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THE IMPOTENCE OF GRIEF:  
ON MELVILLE'S WRETCHED WOMEN  
AND LONESOME GIRLS

I stood, and leaning o'er the garden-gate  
Reviewed that Woman's suff'rings, and it seemed  
To comfort me while with a brother's love  
I blessed her in the impotence of grief.  
(William Wordsworth, "The Ruined Cottage")

*Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (New York, July 1852) brought novelist Herman Melville the most abusive criticisms of his career as a professional writer. Charged with "faults," "absurdities," and "incongruities" of all sorts,<sup>1</sup> this "regular romance" (as he called it, in an unsuccessful attempt to convince his London publisher Richard Bentley to buy the English rights) turned into a memorable disaster in both literary appreciation and the marketplace. In fact, far from being

<sup>1</sup> Reviews of *Pierre* (here in particular, August 19 and 27, September 18, and November 20, 1852) can be found in *Herman Melville: An Annotated Bibliography, 1846-1930*, ed. Brian Higgins (Boston: Hall, 1979), pp. 120-26. For a detailed account of the sales of *Pierre* and Melville's financial failure, see Hershel Parker's second section of the "Historical Note" to *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*, eds. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern U. P. and The Newberry Library, 1971), pp. 379-80, ff.

“calculated for popularity,”<sup>2</sup> the novel of the ambiguities proved not only an aesthetic failure, but also a deliberate and functional representation of the failure of aesthetics itself. Pastoral idylls and gothic reversals, domesticity and the mysteries of genealogy, elopement and disinheritance, narcissism and titanism, murder, incest, and suicide — Melville capitalized on all the literary stereotypes at hand to dramatize the artistic (*Miß*)*Bildung* of his immature hero and expose the inadequacy of romantic consciousness at large. This aesthetic destruction, in turn, involved an unsystematic though devastating philosophical critique, one that put to question the ontological and theological notions of the metaphysical tradition. More narrowly, at the heart of such a ruthless exposure of idealistic aesthetics and Western metaphysics lay a critique of the national ideology that Melville set up and carried out through a self-conscious rewrite of the story of his own artistic development and political engagements, while at the same time striking, as a harsh reviewer promptly noticed, at “the very foundations of society.”<sup>3</sup> As such, *Pierre* may indeed be viewed as a crucial work in Melville’s canon — an explosive recapitulation of the author’s early fiction, based on a critical re-vision of the culture’s romantic and democratic commitments to mid-century America. The “un-writing of *Moby-Dick*,” as *Pierre* has been styled by Sacvan Bercovitch,

<sup>2</sup> Melville, “To Richard Bentley, 16 April 1852,” *Correspondence*, ed. Lynn Horth (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern U. P. and The Newberry Library, 1993), p. 226.

<sup>3</sup> George Washington Peck, *American Whig Review*, 1 November 1852, *The Melville Log: A Documentary Life of Herman Melville, 1819-1891*, 2 vols., ed. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1951), vol. I, p. 463.

was at once a representation of “the failure of symbolic art” and “the betrayal of Young America in literature.”<sup>4</sup>

The novel of the ambiguities opened a new period in Melville’s career. There was not to be another “mighty book” like *Mardi* (1849), *Moby-Dick* (1851), or *Pierre* itself, whether written to promote a national literature commensurate with the greatness of the country’s democratic and expansionist politics or un-written, as it were, to debunk its projects and reverse its imperialistic aspirations. As Melville turned into an apparently less ambitious (and often anonymous) magazine writer, his production witnessed a sudden formal fragmentation, along with what may be called a symptomatic contraction of his characters’ stature. “From being heroic, larger than life, more gifted or more favored than others, as Taji, Ahab, Pierre,” the protagonist of Melville’s fiction, we have long been told, “becomes suddenly the most insignificant of beings, most humble, most undistinguished, most forgotten, as Bartleby, the projected Agatha, the Chola widow, Israel Potter, Merrymusk.”<sup>5</sup> This catalogue could indeed be expanded to include Martha Coulter of “Poor Man’s Pudding,” the “white girls” of “The Tartarus of Maids,” “poor Jimmy Rose,” weary and “lonely” Marianna, as well as all the other sorry examples of “luckless humanity” that Melville sketched in his fiction of the 1850s.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, “How to Read Melville’s *Pierre*,” *Amerikastudien*, 31 (1986), p. 49; a considerably expanded version of this essay, titled “*Pierre*, or the Ambiguities of American Literary History,” is in *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 246-306.

