

## The Blithedale Neuromance

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With the cunning of a literary alchemist, Nathaniel Hawthorne distilled the essence from a substantial nothing, and turned the blatant lack of a genuine American romance tradition into his personal working atmosphere. The Preface to his 1852 *Blithedale Romance* reads:

Among ourselves [...] there is as yet no such Faery Land, so like the real world, that, in a suitable remoteness, one cannot well tell the difference, but with an atmosphere of strange enchantment [...]. This atmosphere is what the American romancer needs. (BR 2)

Hawthorne subsequently transformed this atmosphere into literary substance, and himself into the notorious great negotiator of the thin interface between the real and the imaginary in mid-19th century American literature. The stereotype of Hawthorne, the famous romancer, however, veils Hawthorne, the necromancer, who through the medium of his narrator Miles Coverdale, prophesied

a period when science [...] was bringing forward, anew, a hoard of facts and imperfect theories, that had partially won credence, in elder times, but which modern skepticism had swept away as rubbish. These things were now tossed up again, out of the surging ocean of human thought and experience. (BR 187).

It presumably takes some imagination to realize what is meant here: the imminence of sea changes in present-day cultural theories, influenced by the dawning of a new, technologically implemented age. The American romancer Nathaniel Hawthorne foretells the ontological atmosphere, or conditions of being, for a new type of romancer: the *neuromancer* of the United State of Cyberspace as he dwells in the Gibsonian “matrix” or in Neal Stephenson’s “Street.”<sup>1</sup> Or, for that matter, in Hawthorne’s Faery Land which, to repeat the author’s own words, appears so like the real world, that, in a suitable remote-

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. William Gibson, *Neuromancer*, New York: Ace, 1984, and Neal Stephenson, *Snow Crash*, Harmondsworth: Penguin (ROC), 1993.

ness, one cannot well tell the difference, but with an atmosphere of strange enchantment.

In the following, the heuristic assumption that *The Blithedale Romance* can be read as anticipating the existence in a global cyberspace community marks the take-off for the essay's course and concerns. On the basis of this hypothesis, it can for the moment be illustrated how the pseudoscientific discourse of mesmeric spiritualism and clairvoyancy which pervades the whole of Coverdale's narration functions both as a descriptive mode for the new medial phenomenon of cyberspace (thus regains "credence" and can be "tossed up again," as the narrative put it) and as a programmatic theoretical vademecum for an ideal, i.e. egalitarian and in that sense "socialist" cyberspace community. Via the neurotechnological interface device of the biochip, life in the cybercommunity's virtual reality allows for immediate and instantaneous mind-to-mind contact between those that are "plugged in." By such means, the individual melts into the society of literally likeminded people, hence partakes of the fluidity of a likeminded people.<sup>2</sup>

Hawthorne's text alludes to this ideal in the politico-theoretical maxims of French social theorist Charles Fourier as well as in the spiritistic theories of Priscilla's master in her "career" as the medium of the Veiled Lady, Caligari figure Professor Westervelt.<sup>3</sup> Both views, Fourier's and Westervelt's, echo the

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<sup>2</sup> Hawthorne's visions found both confirmation and extension in Marshall McLuhan's 1964 *Understanding Media* verdict: "Today, after more than a century of electronic technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man—the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society, much as we have already extended our senses and our nerves by the various media" (McLuhan 1965: 3f.).

<sup>3</sup> Coverdale, himself a dyed-in-the-wool spiritist, feels ambiguously attracted and repulsed by Westervelt's contrivances. "I detested this kind of man," he reports, "and all the more, because a part of my own nature showed itself responsive to him" (*BR* 102). Towards the end of the tale, after Zenobia's suicide, Coverdale likewise resumes: "Heaven deal with Westervelt according to his nature and deserts!—that is to say, annihilate him. He was altogether earthly, worldly, made for time and its gross objects, and incapable [...] of so much as one spiritual idea. Whatever stain Zenobia had, was caught from him. [...] Yet his reflections possessed their share of truth" (*BR* 241). Cf. also Annette Kolodny's "Introduction" to *The Blithedale Romance* (Nathaniel Hawthorne, op. cit., vii-xxx), here xxv and xxvii.

