

Herman Melville, Mad Narcissus: The Image of Identity in “The Piazza.”

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*Abstract*

“It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life,” Herman Melville writes in *Moby Dick*. Here, Melville taps into a discussion on the nature of images which has haunted western philosophy since its dawn. Images, the unnerving conclusion is, make things appear which do not exist. In the image, then, there is a divide between appearance and Being. A divide, furthermore, which allows for appearances to traverse our world with complete disregard for Being. Whatever appears as image, disappears as substance. And so, what appears as an image is not really *there* even if it seduces us to think it is. Within western philosophy, images have, therefore, often been seen as both seductive and deceitful. Plato, for example, saw the problematic of the image extend into language in poetry; poetry being the language of the imagination, showing us what is *not* there and diverting one’s mind from philosophical discourse which, supposedly, shows us what *is* there. And more recently, the confrontation with the mirror-image has been seen as leading to one’s departure from oneself in the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan. Taking up both of these accounts, this thesis seeks to explore these workings of the image within the poetics of Herman Melville, and more specifically, in the self-reflective short story “The Piazza” which he wrote towards the end of his career. Rather than simply seeing the image as a threat to subjectivity, however, this paper attempts to also read in Melville’s struggles with self-imagination a way that allows us to regard the image in another light. Drawing both from Melville’s encounter with early German romanticism as well as from post-structuralist theory, this paper suggests that Melville’s work gives us an occasion to think of the image as a place where we might encounter something *other*. Refusing to either grasp, or to let go of this disappearance concurrent to all imaginary appearance, Melville sustains it in its phantom-like strangeness.

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*Acronyms used for cited works.*

*SL* : Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*.

*SB*: Maurice Blanchot, *The Step (Not) Beyond*.

*WD*: Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*.

*GI*: Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*.

*IO*: Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*.

And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all.

—Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*.

The image of life, Herman Melville seems to insist, is also the image of the phantom of life. Or, rather: as soon as we see life as an image, life itself becomes phantasmic. Indeed, considering the image, something seems to haunt us. This is so, perhaps, because the image denotes the possibility that a thing—or, indeed, a person—is able to depart from itself; able to appear without it being there. The image, then, attests to our fragility because it shows us that we, too, can depart from ourselves. As Maurice Blanchot has noted, the experience of looking at an image is eerily similar to the experience of looking at a dead body, itself nothing but the appearance of a person who has, after all, departed (*SL* 256). For Blanchot, the dead body attests to the moment where a person has passed entirely into his resemblance: he is nothing but an image. In this sense, the image denotes a lack of life; the image as apparition. Images might be morbid, but in their capacity to show us what is not there, they remain undeniably attractive. In this sense, every image is a mirage, promising to satisfy our severest thirsts. It is precisely because they remain ungraspable that they, in turn, have a hold over us, and before we know it we plunge into them and drown, just like Narcissus. Images, as we will see, call out to us to leave ourselves behind.

We might then ask ourselves: where does the image end? Certainly, Plato already saw the problematic of the image as a problematic of containment, signalling its insurgence as a straight line leading from the image of pure resemblance, the mirror-image, to painting, and finally to its infiltration into the domain of language. Poetry, language-as-image, is the language of allegory and resemblance, of masquerades and theatre, or, simply, of mimesis. It is the language which shows that which is not: a clear disruption of the Parmenidean ideal. But after Immanuel Kant declared Platonic ideas and the things-in-themselves to be inaccessible to human knowledge, is this not the fate of all language? Is not, in other words, all language “merely” allegorical, simply an image?

Certainly, it were the romanticists of the *Athenaeum* who, right after Kant, declared the imagination to be at the very basis of reality. Friedrich Nietzsche, in turn, declared truth to be nothing but a “mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms” (146). And Jacques Derrida concurs with Jorge Luis Borges

writing that: “universal history is but the history of several metaphors” (114). Our reality has not simply become something *resembling* reality, but resemblance itself has taken the place of reality. Reality as the mirror-image that reflects nothing: “the age of simulation thus begins with a liquidation of all referentials,” writes Jean Baudrillard (4). To be is to be an image; to be imaginary is to be real. This “hyperreality,” as Baudrillard’s calls, not longer has to answer for anything outside of itself: it is its own truth. Now, the image effectively becomes an idol and in it, life becomes myth. The dangers of such a proposition need hardly to be articulated: being its own truth, the image becomes free from being questioned. Hyperreality is what all advertisement and propaganda strives for.

But if we look a little closer at the proposition of reality-as-metaphor, we need to conclude that the image cannot be complete in itself for metaphor implies transference.<sup>1</sup> It implies movement, switching places, coming and going. This is precisely so because, in the image, appearance and disappearance go hand in hand. Which is to say that the fact of appearing is paired with the fact of disappearing. And so whatever disappears, subsists in its disappearance. Here we might return to Blanchot’s notion of the dead body: this “image” testifies to the withdrawal of life. We cannot look at a dead body without regarding this essential absence which makes us question the very presence of the “here.” Looking at the body of a departed person, we ask ourselves: “where did he go?” He is not here, nor is he anywhere else: he is nowhere. “But then,” Blanchot insists, “nowhere is here” (256). An image, then, is never plain and simple presence, but it always carries with it its other side which remains out of sight; every image is incomplete or the presence of absence.