<sup>5</sup> Melville, *Pierre*, *cit.*, p. 456.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Foster, “Introduction” to Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (New York: Hendricks House, 1954), pp. lxxxix-xc.

<sup>7</sup> Melville, “Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs” (1854), “The Paradise of Bachelors and The Tartarus of Maids” (1855), “Jimmy Rose” (1855), “The Piazza” (1856), *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces: 1839-1860*, eds.

This view has been reiterated time and again in Melville criticism and has often led to the emphasizing, for better or for worse, of the concept of sympathy. If the hero/ine “becomes the helpless victim,”<sup>8</sup> then Melville may as well be seen as a compassionate chronicler who tells the story of his or her misfortunes — a gloomy though humane author who supposedly grounds his new artistic stance in a liberal ethics of fellow-feeling. But if the destruction of romantic aesthetics represented in/by *Pierre* can indeed be taken as a turning point in Melville’s canon, then it seems unlikely that after such an apocalypse of negation the author of the ambiguities would candidly resort to one of the most exploited modes (perhaps the mode *par excellence*) of romantic literature at large — “the liberal humanism of sentimentality.”<sup>9</sup> In fact, the moving condition of wretched humanity had been at once employed and questioned within romantic tradition itself. And even when sentimentality can be rehabilitated as “a crucial tactic of politically radical representation,”<sup>10</sup> or reclaimed as that conspicuous “body of mid-nineteenth-century American literature [...] that takes as its highest values sympathy, affection, and relation,”<sup>11</sup> whether mostly written by women or not, problems may still come to the surface. “That feeling and empathy are deepest where the capacity to act has been suspended — as it is in the reader’s relation to art — defines

Harrison Hayford, Alma A. MacDougall, G. Thomas Tanselle, et. al. (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern U. P. and The Newberry Library, 1987), pp. 291, 330, 345, 8; Melville, *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile* (1854, 1855), eds. Hayford, Parker, and Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern U. P. and The Newberry Library, 1982), p. 160.

<sup>8</sup> Foster, “Introduction” to *The Confidence-Man*, cit., p. xc.

<sup>9</sup> Philip Fisher, *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel* (New York: Oxford U. P., 1985), p. 92.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>11</sup> Joanne Dobson, “Reclaiming Sentimental Literature,” *American Literature*, 69 (1997), p. 283.

the limit of sentimental representation.” This “limit,” maintains Philip Fisher, makes of sentimentality “a cautious and questionable politics.”<sup>12</sup> In the production of Melville’s middle period, sentimental strategies of representation based on “sympathy, affection, and relation” are, to say the least, suspect and problematic.

In fact, recalling that most of “his magazine pieces deal essentially and un sentimentally with some kind of loss, poverty, loneliness, or defeat,”<sup>13</sup> a number of skeptical critics have often doubted Melville’s use of pathos and emotions. They have raised questions about the “condition of suffering” he portrays, as well as “the quality of sympathy which attends it.” They have cautioned readers against the appearances of “sorrow” that the author might cleverly manipulate in order to trouble the expectations of his sentimental audience, thus calling attention, instead, to the possibility “of false or misplaced pity,” “the diminishing role” of love and philanthropy, the “lack of communal feeling” or “cheering communion of souls.”<sup>14</sup> Further, they have seen these strategies as part of a deli-

<sup>12</sup> Fisher, *Hard Facts*, cit., p. 122.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Milder, in his incisive “Introduction” to Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor and Selected Tales* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1998), p. ix, recalls and quotes from Charvat’s seminal piece “Melville and the Common Reader,” *The Profession of Authorship in America: The Papers of William Charvat*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli (Columbus: Ohio State U. P., 1968), p. 279.