Utopian ideal of unimpeded transmental interaction in a necessarily “fluid” medium of pansensory and supradimensional qualities. With regard to Fourier’s theoremes, Coverdale concedes that they “attracted a good deal of my attention, from the analogy which I could not but recognize between his system and our own” (BR 53). Subsequently, he translates the ultimate telos of Fourier’s elaboration to the fierce opponent of the Frenchman’s ideas, the philanthropist Hollingsworth:

“When, as a consequence of human improvement,” said I, “the globe shall arrive at its final perfection, the great ocean is to be converted into a particular kind of lemonade, such as was fashionable at Paris in Fourier’s time. He calls it *limonade à cèdre*.” (BR 53)

Westervelt’s spiritistically informed worldview specifies Fourier’s description of the intercontinental communication device, or world wide web, in terms of a “delectable beverage” (BR 53). On the occasion of his magic mesmeric moun-tebank performance at a village-hall, the magician-professor likewise points to a liquid, a “universally pervasive fluid, as he affirmed it to be” (BR 200), which ultimately empowers its user to transcend the limitations of space and time, but which requires a carrier device. In the professor’s case, it is Priscilla who assumes this role: she functions as “his familiar spirit, through whose medium he gained cognizance of whatever happened, in regions near or remote” (BR 188). Westervelt lets Priscilla stage as the mysterious Veiled Lady whose veil effectively “insulate[s] her from the material world, from time and space, and [...] endow[s] her with many of the privileges of a disembodied spirit” (BR 6). The veiled vehicle Pricilla thus functions as the *technical medium* (or processing unit) which, once started up, grants its user access to the *fluid mediality* of spirits or, for that matter, to the realm of all-integrating interactivity and total mind-to-mind flow as it would be the case with the neuromancers in a United Cyberstate of Virtual Reality. Accordingly Westervelt prophesied

a new era that was dawning upon the world; an era that would link soul to soul, and the present life to what we call futurity, with a closeness that should finally convert both worlds into one great, mutually conscious brotherhood. (BR 200)

In the meantime, it has been dawning on us as conceivable in theory *and* feasible in engineering practice: the mutually conscious brotherhood, or community of a likeminded people, whose transmental intercourse finds processing in the fluidity of a digital, technologically implemented new medium. In fact, such device appears like the further development of the Foucaultian *pan-opticon*,<sup>4</sup> i.e. like a construction that now affects and embraces *all* human senses. Consequently, it is Westervelt himself, master of the spiritual medium of Priscilla or, for that matter, user of the veiled vehicle technique, whom Coverdale depicts as a powerful controller capable of ubiquitous appearance:

This man [...] was endowed with a cat-like circumspection; and though precisely the most unspiritual quality in the world, it was almost as effective as spiritual insight, in making him acquainted with whatever it suited him to discover. (*BR* 158)<sup>5</sup>

Westervelt's endowment, then, the pansensory transindividual exchange beyond the boundaries of space and even time, seems to represent the indispensable medial complement for the ultimate perfection of the Blithedalers' ideal. A nice and neat conclusion for all: for Westervelt and Hawthorne, who stage as the visionaries of the neuromance age, for Coverdale, whose mesmeric quirk lends the neuromancer story a perfect terminology, and last but not least for the essay's own persuasiveness.

But the investigation must not end here, for as yet, nothing has been said about the Blithedale reality, nor can any substantial statements be made about a corresponding neuromancers' practice. And still, it is in the field of practice where the conceptual shift of communitarian perfection from a mere imaginary ideal in Hawthorne's mid-19th century times to a technologically implemented and feasible item today shows most clearly. Whereas an analysis of *The Blithedale Romance's* plot indicates that the difference between lofty theory and concrete practice as well as the one between

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et Punir. Naissance de la prison*, Paris: Gallimard, 1975.

<sup>5</sup> Coverdale does so with some reason, as the following sentence indicates where he relates how Westervelt spots him at his hotel window: "He now proved it, considerably to my discomfiture, by

community and individual remains irreconcilable for good, in the Blithedale Neuromance the contrast would dissolve and be replaced with an arrangement whose characteristic features are integration and wholeness.

