rose the story about Thoreau coming to Brooklyn for listening to Henry Ward Beecher at Plymouth Church and for visiting Walt Whitman (NYT 176 - 177). Later on, reflecting on the things he has heard, “Blue cannot help feeling that Black was actually referring to [the case] all along – talking in riddles, so to speak, as though trying to tell Blue something, but not daring to say it out loud.” (NYT 179) Again the author speaks through Black, as was already examined earlier, and tells the reader to read carefully and to look behind the scenes.

The last time Auster points directly to Thoreau is towards the end of the novel, in the passage of Blue visiting Black’s apartment as the Fuller brush man. There he glances at the bookcase on the north wall and spots a copy of *Walden* (NYT 187). And indirect hint follows only one page later: Blue resigns himself to a daydream in which he is “somewhere else, far away from here, walking through these woods and swinging an axe over his shoulder. Alone and free, his own man at last.” (NYT 189)

3 Who is Mr Blue?

Blue is the private eye who does nothing but to observe Black, first passively by watching and following him, and later actively by conversing with him and reading what he is reading, namely *Walden*. Blue is an allegory of the transcendentalist, the Soul⁵ and, first of all, the transparent eye-ball Emerson describes in his famous essay “Nature”:

⁵According to Emerson, everything that is not Nature - the ME.

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.⁶
(Emerson, N)

Blue also stands for the uncomprehending contemporary who is confronted with a different outline of someone else's life. He cannot understand how someone can live like this ("But you can't call this a life, thinks Blue." (NYT 187)). He notices a change in his life and in his inside world, and he is seeking for an inner balance in order to feel at ease; a balance that every once in a while is caused by Black's presence: "There are moments when he feels so completely in harmony with Black, so naturally at one with the other man, that to anticipate what Black is going to do, to know when he will stay in his room and when he will go out, he need merely look into himself." (NYT 158)

4 Who is Mr Black?

Black is the character Blue struggles with all the time, and later Blue even hurts and abandons him. In several emotional outbursts Blue hates him, likes him, pities him, feels both seperated and one with him, knows what his counterpart is up to do and does not know what he does at all and why. Black represents Nature, based on Emerson's definition in which he states that

[p]hilosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, Note that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE. (Emerson, N)

Black sometimes seems to be blind: at least his eyes do not reveal what he is thinking, as is mentioned in several passages where he is looking in Blue's direction (NYT 139, 156, 181); it is hard to acquire an understanding of him by the one who pays attention to him – namely the reader, philosopher and transcendentalist –, and some efforts are necessary to gain a consciousness of how Blue – that is, Nature, life, transcendentalism – in fact works.

5 Similarities between *Ghosts* and *Walden*

5.1 When Everything Started ...

"The place is New York, the time is the present, and neither one will ever change." (NYT 137) While in the first paragraph of *Ghosts* the narrator suggests that both the precise place and the date are rather unimportant, he relativizes his elusive expression

⁶A full text can be found on <http://transcendentalism.tamu.edu/authors/emerson/nature>.

some lines later by the clear statement: “It is 3 February 1947.” (NYT 138) The day where Blue’s case and the change of his life begins seems not to be chosen randomly – it is the author’s birthday (Jakubzik 189). Yet the narrator does not refer to this coincidence.

In *Walden* the beginning of Thoreau’s quest is pointed out as well, “which, by accident, was on Independence Day, or the Fourth of July, 1845” (W 300) – another coincidence. At the same time, we have here two dates which both bear their own importance: First, because they mark days when “history was written” outside the text; second, they are intratextual starting points of the alteration of the past in the works’ realities – new chapters in two lives.