<sup>14</sup> This view (mainly developed in Melville criticism of the 1970s) has been expressed by Robert Sattelmeyer and James Barbour, “The Sources and Genesis of Melville’s ‘Norfolk Isle and the Chola Widow,’” *American Literature*, 50 (1978-79), pp. 414-16, and by Marvin Fisher, *Going Under: Melville’s Short Fiction and the American 1850s* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State U. P., 1977), pp. 62, 70. Melville’s use of sentimentality and humanism has been also more or less effectively questioned by Howard D. Pearce, “The Narrator of ‘Norfolk Isle and the Chola Widow,’” *Studies in Short Fiction*, 3 (1965-66), pp. 56-62; Robert C. Albrecht, “The Thematic Unity of Melville’s ‘The Encantadas,’” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 14 (1972-73), pp. 474-75; R. Bruce Bickley, Jr., *The Method of Melville’s Short Fiction* (Durham: Duke U. P., 1975), pp. 37-8; William B. Dillingham, *Melville’s Short Fiction: 1853-1856* (Athens: U. of Georgia P., 1977), pp. 85-6.

berate "reproach" to a "conventional 'kindly reader,'" usually invoked "and counted on to feel sympathy for the sufferings of the lower orders" or of a systematic "destruction," as it has been also argued, "of [the] idealistic view of charity" at large.<sup>15</sup> But if it is true that Melville used and often manipulated these banished victims of humanity in a functional way, then it is also true that his subversive strategies did not exclusively serve against the literary cause of sentimentality as such, or, for that matter, against the cultural one of social fragmentation or of liberal and charitable Christianity. Though the skeptical and unsentimental approach to his middle period is, in fact, more plausible and suggestive than the former (the one that sees Melville progressively move toward a sort of "last-ditch humanism"),<sup>16</sup> they both prove reductive. Their limitation lies in a partial and unproblematic understanding of the sympathetic outlook that Melville allegedly employed and/or subverted in his work. Thus the possibility of a different approach to the concept of sympathy, as well as of a wider reconstruction of its intellectual context, from the premises of moral philosophy through the developments of sentimental narrative and the growth of romantic historical consciousness, needs to be suggested here. Such a (trans)Atlantic context can provide a different framework for an understanding of Melville's use and abuse of the strategies of feeling and fellow-feeling in the wake of *Pierre*, and therefore — as I shall argue and exemplify through my reading of Melville's most unusual (and rare) characters, namely his female characters — for a potential reassessment of his middle period as a whole in terms

<sup>15</sup> Michael T. Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (Chicago: U. of Chicago P., 1985), p. 142; David Andrews, "Benito Cereno: No Charity on Earth, Not Even at Sea," *Leviathan*, 2 (2000), p. 102.

<sup>16</sup> Foster, "Introduction" to *The Confidence-Man*, *cit.*, p. lxxxix.

of a critique of historical consciousness. In a related essay,<sup>17</sup> I addressed the "little story" of "vanquished" Hunilla — the "dark-damasked" heroine of the eighth sketch of "The Encantadas," who may be said to stand as a representative of wretched humanity at large as well as an emblematic example of the subdued races of the American continent.<sup>18</sup> In this essay I will eventually focus on Marianna, the shy and solitary "pale-cheeked girl" of "The Piazza,"<sup>19</sup> the story that Melville purposely wrote to introduce his collection of previously published magazine pieces of the early 1850s, thus titling them *The Piazza Tales* (1856).

#### *The Ethics of Fellow-Feeling and Sentimental Representation*

The influential systems of moral philosophy in Britain may provide a helpful starting point not only for an understanding of sympathy as a psychological and an ethical principle in sentimental narrative, but also for an outline of its subsequent developments as a cognitive and a historical method in its own right. As the reflections of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Hume paved the way for Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, the concept gained an unusually wide and inclusive definition. Sympathy was no longer or not only meant as a synonym of pity or compassion:

Pity and compassion are words appropriated to signify our fellow-feeling with the sorrow of others. Sympathy,

<sup>17</sup> Giuseppe Nori, "The Trials of Humanity at the Margins of History: On Herman Melville's Enchanted Isles," *Anglistica*, 6 (2002), pp. 63-85.

<sup>18</sup> Melville, "The Encantadas, or Enchanted Isles: By Salvator R. Tarnmoor" (1854), *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces*, *cit.*, pp. 151, 157, 152.