*The Blithedale Romance* illustrates how due to individual overdoses of practical zeal the fluid ideal of a medially processed mind-to-mind socialism precipitates into the solid fact of its own *impracticality*. Miles Coverdale relates the failure of the Blithedale enterprise and the subsequent disillusionment of four of the communitarians: the mesmeric poet and “transcendental Yankee” (*BR* 162) himself; Zenobia, a feminist writer and Westervelt’s alleged ex-wife; philanthropist Hollingsworth, whose “heart, I imagine, was never really interested in our socialist scheme, but was forever busy with his strange [...] plan for the reformation of criminals” (*BR* 36). Last there is Zenobia’s half-sister Priscilla, whose entrance at Blithedale as “a slim and unsubstantial girl” (*BR* 26) resounds the “lack of earthly substance” (*BR* 188) of her appearance as the “disembodied spirit” of Westervelt’s Veiled Lady.<sup>6</sup>

Blithedale was founded on lofty assumptions which in retrospect turn out to be congenital defects. As an obvious pre-requisite, “the footing, on which we all associated at Blithedale, was widely different from conventional society” in a number of respects—in the question of human passion for instance, where the community idea “seemed to authorize any individual, of either sex, to fall in love with any other, regardless of what would elsewhere be judged suitable and prudent” (*BR* 72). The Blithedale creation not only propagates explicit transmental fluidity, but also its equivalent, unimpeded transemotional flow—Fourier’s lemonade sea an ocean of “Taste the Feeling!”

Indeed, as far as the theory of transemotionality is concerned, the Blithedale view converges with Fourier’s. But a wide chasm opens up in the

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detecting and recognizing me, at my post of observation” (*BR* 158).

<sup>6</sup> Priscilla’s frame may hence be suspected to have stimulated, if not co-effected, Coverdale’s stylistic spleen, as Zenobia resumes: “as she has hardly any physique, a poet, like Mr. Miles Coverdale, may be allowed to think her spiritual” (*BR* 34).

question of its realization, or transfer into practice. Fourier himself opted for sexual permissiveness among communitarians and claimed that a well-balanced proportion of the abstract emotional household to its natural correlate, concrete sexual intercourse, will have positive repercussion on the community's overall prosperity. This, in turn, marks a strong deviation from the airy Blithedale ideal of total submission of individual interests to those of the community; consequently, it is Hollingsworth who condemns Fourier as representative of what he calls "the selfish principle":

I never will forgive this fellow! He has committed the Unpardonable Sin! For what more monstrous iniquity could the Devil himself contrive, than to choose the selfish principle—the principle of all human wrong [...] which it is the whole aim of spiritual discipline to eradicate—to choose it as the master-workman of his system? (*BR* 53)

Hollingsworth's demonization of Fourierism in the name of a Blithedale orthodoxy falls back on the dogmatist, however, when dogmatism proves to be just another version of the shunned selfish principle. Concludes Coverdale with reference to philanthropists of the Hollingsworth type:

They have an idol, to which they consecrate themselves high-priest, and deem it holy work to offer sacrifices of whatever is most precious [...]. And the higher and purer the original object, and the more unselfishly it may have been taken up, the slighter is the probability that they can be led to recognize the process, by which godlike benevolence has been debased into all-devouring egotism. (*BR* 70f.)

Zenobia makes a similar charge against Hollingsworth: "Are you a man? No, but a monster! A cold, heartless, self-beginning and self-ending piece of mechanism" (*BR* 218).

Ultimately, Blithedale's major representatives are entangled in the paradoxical struggle between imaginary ideal and actual practice. Concrete individual passion intervenes time and again with the pretentious theory of the communitarians, and turns the 19th century issue of "Make love, not war!" into its painful contrary. Both Priscilla and Zenobia feel attracted by Hollingsworth, who picks the younger, saving her from Westervelt's dubious influence, and lets down Zenobia, who subsequently kills herself. Coverdale, Hollingsworth's

rival in the courtship for Priscilla, abandons his love schemes at last and retires to his writing desk, brooding over “these inactive years of meridian manhood, with my bachelorship, with the unsatisfied retrospect that I fling back on life, and my listless glance towards future” (*BR* 247). In short: the transmental flow is bogged for good, and hardens into resentments and antipathy—a poor outcome, compared to the lofty assumption of a community in which everybody is supposed to love everybody else.