It is this incompleteness, announced within the image itself, neither a part of it nor separable from it, which we cannot—and should not—let go of. In a world where “our visual culture fashions our self-perceptions and our self-understandings in terms of images” (Crockett 188), we are continually challenged to keep thinking the image *as image*. To think, in other words, images as modes of incompleteness rather than as idols, in order to retain an open space within presence. For, after all, it is only in this space that something or someone *other*, could appear. And it is art which might help us to do so. Even if an artwork always runs the risk of falling victim “to the operations idolatrous intimidation,” Jean-Luc Nancy writes,

it is no less so that within what has since the Renaissance gradually come to be named “art” [. . .] what will always have been at stake is the production of images (visual, auditory) that are exactly the opposite of a making of idols: [. . .] not a thick and tautological presence before which one prostrates oneself but rather the presentation of an open absence within the given itself—within its sensory presentation—of the so-called work of “art.” (*GI* 32-33)

We need to conceive of the image as a sign of fragility rather than of domination. And so, by extension, we need to think of reality, of identity and of community (all of which are always imaged-imagined) as fragile,

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<sup>1</sup> “Metaphor” stems from the Greek *μεταφέρειν*, “to transfer.”

finite, or open rather than as overpowering entities and self-sufficient wholes. It is here that I turn to Herman Melville, because what Melville makes so abundantly clear is that if we cannot forego imagining ourselves, neither can we forego feeling uneasy with our own imagination. As Bradley Johnson says: “Melville, as it were, cannot truly begin without somehow ending; and yet neither can he come to his end without beginning once again” (22). Every proposition needs to be retracted, and every retraction encompasses a new proposition: Melville is caught in perpetual loop of self-assertion and self-denial. All of Melville’s appearances, in other words, are paired to disappearance, and yet, disappearance as such, remains untenable.

From his first book on, Melville asserted that self-consciousness could only be attained in the “very act of writing” (Johnson 15) and, as we will see, the early years of his career manifest themselves as precisely that: an act. Melville, the writer of “true narratives,” could not care less about the truth: the way he forges his identity as a writer is nothing short of an elaborate stage-play. But Melville is unable to keep this act up, even if he is unable to let go of it as well. And so, Melville will come to look for “truth,” though not as something which is attainable. Truth, he will come to suggest, is that which remains untouched outside of the work. If the work is that which comes to light, truth remains in the dark. Truth, in other words, is that indivisible Being, which every representation leaves behind. And so, all work and by extension all self-consciousness, remains groundless and detached from the “true” self. Writing, we might say, becomes a matter of madness. And we are never closer to the truth, than when we declare ourselves to be just that: mad.

Certainly, we this theme is already central to *Moby Dick* (1851) where the elusive whale’s whiteness “is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors [. . .] a dumb blankness full of meaning” (216). The absence of colour or, might we say, the absence of image, becomes aligned with the impossibility to capturing it. Whiteness, furthermore, appears as the concrete fundament, the underside, or the potential, of all colours. It is the ground of colouration which necessarily disappears as soon as any colour appears upon it. The appearance of colour, covers it over and makes it disappear. We can, I suggest, understand its role in much the same way as Nancy describes the “ground of the image” which, Nancy writes, “appears as what it is by disappearing. Disappearing as ground it passes entirely into the image” (GI 7). For Melville, that which is necessarily lost in appearance and remains unspoken (dumb), is that which is full of meaning.<sup>2</sup>

And then with *Pierre* (1852), Melville takes up this idea in a more self-reflective manner. Here, what becomes elusive is the very origin of the writer-protagonist himself. Pierre attempts to write his life and reconstruct his identity “in truth” in order to “fill the void” left after rejecting the childhood memories of his parents (Johnson 81). Now, authorship itself becomes the “tool to remake the boundaries of the sovereign subject” (Weinauer 708), to capture the ground of one’s image. And “The Piazza” (1856), my main concern

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. “the still deeper meaning of that story of Narcissus.” For Melville, as we will see, “meaning,” like truth, is consistently linked to the elusive, to that which necessarily disappears.

in this thesis, becomes one more step in Melville's closing in upon himself. Here, the unnamed protagonist and narrator is clearly modelled after Melville himself: the story is set in the very house where Melville lived since 1850 and wrote both *Moby Dick* and *Pierre*. This time, the story deals with an imaginative mind which fails and, in doing so, *also* discovers that "truth comes with darkness" (29). "The Piazza" therefore actively enacts this failure that Melville has come to long for: it captures the narrator's failure to capture truth. But where the narrator fails, Melville thus succeeds. But it is a success which is, perhaps, only a failure.

In "The Piazza" Melville enacts authorship, the writer's self-consciousness and subjectivity, in terms of a dialectic not only of failure and success, but most of all of presence and absence, appearance and disappearance, light and dark, conceit and truth.<sup>3</sup> The story opens itself up only to close down upon itself again. It proffers a key only to declare the door it opens to be phantasmic; here, there is no beyond, only an absence that already resides within. It is a story about the writer's weariness. And displays a madness which, as Blanchot says, "shatters language in leaving it apparently intact" (*SB* 46). In this story, we find that "nowhere is here" because it manages to think itself as an image.