5.2 Long-Term Observation in a Nutshell

Blue went to Brooklyn Heights to study Black in 1947, and one hundred years before, Thoreau left Walden after studying nature for two years. Observing neighbours, or *one* neighbour, respectively, is another important link between *Ghosts* and *Walden*. Blue watches Black doing whatever he does, either from his apartment window or outside by following him on the streets. His observations are written down in his notebook and are later formulated in detail in the form of a report. Writing down what he sees makes Blue understand the world; he catches a clear sight of what is going on outside. Auster puts it as follows: “Words are transparent for him, great windows that stand between him and the world, and until now they have never impeded his view, have never even seemed to be there.” (NYT 148) He always used to stick “to known and verifiable facts” (NYT 148), but when it comes to write about Black, Blue must tell himself that “[t]his isn’t the story of my life, after all, [...] I’m supposed to be writing about him, not myself” (NYT 149), and he adds in a puzzled tone: “what happened is not really what happened.” (NYT 149) As we can gather from the text, this long-term observation goes on for at least one year and several months, presumably until autumn 1948.⁷ However, the narrator tells us at the beginning of the novel that “the case will go on for years” (NYT 138). This application of a story whose story time stretches over a longer time-period (two years) but being narrated as if it took place in a shorter period (one year) also occurs in *Walden*, but with the difference that Thoreau refers

⁷When Blue makes his first appearance as Jimmy Rose, we learn that it is midsummer, 1948 (NYT 173). Auster does not give a detailed account on the weeks that passed between this incident and the end of the story, but there are some clues: He mentions the next weekly report after the Rose-Black-dialogue and the receiving of the cheque (NYT 180); the next night the meeting at the Algonquin Hotel takes place (180), the day after that Blue disguises as the Fuller brush man (NYT 185), three nights later he enters Black’s room and steals his own reports (NYT 188). After that, he slouches over for “several days” and misses to write his next report (NYT 192) until “one afternoon”, he watches Black sitting on the stoop and visits him at night, beats him up and takes Black’s book which he finishes the next morning (NYT 192, 197). From all that the reader can gather of those pieces of information, it must be late summer or early autumn 1948.

to it in chapter II: “The present was my next experiment of this kind, which I purpose to describe more at length, for convenience putting the experiment of two years into one.” (W 300) and again at the end of the chapter “Spring”: “Thus was my first year’s life in the woods completed; and the second year was similar to it.” (W 456) Like Blue, Thoreau also devotes his time to observing what is going on around him and later writes about it, such as the plants that grow around his place (W 320 f.), a woodchopper and his view of life and work (W 340 f.), the village community (chapter X “The Village”), the ponds in the woods (chapter IX “The Ponds” and XVI “The Pond in Winter”), animals (chapter XV “Winter Animals”) and visitors and other people in the area (chapter XIV “Former Inhabitants and Winter Visitors”). During his two years in solitude, he seemed to have observed everything that occurred in his nearest surroundings.

5.3 Solitude and Thoughts

Living alone and being on your own is another issue that links *Ghosts* and *Walden*. Both protagonists feel more or less the urge to do so, whereas their motivations differ – Blue is in it for the money, Thoreau has seen this way of living and experiencing simplicity as an experiment from the very beginning. It takes a couple of days until Blue gives in to his feeling to long for companionship and writes a long letter to Brown (NYT 158 - 159). Interestingly enough, it does not occur to him to make a phone call or visit someone. After all, he is still in civilization, in the midst of a metropolis with 8 million inhabitants. Not even his fiancée is worth to be called, although he is craving for it all the time. He is confused that he does not simply do it, “for he cannot remember a time in his life when he has been so reluctant to do a thing he so clearly wants to do.” (NYT 147) But for the sake of similarities, Blue refrains from doing so, and he cannot explain that – Thoreau was not interested in having close relations to someone (there was neither a woman nor a man he shared his life with), so Blue has to suffer from the author’s idea to live this experiment through alone, and of course he cannot guess that his will is externally controlled by an invisible master. “I’m changing, he says to himself. Little by little, I’m no longer the same.” (NYT 148) This explanation must suffice for him.