All this is mirrored on the level of the narrator’s idiosyncratic style, i.e. Coverdale’s excessive wallowing in spiritistic terminology and his consistent use of the key imagery of *fluid* vs. *solid*. Thoroughly exploiting the word field of either literally or metaphorically associated terms (unsubstantial/substantial; thin and dense; melting and moulding; liquid and wax; airy, ethereal and soft; ghost, spirit, shadow, spectral character and chimeras; embodiment, form and shape; material and non-material, i.e. ideal; weight, matter, etc., etc.), Coverdale’s imagery appeals to all sensory and supersensory organs in order to hammer home one central message. With regard to the Blithedale enterprise, the theoretical, the ideal, the abstract and the imaginary, all loosely coupled and “fluid” in character, prove to be incommensurate with and will ultimately be outweighed by the strictly coupled and “solid” reality of concrete practice. Symptomatically, this quasi-chemical transformation from a fluid ideal to the solid fact of its impracticality gains shape in the protagonists themselves. Priscilla for instance transforms from Westervelt’s spiritistic medium into the solid character of a “guardian of her companion” (*BR* 242) Hollingsworth. And it is in the figure of Zenobia where the transition from the fluid to the solid finds its most obvious representation. “It was as if a great, invisible, irresistible weight were pressing her to the earth” (*BR* 221), reports Coverdale on Zenobia’s state of mind immediately before her suicide at the end of the tale, which then sheds the feminist’s weightless soul from a dead body that matters. On the level of signification, the narrator’s reproachful double reference to Zenobia’s

“wounded heart” likewise sheds the abstract metaphorical use from the literal one that denotes the concrete injured organ. By means of an iron hook, Hollingsworth had lifted the drowned body to the pond’s surface:

“You have wounded the poor thing’s breast,” said [Foster, another communitarian] to Hollingsworth. “Close by her heart, too!”  
“Ha!” cried Hollingsworth, with a start.  
And so he had, indeed, both before and after death. (*BR* 235)

In total, the communitarians’ “hope [...] that, between theory and practice, a true and available mode of life might be struck out” (*BR* 63) remains unfulfilled for good because “two distinct individuals [...] can never be melted, or wielded into one substance” (*BR* 66). Reduced to a common denominator, Hawthorne’s skeptical view on the Blithedale enterprise is *separative*: the community falls apart into its constituent members, and theory remains strictly separate from practice.

Things could be different, however, in the 21st century remake of the mid-19th century tale. The Blithedale Neuromance could with some more reason hope that an available mode of life might be struck out between theory and practice. The imminent breakthrough in the field of present-day engineering sciences, by itself a transformation from the theoretical sketch on the drawing-board to its implementation in the high-tech lab, would in a corollary transformation combine and irrevocably integrate socialist theory and communitarian practice.

Once again, and step by step: the interface device of the biochip would establish the contact between the very network that regulates the sensory transmission inside the individual, the neuronal system, and the quasi-neuronal digital network system outside it. There, in this outside, a corresponding processing unit likewise regulates the transindividual flow of mind-data from every single to every other communitarian—so much for the technical side of it. What is crucial, now, is the recognition that here, two or more distinct individuals not just communicate with each other, but indeed melt and wield

into one substance, as Hawthorne put it. In neuronal terms they abandon their distinctness (or their quality of the separative) and integrate into a single, holistic social hyper-mind, molded into the theoretical “body” of a perfectly practising communitarian state.

But still, but again: all this is theory—a suspicious conclusion, after all that has found unfolding before. The question of practicality will, it looks, haunt the item like an ever-returning spirit until the technological implementation will have been accomplished at last. Until then—speculations: how does a logged-in Blithedale neuromancer feed and drink? Assumed that there is a way, how does a drunken neuromancer's intoxicated mind affect the social hypermind in Cyberspace? How do the neuromancer's orgasms? Does she or he *have* any at all? How does cybersex look like, then? Neurowanker?

And yet, it looks as if the Priscilla of the present, i.e. the electronic medium, will keep on fascinating the theorist as much as Hawthorne's Priscilla, the former spiritistic medium, enchanted Coverdale. Veiled in his words, this amounts to

the confession [...] essential to the full understanding of my story. The reader [...] is entitled to this one word more. As I write it, he will charitably suppose me to blush, and turn away my face: - I - I myself - was in love - with - *Priscilla*. (BR 247)

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