I will discuss "The Piazza" in two parts, relating each to Melville's poetics. The first half will take up Melville's attempt to imagine: here we have a kind of careless sense of creation: it is pure appearance. And the second half, then, is a response to this first: here everything has become an image, but his image starts to crumble. This is when things become weary and mad. But before turning to Melville, I shall shortly discuss this "key" to it all: the story of Narcissus. In order to do so, I will look at this story dealing with the relationship between the self to its image, through the lens of Jacques Lacan's mirror-stage, look at Paul Valéry's propositions on visibility and finally turn to Blanchot's interpretation of the myth.

*Narcissus: an alienating destination.*

At the border of writing, always having to live without you.

—Maurice Blanchot, *The Step (Not) Beyond*.

As Melville biographer Raymond Weaver noticed, the key Melville proposes to his mystery, to his book, seems itself to be "locked in mystery" (127). This key, if it can be said to open anything, only opens up to another layer of mystery or to yet another page. Writing in order to reach the self, to reach the ungraspable phantom of life itself, Melville can only go on writing. No word can be his last, because what he is trying to say is beyond words. The image, here, is of a limit which is incessantly reached but which does not give way

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<sup>3</sup> "Conceit," as I will return to, is a word often employed by Melville to denote his (or others') writing. It designates it as something that is both imaginative and incapable.

at any point. Here, the key to his words is offered in words and leads only to more words. Inevitably, writing remains within writing. But such is the fate, not only of the write, but, as Melville so rightly notes, we all share this Narcissean fate.

Indeed, the Lacanian mirror-stage famously articulates such a relation of the self to the mirror-image. Looking in the mirror, we naturally try to reach for ourselves; the image behind the glass supposed to be mine. It is supposed to identify me, to be identical to me: we should be one and the same. But for Lacan, this desire is nothing but “a seductive fascination” brought about by the nature image itself which “lures and entices us” whilst “it offers only an illusion [. . .] of wholeness, autonomy and similarity” (Foster 80). Indeed, the mirror offers us no grasp over ourselves in the way the philosophies of *cogito* propose to do (5), it merely offers the self as an irresistible *imago* (4). Therefore, we do not take our image and thereby gain possession of ourselves, but rather we take it on like an actor takes on a role. And indeed, we seem to be playing the role of ourselves, for the image is not picture perfect representation of us, but instead, we model ourselves *after* the image. The subject follows his reflection, more so than the other way around (4); representation comes first and its “origin” is always deferred. What ensues is an endless play of mirrors whereby subject and image reflect one another. Self-reflection puts the self in a “fictional direction” (4) and the more we begin to enact the role imposed on us by our image, the farther we are towards our “alienating destination” of being a pure *imago* (5).

And yet, this is not a process we can refrain from. For if the mirror-image provides us with no satisfactory end, this only means that it allows for no return to the “originary” unity of self. Indeed, what is originary is not the self, pure and undivided, but its being-divided. For Lacan, therefore, subjectivity begins with a “primordial Discord” (5). Here we can go back a few decades in order to expand upon our metaphor of the actor. “Nothing can be born or perish, exist in some degree, possess a time, a place, a meaning, a figure,” Paul Valéry wrote in a short 1919 essay, “except on this definite *stage* which the fates have circumscribed, and which [. . .] they have opposed and subordinated to the condition of *being seen*” (97, Valéry’s emphasis). Here, visibility acts itself out on an illuminated stage and we, the viewers, behold the spectacle from our seat in the darkened audience. I put myself on stage so that I can see myself. But only on condition that I also remain behind. For I need to be here, in the dark, in order to perceive myself on that stage bathed in light.<sup>4</sup> I am at once “behind” my eyes looking out, *and* in front of my eyes receiving my own gaze. This is the misery of our condition: we are “the invisible audience seated in a darkened theater” which “cannot observe itself and is condemned to watch the scene confronting it” (97).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This problem is, of course, Kant’s when he writes that “the I think must be able to accompany all my representations; for otherwise something would be represented in me that could not be thought at all” (246).

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Paul Valéry’s writings on Narcissus and self-consciousness, see Jacques Derrida’s “Qual Quelle: Valéry’s Sources” in *Margins of Philosophy*, pp. 273-306.

The visible—and by extension: “all things perceptible, all things intelligible, all things possible” (97)—exists on condition of being able to depart from its source. And we can see on condition of remaining left behind; imperceptible, unintelligible, and impossible, without a time, a place, or a figure, neither able to be born, nor to perish: inexistent. This is the fate of Narcissus: when he sees himself, it an other he sees, it is his “alienating destination” which becomes clear to him. And because this appearance is never properly his own, he will be left behind. What Narcissus sees is the fact that he is not there. Or, as Blanchot writes, he sees “the invisible in the visible—in the picture the undepicted, the unstable unknown of a representation without presence, which reflects no model. [. . .] It is madness he sees, and death” (*WD* 134).

Narcissus does not see himself, but his lack of self. He sees his own disappearance in the appearance of his image. A disappearance which has, furthermore, already taken place because he has never possessed his own image, but which is, nevertheless, is made truly irreversible when he drowns and turns “into an image, [dissolving] in the immobile dissolution of the imaginary [. . .] losing a life he does not have.” (*WD* 126). The image, therefore, confronts us with our alienating destination as an image which is, of course, nothing but our death. But it also transposes this death into life because it posits the possibility that we have already departed from ourselves, have already lost possession of ourselves. The images prefigures madness and madness prefigures death. The “mad game of writing” (as Blanchot likes to call it after Mallarmé), then, entails the exile of the writing form his own imagination. He lives, in his work without himself whilst he cannot but covers over this lack with an endless stream of words, each of them a key without a door.