<sup>19</sup> Melville, "The Piazza," *cit.*, p. 8.

though its meaning was, perhaps, originally the same, may now, however, without much impropriety, be made use of to denote our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever.<sup>20</sup>

Viewed as such a comprehensive fellow-feeling, sympathy allows the “attentive spectator” to feel not only for the “misery” or “the sorrow of others,” but also for their joy and anger, indignation and shame — in short, for “any passion whatever.” And the “source” of this fellow-feeling is “the imagination.” It is by the imagination that we — as beholders — can in fact sympathize and identify with another person, that is, as Smith has it, “put ourselves in his case.” To begin with, imagination comes primarily into play when our external senses stop, blocked, as it were, by their inability to give us an “immediate experience of what other men feel.” “Though our brother is upon the rack,” Smith observes, conjuring up a “situation” of bodily pain, “our senses will never inform us what he suffers.” It is through an imaginative projection that the spectator changes “circumstances,” “persons and characters” with the sufferer, thereby experiencing an effacement and a fusion of identity at the same time. Further, imagination allows the viewer to feel for another not only what he actually feels or may feel, but also, sometimes, what “he himself seems to be altogether incapable” of feeling. “We blush for the impudence and rudeness of another,” says Smith, “though he himself appears to have no sense of the impropriety of his own behaviour.” Such a vicarious “passion” (in this case, shame or embarrassment) in fact “arises in our breast from the imagination, though it does not in his from the reality.” Through sympathy, the self reaches out to the other — feels

with the other and understands his situation even when the other seems to be “insensible” of it — and therefore, to a certain extent, may be said to become the other. As an “imaginary” experience, this “change of situations” is altruistic and disinterested exactly because it occurs *outside* the self. For this reason, Smith claims in opposition to egoistic theories of morality, sympathy “cannot, in any sense, be regarded as a selfish principle.”<sup>21</sup>

This benevolent self-projection, however, is just the intermediate stage of a process that does not culminate in imaginary self-oblivion. “That imaginary change of situations, upon which [...] sympathy is founded,” Smith points out, “is but momentary.” Sympathetic identification is an imaginary *and* a temporary experience that is in fact controlled by consciousness. This “secret consciousness,” Smith maintains, never abandons the sympathizer because it intermittently reminds him of his own personal identity. Thus in front of a situation of suffering, for instance, the spectators’ minds and stations are inevitably determined by the “thought of their own safety.” The “thought that they themselves are not really the sufferers,” says Smith, “continually intrudes itself upon them.” As the sympathetic spectator realizes the ontological boundaries of his own identity, he comes back (as it were) to himself, and ultimately re-defines his own individuality in terms of consciousness, however fluid that may be. In so doing, he also realizes a difference, both “in degree” and “in kind” between the sentiments. The psychological power of sympathy cannot really bridge the variance of feeling, namely the discrepancy between the reproduced emotion of the beholder and the original one of the sufferer: “compassion,” Smith says, “can never be exactly the same with original

<sup>20</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), eds. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1982), p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 12.

sorrow." "These two sentiments, however," he adds, "may [...] have such a correspondence with one another, as is sufficient for the harmony of society."<sup>22</sup>

Though "imaginary," "momentary," and somehow always "imperfect" or approximate, this "correspondence of sentiments" comes to constitute the chief principle of our moral judgment and conduct — the principle of approbation. "To approve of the passions of another," Smith points out, "is the same thing as to observe that we entirely sympathize with them"; "and not to approve of them as such," he adds, "is the same thing as to observe that we do not entirely sympathize with them." To sympathize means to approve. And to approve means to judge morally not only of the "propriety" but also of the "merit and demerit," "duty," "utility," and "virtue" of the affections or actions of other men, as well as of our affections and actions, both in their motives and in their effects.<sup>23</sup>

Sentimental narrative may be said to have used and adapted this psychological and ethical "correspondence of sentiments" to create what I would call, slightly modifying Fisher's terms, *contracted* "equations of feelings."<sup>24</sup> By *contracted equations of feelings* I mean sentimental correspondences that exclusively link the pity felt by the spectator (as well as by the reader of a text) to the sorrow experienced by the sufferer (a character in the text). In other words, sentimentality reduced Smith's comprehensive definition of sympathy (*qua* "fellow-feeling with any passion whatever") back to its original and narrower meaning of compassion in relation to suffering.