Blue enjoys his solitude most when he is in complete harmony with Black. “In other words, the more deeply entangled he becomes, the freer he is. [...] At those moments when he feels closest to Black, however, he can even begin to lead the semblance of an independent life.” (NYT 160) However, it cannot be denied that a change is in progress. Not only does he begin to read *Walden*, which is a difficult material to work through, especially after decades of only enjoying detective magazines, newspapers and few books, but he is alone with his mind for the first time in his life, almost forced by

the situation to spend his thoughts on his inner self and to look beyond the surfaces of the world as it appears to him. His main task adds an opportunity to this mental occupation with himself: “for in spying out at Black across the street, it is as though Blue were looking into a mirror, and instead of merely watching another, he finds that he is also watching himself.” (NYT 145 - 146)

And Thoreau? He dedicated a whole chapter to Solitude (“V. Solitude”, W), and he loves to have “my own sun and moon and stars, and a little world all to myself.” (W 331) “There can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of nature and has his senses still”, he explains, and “I have never felt lonesome, or in the least oppressed by a sense of solitude, but once, and that was a few weeks after I came to the woods, when, for an hour, I doubted if the near neighborhood of man was not essential to a serene and healthy life.” (W 332) He finds “such sweet and beneficent society in Nature” (W 332), like Blue does when being in total balance with Black. He cannot understand why people are baffled that he chose this lonely life in the wilderness. “Why should I feel lonely? is not our planet in the Milky Way? [...] What sort of space is that which separates a man from his fellows and makes him solitary? I have found that no exertion of the legs can bring two minds much nearer to one another.” (W 333) By choosing this physical separation of his own free will, Thoreau is much more relaxed when it comes to loneliness. Blue, on the other hand, is confused and thrown in at the deep end, but he manages to keep on and does pretty well until the end of the novel. Besides his visits to the bar and his accidental meeting with his future wife, he does not make any personal contact with other people but Black.

5.4 A Spartan Room

At the beginning of the case, Blue moves in to the apartment that was rented for him. The place is “fully equipped, and as he walks around the room inspecting the furnishings, he discovers that everything in the place is new: the bed, the table, the chair, the rug, the linens, the kitchen supplies, everything.” There is also a closet with a new set of clothes for him, and Blue finds the apartment “cosy enough, cosy enough” (NYT 139) This listing of furniture, household appliances and superfluous items (the clothes) emphasizes that Blue does not lack of anything, he can be perfectly happy with his new living space and feels comfortable with it. It does not even bother him that he has lived in bigger places before; the new apartment seems to resemble the way in which he has lived before.

However, the description of Black’s room turns out to be considerably different:

The room is much as he [Blue] imagined it would be, though perhaps even more austere. Nothing on the walls, for example, which surprises him a little [...]. Other than that, there's precious little to contradict his former notions. It's the same monk's cell he saw in his mind: the small, neatly made bed in one corner, the kitchenette in another corner, everything spotless, not a crumb to be seen. Then, in the centre of the room facing the window, the wooden table with a single stiffbacked wooden chair. Pencils, pens, a typewriter. A bureau, a night table, a lamp. A bookcase on the north wall, but no more than several books in it: *Walden*, *Leaves of Grass*, *Twice-Told Tales*, a few others. No telephone, no radio, no magazines. [...] But you can't call this a life, thinks Blue. You can't really call it anything. It's a no man's land, the place you come to at the end of the world. (NYT 186-187)

Thoreau's hut does not have much more to offer either:

My furniture, part of which I made myself—and the rest cost me nothing of which I have not rendered an account—consisted of a bed, a table, a desk, three chairs, a looking-glass three inches in diameter, a pair of tongs and andirons, a kettle, a skillet, and a frying-pan, a dipper, a wash-bowl, two knives and forks, three plates, one cup, one spoon, a jug for oil, a jug for molasses, and a japanned lamp. [...] Indeed, the more you have of such things the poorer you are.
(W 287-288)

The resemblance of the furnishings is striking. At least Thoreau was more into social interactions than Black and owned three chairs, “one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society.” (W 337) As for literature, Thoreau has a “few books on my table” like Black; one of them being a volume of Homer (W 359).