*Melville: like a counterfeit coin.*

It is a sublime taste always to like things better when they've been raised to the second power. For example, copies of imitations, critiques of reviews, addenda to additions, commentaries on notes.

—*Athenaeum* fragment 110.

The writer writes, stacking image upon image, creating an ever-expanding network of allusions, metaphors, roles and personae from which he is inevitably absent. As in Lacan's specular relation, there is a division without the possibility of reciprocity or possession. The images the writer creates, that depart from him, divide him and obscure him from view. Which is to say that he is nothing but what he has written and that, nevertheless, he is not (in) his writings. Which in turn means that “his” writing is never truly his, and that we can never be sure who is speaking. Plato sought to remedy the situation by, quite literally, forcing the poet to appear on stage with his work: here would be himself, speaking his own words. All this in order to prevent the poet from making himself “apocryphal,” as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe says. Preventing him “to slip into the other's identity and so mislead us—in order to make animate what cannot (and should not) be; he presents himself as what is not, exposes himself as other than he is, and depropriates himself” (133).



If the myth of Narcissus is a warning against the lure of images, or even a “prohibition upon seeing” as Blanchot says (*WD* 128), Plato’s argument is as well and on the very same basis: the image-imaginary, marks the departure from ourselves. We lose ourselves and our minds alike. Because, as Lacoue-Labarthe insists, sanity is “defined not otherwise than simplicity, non-duplicity, and non-multiplicity, and by the manifestness of "subjective" property” (134). Sanity is the imperative to own our work and by extension own ourselves.

It is a matter of propriety; of self-possession and behaving accordingly. Melville, however, is not proper. Indeed, as Johnson points out, “[l]ike a counterfeit coin, Melville’s writing, from the beginning, had been manufactured by and circulated in a network of impropriety that inevitably he could not completely control” (39). Already for first book *Typee* (1846), published as a “true narrative” account of his travels to Polynesia,<sup>6</sup> Melville “copied so much [. . .] that he probably could have written his alleged first-person narrative of adventures on the Marquesas Islands without ever having so much as seen them” (Johnson 38). From the outset, Melville refuses to play by the rules and posits himself as “apocryphal.” Something immediately picked up by critics at the time who doubted the very existence of this “Herman Melville.” A name, some suggested, which might as well be made-up.<sup>7</sup> *The Literary Gazette* went so far as to invite Melville to a pretend-dinner on April first. Along with Melville, “we intend to ask only a small party,” they wrote: “Messrs. Crusoe, Sinbad, Gulliver, Munchausen” (*Correspondence* 86).

Melville, unhappy with these allegations, tried to set them right and together with the befriended coeditor of the *American Review* he conceives of a plan: he will write a review of his own book, pretending to be his own reader. Sending the resulting article to his friend, Melville writes the following:

Herewith you have the article we spoke of. I have endeavored to make it appear as if written by one who had read the book & beleived [sic] it — & moreover — had been as much pleased. [. . .] Perhaps, it may not be exactly the right sort of thing. The fact is, it was rathar [sic] an awkward undertaking any way — for I have not sought to present my own view of the matter (which you may be sure is straitforward [sic] enough) but have only presented such considerations as would be apt to suggest themselves to a reader who was acquainted with, & felt freindly [sic] toward the author. (38)

Far from clearing up any inconsistencies, Melville divides himself once more and adds yet another layer of make-believe to his authorship. Melville’s “fictional direction” has been set and two years later he will find himself scrapping “& it’s authentic” in favour of “it shall have the right stuff in it” when he pitches his third

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<sup>6</sup> Attesting to its supposed truthfulness, the title page of the book’s initial publication in England reads “*Narrative of a Four Month’s Residence Among the Natives of a Valley of the Marquesas Islands; or, A Peep at Polynesian Life* by Herman Melville.”

<sup>7</sup> Curiously, Herman Melville effectively *was* a pseudonym, as the final “e” was only added by Herman’s mother after the death of his father, Alan Melvill, in 1832, in order to rid the family of the debts that he left behind. A “small and inconsequential” difference, Johnson writes, but nevertheless a “hint at the inherent fluidity of his very identity, a notion with which he would even occasionally play by signing letters with this original surname, “Melvill” (5). According to Elizabeth Renker, he continues, these “acts of reversion would effectively split him in two” (5).

book to his publisher (105). Melville no longer cares about believability and sets out to write a *romance*.<sup>8</sup> And indeed, even towards his apprehensive publisher, Melville now embraces his duplicitous character. The above-mentioned pitch for the book that would become *Mardi*, opens as follows:

Will you still continue, Mr Murray, to break seals from the Land of Shadows — persisting in carrying on this mysterious correspondence with an imposter shade, that under the fanciful appellation of Herman Melvill still practices upon your honest credulity? — Have a care, I pray, lest while thus parleying with a ghost you fall upon some horrible evel [sic], peradventure sell your soul ere you are aware. — But in tragic phrase “no more!” — only glancing at the closing sentence of your letter, I read there your desire to test the corporeality of H— M— by clapping eyes upon him in London.  
(106)

Melville’s newfound confidence in his imaginary self stems from his discovery of German idealism in the late 1840s which, in this period, found its way into American literary circles through the likes of Thomas Carlyle and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (Johnson 44).<sup>9</sup> Along with Kant’s assertion that *noumenal* reality is beyond our reach, the romantic branch of idealism validated Melville’s endeavours. These authors, centred around the *Athenaeum* publication, attempted to re-establish reality as the *product* of the imagination. Simply put: if representations (in the form of perception or knowledge) do not stem from external reality, then it follows that everything we do perceive or know is a product of the human imagination. What Kant denoted as a shortcoming, now becomes a human privilege and the possible return to the age of mythology where the essence of things resided in their spiritual appearance.