This conceptual reduction, however, was inherent in Smith's argument. In spite of his wide definition of sympathy, in fact, the moral philosopher (who knew the works of early

sentimental writers such as Gray, Rousseau, Richardson, and others) had often and explicitly suggested that there are certain situations ("the calamities to which the condition of mortality exposes mankind," for instance) and certain classes of people (the "unfortunate and the injured" of humanity) with which "we are most apt to sympathize."<sup>25</sup> That is to say, we are most inclined to feel for situations of suffering and affliction (say, the "torments" of physical pain, "the loss of reason," the "agony of disease," and so forth), and therefore most likely to respond emotionally to the sufferers and the afflicted themselves. "We sympathize even with the dead," exclaims Smith, at once recapitulating and anticipating the crucial strategy of sentimental representation — from Gray's "annals of the poor" through Wordsworth's "tale[s] of silent suffering" — based on the moving evocation of a past life that is not only irretrievably lost, but also "in danger of being forgot" and "obliterated" forever:

It is miserable, we think, [...] to be no more thought of in this world, but to be obliterated, in a little time, from the affections, and almost from the memory, of their dearest friends and relations. Surely, we imagine, we can never feel too much for those who have suffered so dreadful a calamity. The tribute of our fellow-feeling seems doubly due to them now, when they are in danger of being forgot by every body; and, by the vain honours which we pay to their memory, we endeavour, for our own misery, artificially to keep alive our melancholy remembrance of their misfortune.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, *cit.*, pp. 24, 12, 24.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 12-13. I am here alluding to classic poems of the sentimental tradition such as Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1751) and William Wordsworth's "The Ruined Cottage" (1797-ca. 1799).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 21, 22.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 17, 16.

<sup>24</sup> Fisher, *Hard Facts*, *cit.*, p. 118.

In all these cases (torture, folly, sickness, death), sympathy is *only and exclusively* compassion. "Compassion," maintains Fisher, "exists in relation to suffering and makes of suffering the primary subject matter [...] of sentimental narrative."<sup>27</sup> As Wordsworth reminds us through the moral voice of his peddler in "The Ruined Cottage," our conduct would be severely reprehensible, should "our hearts [...] hold vain dalliance with the misery [e]ven of the dead" and be just "contented to draw [a] momentary pleasure [...] barren of all future good."<sup>28</sup> In fact, our psychological and emotional involvement with the calamities of humanity (our fellow-feeling with the misery, suffering and even death of our fellow creatures) should not be selfishly sterile and aimless (an ephemeral "dalliance"), but morally fruitful — a sentimental education in its own right. "In our mournful thoughts," continues Wordsworth's "teacher of the sublimest morality,"<sup>29</sup> there always should be found a "power to virtue friendly."<sup>30</sup> This "power" is compassion, an *ethical* power teleologically meant, so to speak, to show us the way and a higher purpose, leading to both "future good" and "virtue" — indeed "the central moral category" of sentimental representation.<sup>31</sup>

### *Sentimentality and Historicism*

In reaction to the Enlightenment and its normative ideals, this "central moral category" of sentimentality became also

<sup>27</sup> Fisher, *Hard Facts*, *cit.*, p. 105.

<sup>28</sup> William Wordsworth, "The Ruined Cottage," *The Ruined Cottage and The Pedlar*, ed. James Butler (Ithaca: Cornell U. P., 1979), ll. 220-26.

<sup>29</sup> This is George Bancroft's sympathetic definition of Wordsworth's peddler in "The Office of the People in Art, Government, and Religion" (1835), *Literary and Historical Miscellanies* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1855), pp. 411-12.

<sup>30</sup> Wordsworth, "The Ruined Cottage," *cit.*, l. 229.

<sup>31</sup> Fisher, *Hard Facts*, *cit.*, p. 95.

and almost simultaneously the crucial tenet of anti-rationalistic historical approaches — indeed a method in its own right that was to shape those views of the past that we have come to associate, for better or for worse, with the rise and predominance of romantic consciousness and historiography (historicism) over the course of the nineteenth century. Romantic historicism may be said to have radicalized the concept of sympathy not so much by narrowing down its moral function to the one central category of compassion (on the foreground of a common humanity), as by expanding its cognitive function into a broader category of knowledge (on the larger background of what, elsewhere, I called "a cosmic metaphysics of the soul").<sup>32</sup> It thereby turned sympathy into the epistemological premise of the "science and art" of history.<sup>33</sup> To feel with and/or to feel into (namely, "sympathy," "fellow-feeling," "Mitgefühl," "Mitföhlung," "Einföhlung"), for the romantic historian meant essentially to know.