Having his chance to enter that room alone one night at nine o'clock, Blue is overwhelmed and totally consumed by the presence of the incarnate transcendental philosophy the Walden hut stands for; “he feels everything go dark inside him” (NYT 190), that is to say: black through and through. He becomes Emerson's “transparent eye-ball” with the “currents of the Universal Being” circulating through him, or, as William Henry Channing puts it in his definition of transcendentalism, “he [the transcendentalist] sought to hold communion face to face with the unnameable Spirit of his spirit, and gave himself up to the embrace of nature's perfect joy, as a babe seeks the breast of a mother.” (Channing)

He takes some of the papers from the desk and recognizes them as his own writings; so after all, Black's room has given him the opportunity to regard his own thoughts that have once poured out of him, and the chance to realize that they are meaningless – which implies that he himself is able to see that he has changed since he wrote them.

5.5 Coming to an End

It is midsummer 1948 when Blue awakes from his stupor and finally takes action in the form of setting up contact with Black, first by begging money from him as Jimmy Rose and later by joining him for some drinks in a hotel bar in the role of the self insurance salesman Snow. At this point, Blue is already certain that the person opposite knows whom he is talking to (“Play dumb, Blue tells himself, for he knows that it would make no sense to reveal who he is, even though he knows that Black knows.” (NYT 181)). By the end of the talk, Black finally gives an explanation of the whole purpose: “He [Blue] needs my [Black’s] eye looking at him. He needs me to prove he’s alive.” (NYT 184) A single tear rolls down Black’s cheek, a tear that seems to say “It’s over now. Your task is finished,” and he hastily gets up and leaves. Blue, too, suspects that Black is “urging him on towards whatever end he is planning” and he has got the feeling that “for the first time since the case began he is no longer standing where he was” (NYT 184). The episode in the Algonquin Hotel is a key role which induces a foreseeable end. Assuming that Blue stands for the truth-and-self-seeking transcendentalist and Black for the spirit of nature, the former finally gets an answer from the latter: “He needs me to prove he’s alive.” The characters in this dialogue are mixed up, and suddenly the one who is observed claims that in fact he has observed the observer all the time. Although the speech is often interrupted by the narrator’s insertions that tell us who is currently talking, it is hard for the reader to tell both protagonists apart – nature and human become one after this revelation.

However, the story will first be over forever when the hero walks out for good (NYT 197), like Thoreau does in *Walden*. After two years of living his experiment, Thoreau simply leaves his hut, and like him, Blue “stands up from his chair, puts on his hat, and walks through the door. And from this moment on, we know nothing.” (NYT 198) After the outstretched, long-winded narration of the story, this meagre ending of *Ghosts* is comparatively as unspectacular as the end of *Walden*, in which it is said: “Thus was my first year’s life in the woods completed; and the second year was similar to it. I finally left Walden September 6th, 1847.” (W 456)

6 Conclusion

Over the years many readers have complaint about the monotony of the plots, the unsatisfying endings and the futility of reading Auster's *New York Trilogy* and especially *Ghosts*. By reading reviews of the novel on amazon.com, for instance, a nice cross-section of opinions of disappointed readers can be gathered.

On closer inspection, *Ghosts* is more than a disturbing or even boring pale imitation of its predecessor *City of Glass*: The novel stands for itself, it is an individual piece of work with a thoughtful depth and the well thought-out composition of a writer who has an enormous knowledge of New England's literary history as well as a remarkable gift to transfer this knowledge into an independent story with just enough hints to show what it is actually *really* about – and yet with *not* enough obvious hints so that there remain plenty of unanswered questions for the reader to dwell on.

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. When the play, it may be the tragedy, of life is over, the spectator goes his way. It was a kind of fiction, a work of the imagination only, so far as he was concerned. This doubleness may easily make us poor neighbors and friends sometimes. (W 334)

Blue may have liked this passage if he had only read *Walden* in the spirit in which it asks to be read.

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8 Honesty Declaration

I hereby declare that the work submitted is my own and that all passages and ideas that are not mine have been fully and properly acknowledged. I am aware that I will fail the entire course should I include passages and ideas from other sources and present them as if they were my own.

Dortmund, 2012-09-06