As such, *Athenaeum* fragment 132 reads “Every poet is really Narcissus” (35) because it is the poet who realises himself completely in the realm of the imaginary. He is the one who produces, through the power of his imagination, a mirror-image which does not reflect him (double up and divide him), but that constitutes him. Because the production of images coincides with the production of reality, the image is no longer a sign of loss. In romanticist “new mythology,” the subject is not born in a world foreign to him, but the world, as Lacoue-Labarthe together with Nancy has noted, becomes the subject’s corollary (33). The world, reality, is nothing other than the product of the subject’s imagination: it is his work of art. Romanticism does away with the philosopher who attempts to uncover reality, and posits a philosopher-poet who actively produces it. And, for Melville, this means: no more sailor writing about his past life, but a *romancier* who produces his future life.

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<sup>8</sup> Which, nevertheless, “shall afford the strongest *presumptive* evidence of the truth of Typee & Omoo by the sheer force of contrast” he tells his publisher not without irony (106-07, my emphasis).

<sup>9</sup> For a more elaborate discussion of Melville’s relationship to German philosophy, see Johnson’s chapter “Melville and German Idealism” in *The Characteristic Theology of Herman Melville*, pp. 43-76.

“*The Piazza*” I: *setting the stage*.

No poetry, no reality; no external world without imagination.

—*Athenaeum* fragment 350.

German romanticism, then, conceives of the world as a stage-play where the subject is both scenographer and protagonist. Because perception is really creation, we have been on the stage all along; nothing eludes us because what is not seen, is not created either. This is precisely starting proposition of “The Piazza.” Here it is the building of a piazza (meaning a veranda) to the side of the protagonist’s house which symbolically brings about the shift towards romantic idealism. Which is to say that it fuses inside and out (1), erasing this distinction and making everything equally accessible. At times a picture-gallery’s bench (4), a pew (4), and a box-royal (28), the piazza turns the world into both a spectacle and a religious revelation: the visible itself seems to become an idol.

As noted, the story’s setting resembles the very place Melville had lived since September 1850, where he finished *Moby Dick* and wrote the novels that succeeded it. And like the story comments on his writing career, the real piazza was also a direct product of his literary efforts. Which is to say that his books did not pay well enough for him to build a new house on the property as he intended to do. And that, instead, the building of the piazza had to suffice.<sup>10</sup> But Melville returns to his earlier writing in yet another way. If, in the story, the environment is called an “amphitheatre” (28) and the mountain situated just north of the house is crowned Charlemagne everyday by the rising and falling sun (4), these descriptions allude to the his dedication of *Pierre* “to Greylock’s Most Excellent Majesty” and “the amphitheatre over which his majesty presides.” Where, in the writing of *Pierre*, the environment acted as Melville’s muse, in the story it is the narrator whose imagination is endlessly spurred on by these sights.

The piazza had to be built, the narrator thus explains, because “the country round about was such a picture that in berry time no boy climbs hill or crosses vale without coming upon easels planted in every nook, and sun-burnt painters painting there” (1). The landscape is a picture, *even* if the narrator is *not* a painter. No need for canvases or brushes in order to replicate nature in a picture: to him, nature manifests *itself* as a picture. “For what but picture-galleries are the marble halls of these same limestone hills?” What but “galleries hung, month after month anew, with pictures fading into pictures ever fresh” (3)? All he needs to enjoy nature’s picture is to have a piazza: a place to sit down. Here, mimesis is not reproduction, but production: these poetico-mythological images originate simultaneously with nature around him.

The narrator’s fancies are what Friedrich Schelling called *tautegorical*: an allegory referring only to itself, an image that is its own image (an idol, in short). As Nancy writes, for Schelling, mythology not only “says nothing other than itself,” but it is also “produced in consciousness by the same process that, in nature, produces

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<sup>10</sup> For more information on Melville’s Arrowhead home, see the national monument nomination form: <https://npgallery.nps.gov/pdfhost/docs/NHLS/Text/66000126.pdf>

the forces that myth represents” (*IO* 49). Signifier and signified, in other words, are on the same level and mythological speech simultaneously “talks about” nature and simply “is” nature. Image-language, is no longer a corruption of language but, the romantics argue against Plato, it constitutes the very heart of language itself: language is nothing other than poetic creation for words do not signify, but they create reality. Therefore, the imagination does not signal loss, but creation: mimesis becomes *poesis*. And the imagination the “*poesis* of the world as true world of gods, of man, and of nature” (55).

Within this imagined language, everything communes. Culture and nature become one. It is “transcendence,” Nancy writes, “of gods, of man, of speech, of the cosmos, and so on, presented immediately” (50). No more divisions, but immanence: the sacred is everywhere. It is quite clear that poetry here becomes religious. And so, for our narrator “beauty is like piety” (3). As such, the narrator cannot be disturbed by his neighbour who ridicules him for having a piazza facing the north (where the sun doesn’t shine). The piazza faces north because to the north there is the majestic Mount Greylock which provides a superior *view* and the northern piazza is nothing but the mark of the narrator’s faith in beauty. It is, even, the assurance of his transcendence. “[I]n the elysium of my northern bower,” the narrator declares, “I, Lazarus in Abraham’s bosom, cast down the hill a pitying glance on poor old Dives, tormented in the purgatory of his piazza to the south” (6). Neighbour Dives can enjoy earthly riches, but the narrator has secured his place in the imaginary paradise.

Or so it seems, because the discovery of “millions of cankerous worms” in the Chinese creeper climbing one of the piazza’s posts, disrupts the narrator’s divine favour. Their “feeding upon those blossoms,” we read, “so shared their blessed hue, as to make it unblest evermore” (12). The presence of decay, signalling weariness and death, seems to cause the imagination to slip. It is a first sign of weakness on part of the narrator. But for him it is the reason to dive only further into this imagination. At this point, it is the shimmer of a “golden mountain window” (13) which attracts him. Certainly, he concludes, a fairy must live there and, certainly, she will cure him of his weariness.

*Hawthorne: a blackness of darkness beyond.*

You may be witched by his sunlight,—transported by the bright gildings in the skies he builds over you;—but there is the blackness of darkness beyond; and even his bright gildings but fringe, and play upon the edges of thunder-clouds.

—Herman Melville, “Hawthorne and his Mosses.”

Here, the story turns around: the scene has been set and it is only a matter of time before the whole stage comes crashing down. Which is to say that this romantic idealism cannot be maintained. Indeed, as Johnson writes, “the disembodied idealism of writers like Emerson and Goethe was naturally at odds with Melville’s first-hand experience of nature’s horrific and violent design” (73). The imagination might create, but it is na-

ture which destroys. Here the image's double nature returns once more: appearance as inherently linked to disappearance. Now the *imago* uncovers what the *cogito* covers up: the dissolution of being in the appearance of madness and death. "We untiringly construct the world in order that the hidden dissolution, the universal corruption that governs what 'is' should be forgotten in favor of a clear and defined coherence of notions and objects, relations and forms," Blanchot writes, but it is poetry which teaches us that this is in vain (*IC* 33). Precisely because, being an image, poetry is unstable like the shimmering reflection of Narcissus. It possesses no essence and, in the end it cannot but affirm this lack over and over again. And so, according to Blanchot, the poet is like Narcissus in yet another way. Commenting upon Schlegel's idea, he asserts that we should not only read it as the "superficial remark of a certain romanticism according to which creation—poetry—is absolute subjectivity and the poet a living subject in the poem that reflects him," but also realise that, inevitably, "in the poem, where the poet writes himself, he does not recognize himself, for he does not become conscious of himself. He is excluded from the facile, humanistic hope that by writing, or 'creating,' he would transform his dark experience into greater consciousness" (*WD* 135).

Blanchot, here, recalls his earlier assertion that writing constitutes "my consciousness without me" (*WF* 328). It is the perfect reflection of my consciousness because—and Blanchot resembles the romantics in this regard—as a writer I only exist on the merit of what I have written. I am, in this sense, what I write. But—and this where Blanchot (and Melville, as I will discuss in a moment) departs from the romantic proposition—as soon as the text is written, it departs from me; it becomes something else, something other, forever irretrievable. And what remains is not the work, nor the writing subject, but the "fact of disappearing," which "appears as the essential thing" (308). For Melville, then, a similar position arises in "Hawthorne and his Mosses," Melville's review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's short-story collection *Mosses From an Olde Manse*. Sticking to his "act," this text not only openly declares that "the names of all fine authors are fictitious ones," but it is also duly signed "a Virginian Spending July in Vermont."<sup>11</sup> Everything here, then, should be taken with a grain of salt. But this is *precisely* the point.

For Ellen Weinauer, whom reads it in relation to matters of proprietorship and plagiarism, this text "registers an unresolved anxiety about the nature of authorship" (702). According to Weinauer, Melville struggles between "a longing to recognize a nonproprietary kinship with his 'brother geniuses' and a what such a relinquishment of proprietary control might mean to the authorial subject" (702). In other words: writing might be an collaborative effort which makes Melville's work part of the same *Gesamtkunstwerk* as the work of all the genius writers of the past but that would entail losing the sense of the self as autonomous subject. For Weinauer the text attempts to propose the former but ultimately fails to do so because it fails to let go of the subject as properly his own (711).

My interpretation, however, is that quite the opposite is true: Melville has sensed that he fails as autonomous author and that he attempts to restore his self-worth by inscribing himself into a community of great writers which is based not on what has been written, but on what has eluded them, on what has *not* been written.

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<sup>11</sup> Needless to say, Melville was neither a Virginian, nor was he in Vermont at the time of writing this text.

Here, Melville's failure to attain self-consciousness "in the very act of writing," is converted into success. If we look at how Melville defines "genius," we must conclude that it is, indeed, outside the work.

Genius is "this great fullness and overflowing [. . .] shared by a plurality of men" (12). The words "fulness" and "overflowing" already give us a hint: what we are dealing with, is a kind of beyond. A place that is infinite and undivided; sacred, rather than secular time. This point becomes clear when we look at his discussion of Hawthorne. Insofar as "Hawthorne is *known*, he seems to be deemed a pleasant writer" Melville writes (4, my emphasis). And to illustrate this point, he alludes to one of his "charming" (4) tales, "Monsieur du Miroir." But the part that attracts admiration—this knowable, pleasant and charming work—is only the "least part of [his] genius," Melville asserts (4). For this story, beyond the charm of its appearance, possesses a "mystical depth of meaning."<sup>12</sup> To make this clear, Melville recites from Hawthorne's tale:

Yes, there he sits, and looks at me,—this "shape of mystery," this "identical Monsieur du Miroir." —  
"Methinks I should tremble now, were his wizard power of gliding through all impediments in search of me, to place him suddenly before my eyes." (4)

Looking in the mirror in search of me, I am confronted by this figure. And no matter how pleasant or charming he might be, he replaces *me*. And the same goes for Hawthorne and his work: for all that is visible, brought to light in his work, the "real" Hawthorne remains in the dark. For all the "sunlight on the hither side of Hawthorne's soul," Melville writes, "the other side—like the dark half of the physical sphere—is shrouded in a blackness, ten times black" (4). And this blackness, Melville continues, is separated by something akin to that "Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin" (4). There is, thus, an originary division between these two sides which prefigures Lacan's "primordial Discord."

Whether it is the glass of the mirror or the covers of the book, we are dealing with a limit that remains irreducible even if it cannot be crossed. And when Melville speaks of "real" genius (and not its least side), he speaks of this blackness beyond. It is this blackness which inaugurates Hawthorne into the "brotherhood of genius" because it is this blackness "that furnishes the infinite obscure of his background,—that background against which Shakespeare plays his grandest conceits" (5). In other words: Hawthorne and Shakespeare, two writers of genius share a *background*: a fundamental absence. It is not their work that they share, but it a nothingness *outside* of their work. This is where we encounter the infinite: "[i]n Shakespeare's tomb lies infinitely more than Shakespeare ever wrote. And if I magnify Shakespeare, it is not so much for what he did do, as for what he did not do, or refrained from doing" (5).

How, then, can we appreciate someone for what he did not do? The answer is: because he announces this absence in what is present. When "Hamlet, Timon, Lear and Iago," say things that are "so terrifically true that it were all but madness for any good man in his own proper character to utter," or when "Lear the frantic King tears off the mask and speaks the sane madness of vital truth," then we see the madness of being

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<sup>12</sup> Compare the "mystical depth of meaning" of Hawthorne's mirror-man to the "still deeper meaning" of Narcissus in *Moby Dick*.

seen. In what almost seems a Brechtian manoeuvre of estrangement, we get to see the cracks in the surface of these images. When these figures declare themselves mad and groundless, we stare into the blackness of darkness beyond. Once more, “nowhere is here.”

*“The Piazza” II: the limit of weariness.*

It could even be said not only that weariness does not prevent you from working, but that working requires you be weary beyond all measure.

—Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*.

In the light of this, we might see the second half of “The Piazza” as a dramatisation of the theory put forth in “Mosses.” The first half of the story is concerned with the visible, with bringing things to light; it is the domain of the “day” as Blanchot might say with Hegel. The second half, set in motion by the discovery of the worms, is, on the other hand, a journey towards the unreachable night. The concern is no longer with the active subject creating and shaping the world and himself, but with its consequential passivity and weariness. Work, here, tends to the absence of work; to what Blanchot has designated as *désœuvrement*, unworking or worklessness. We have seen that in “Mosses” Melville introduces a kind of accomplishment in falling short. Here, the madness of the work exposes that truth is outside of the work. The work, therefore, no longer attempts to be a completed whole, but rather, it actively disrupts itself precisely in order to show the ungraspable in its very ungraspability.

Melville saw thus that romanticist idealism is, as Blanchot would put it a century later, “essentially what begins and what cannot but finish badly: an end that is called suicide, madness, loss, forgetting” (*IC* 352-3). When in romanticism poetical language becomes everything, the defining characteristic of language is lost. For if there is no “outside” of language, then there is nothing that language can refer to. Language comes be made up of empty signifiers which lack all signifieds. And this lack that constitutes the disappearance of the world subsists within language. Language itself has become a pure image: “neither the world nor outside the world; master of everything, but on condition that the whole contain nothing; pure consciousness without content, a pure speech that can say nothing” (356).

Reality, we might say, has passed into its image; the fact of its disappearance, appears once more in the appearance of this image. And this is the central theme of the latter half of our story. It all starts with that other essential characteristic of the image which I have identified: the notion that it is *fascinating*, bewitching. As we saw with Lacan and Narcissus, the image harbours its attraction in the fact that it shows the non-existent. And so, like the reader of Hawthorne, the narrator is bewitched by a “bright gilding” only to be guided towards the darkness beyond. On a “mad poet’s afternoon” we are told, he sees this “uncertain object [. . .]

mysteriously snugged away to all appearance” (7), visible only “under certain witching conditions of light and shadow” (8): the golden mountain window of the fairy’s cottage.

We might compare this guiding light to the Sirens’ song which, according to Blanchot, contains the two essentials of the imaginary. First, he writes, it is the “song of the abyss, that, once heard, would open an abyss in each word” (BC 4). And secondly, it seems to make this abyss both irresistible and reachable: the song becomes a means of navigation, “making the song into the movement towards the song” (4).<sup>13</sup> But just as this song promises a “wonderful beyond” while granting the listener “only a desert, as if the motherland of music were the only place completely deprived of music” (4), so does the golden mountain window. When the narrator arrives, he pauses not at the threshold, but “rather where the threshold once had been” (19). There is no threshold, no doorstep, because this cottage is dilapidated and the doorstep has rotted away. And this is so, because it does not belong to a fairy, but rather to a poor girl named Marianna. The lack of threshold, then, is also the lack of an imaginary beyond. The heart of this story, is the absence of story.

Seeing Marianna sit inside, the narrator falls silent: a first sign of the inaccessibility of the beyond. We are told, in words, that the narrator has no words. Which is to say that the word “silence” necessarily points towards something outside of itself, unable to denote it with any accuracy. This silence necessarily covered over by speech is brought onto the narrator, we quickly learn, by Marianna. She invites him in and their discussion recalls the theme that opened the story: the view outside. Marianna mirrors the narrator’s feelings when she tells him that “the first time I looked out of this window, I said ‘never, never shall I weary of this’” (20). But Marianna *has* wearied of it and the cause this weariness, she explains, “is not the view, it is Marianna” (20).

Looking to escape weariness, the the narrator’s encounters in in the heart of his tale; the fairy-queen now exposed as a girl, harbours a deeply rooted weariness. “Weariness,” is defined by the *OED* as “extreme tiredness or fatigue resulting from exertion, continued endurance of pain, or want of sleep” as well as “tedium or distaste induced by monotonous or uncongenial conditions or occupations.” It shares its etymological root of *wōr* with the Old English *wórian*: “to wander, go astray” and the Old Norse *órar* connoting “mad” or “insane.” Weariness, in other words, is a tiredness of the *same* without the possibility of accessing anything *other*. It is to be destined to wandering within one’s limits and realising that the “outside” is inaccessible. And it is madness because through it we are forced to have a relation to the nonexistent.

Weariness negates what “is,” without positing an alternative. Therefore, as Leslie Hill writes, weariness “occurs only at the limit” and exposes this very limit to be limitless (293). Being weary is being conscious of the infinity of the limit itself: it a limit without a threshold, a desire forever to remain desire. For Marianna, weariness is inextricably tied to the notion of work. For her, it is clear that work leads to nothing. As Blanchot says: “to labor for the day is to find, in the end, the night” (SL 168). And so too, Marianna’s brother who lives with her, spends all day working in the woods, and when he finally comes home, “he soon [leaves] his bench, poor fellow, for his bed; just as one, at last, wearily quits that, too, for still deeper rest. The bench, the bed, the grave” (20). The narrator falls silent again.

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<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting that in “Reality and its Shadow,” Emmanuel Levinas analyses the image’s seductive and fascinating power comparing it to music: “he hold that an image has over us,” he writes, is “a function of rhythm” (134).



Marianna's work is wearisome as well. It is "dull woman's work—sitting, sitting, restless sitting" (26) which leaves her "[t]hinking, thinking—a wheel I cannot stop; pure want of sleep it is that turns it." Marianna is struck by a "wakeful weariness" (27). Weariness which, as Hill contends, is "proof of physical frailty, impending death," as well as of "ignorance" (296). It is death apprehended from within life and the unknowable seen from the perspective of knowledge. It is, therefore, "that to which philosophy, thought, knowledge, work, writing, all must tend as their only, sufficient end; but it is also what mocks and defeats the possibility of all sufficiency" (296). Weariness signifies that the infinite is separated from the finite by a limit stretching itself out infinitely. It is a reaching out which continues in the same direction endlessly, foreclosing any possibility of grasping what it seeks and of returning with what is grasped. Work becomes unworked.

It is a relation to what is Other, without relieving it from its alterity; it is presence which touches upon absence without making it present. This weariness makes possible a new kind of attitude towards work: incompleteness as its only accomplishment. Disappearance becomes the essential characteristic of its appearance. The narrator, at this point, knows that his story runs parallel to Marianna's and they can only touch each other at their limits. Marianna's is another story and another image, unassimilable to his own because at the heart of her image, there is the absence of image: there is the abyss, the blackness of darkness beyond. During the day and back on the piazza, the "scenery is magical," "the illusion so complete" and the "weary face" behind the golden window so far away," but "every night, when the curtain falls, truth comes with darkness. No light shows from the mountain. To and fro I walk the piazza deck, haunted by Marianna's face, and many as real a story" (28-9). From this point on, the bright image that appears by day, is forever accompanied by its other side: the darkness of disappearance.

### *Conclusion.*

The time when all these truths are stories, when all stories are false.

—Maurice Blanchot, *The Step (Not) Beyond*.

When the curtain falls, the play is over, but only for it to start once more at the break of dawn. We cannot accede to darkness: it is not the unknown to be turned into the known, but it is the unknowable. Nevertheless, this darkness, being the other side of the coin, the backside of any image, remains inseparable from the light. When history and language become image or metaphor, everything we hold to be true becomes a story. But, if we see these stories as stories—as images, resemblances or allegories—they remain false, not-true, separated from truth and therefore incomplete. Rather than make reality into an idolatrous hyperreality, it seems to be our task to keep thinking this ever-present image as image so that we might keep open the absences in which the Other might appear even if it is in disappearance. This, then, is what "The Piazza" shows: we construct ourselves and the world around us, but in this creation resides its other: destruction. The image of our lives as the Narcissistic image of non-propriety, dispossession and being haunted by Otherness; not as a threat but as a challenge to face.

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