"The foundation of Romantic historiography," maintains Lionel Gossman, "was not a rhetoric but a metaphysics, a philosophy of universal analogy, according to which the mind can grasp the world, the self the other, because they are structured the same way."<sup>34</sup> The romantic view of history, in fact, based the ethical experience of what was felt as an original and disinterested "correspondence of sentiments" (however "imaginary," "momentary" and "imperfect" that "correspondence" may have been, in Smith's terms again) on a more fundamental "congruity" (*Übereinstimmung*) between

<sup>32</sup> Giuseppe Nori "The Problematics of Sympathy and Romantic Historicism," *Studies in Romanticism*, 34 (1995): pp. 3-28.

<sup>33</sup> Leopold von Ranke, "On the Character of Historical Science (A Manuscript of the 1830s)," *The Theory and Practice of History*, eds. Georg G. Iggers and Konrad von Moltke (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973), p. 34.

<sup>34</sup> Lionel Gossman, *Between History and Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard U. P., 1990), p. 297.

the self and the other person (a “fellow-creature” or another “soul”). Thus Wilhelm von Humboldt:

All understanding presupposes in the person who understands, as a condition of its possibility, an analogue of that which will actually be understood later: an original, antecedent congruity between subject and object [...]. In the case of history that antecedent of understanding is quite obvious, since everything which is active in world history is also moving within the human heart.<sup>35</sup>

Invoked in similar terms by such diverse thinkers and writers as Humboldt and Schleiermacher, Emerson and Bancroft, Carlyle and Ranke, Manzoni and Michelet, Droysen and Dilthey, this “congruity between subject and object” in turn relied on a larger metaphysical belief (whether religious or secular) in the commonality of life. The romantic ideal of a cosmic identity (all beings sharing in the same living reality) imposed no rigid division between selves and entities. On the contrary, it held them on a spiritual relation of embrace and resemblance, agreement and infinite analogy. This allowed hypothetically the occurrence of a sympathetic fusion between individuals as a natural event in the first place, then making cognitive interactions possible as an obvious consequence. The self could understand another self because they shared in the same universal psychic nature. At the same time, he could understand the world of history because that world was the product of his own soul as an agent of the universal mind — the realm of his own spiritual makings (the world of “objective spirit,” as Dilthey called it after Vico and Hegel), inhabited and cohabited with his fellow-creatures, past, present and to

<sup>35</sup> Wilhelm von Humboldt, “On the Historian’s Task” (1821), Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History*, cit., pp. 15-6.

come. In other words, on the grounds of an all-embracing metaphysics of life (*Lebensphilosophie*), the process of identification came to be envisioned as a cognitive “rediscovery,” expanding from the self, through the other person, to cultural systems, and universal history. Thus Dilthey’s theory of sympathetic understanding — what he called, more specifically, “the understanding of other persons and their expressions of life” — may be said to have synthesized and at once brought to a climax “the epistemology of history” of the nineteenth century:

Understanding is a rediscovery of the I in the Thou: the mind rediscovers itself at ever higher levels of complex involvement: this identity of the mind in the I and the Thou, in every subject of a community, in every system of a culture and finally, in the totality of mind and universal history, makes successful co-operation between different processes in the human studies possible. The knowing subject is, here, one with its object, which is the same at all stages of its objectification.<sup>36</sup>

The romantic historian endowed this sympathetic understanding with an irresistible cognitive power that, from a theoretical perspective, allowed him to penetrate virtually into all kinds of past forms and grasp them in their own terms. But if it is true that *all* the past had a claim on the chronicler’s attention (as Ranke, Carlyle, and others believed), then it is also true that his attention (as Thierry, Sismondi, and other antagonistic writers taught) was more likely to be solicited by what had usually been neglected or obliterated by the dominant views of history. And it is in fact in the light of this

<sup>36</sup> Wilhelm Dilthey, *The Construction of the Historical World in the Human Studies* (1906, 1910, 1927), *Wilhelm Dilthey: Selected Writings*, ed. H. P. Rickman (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1976), pp. 192-93, 207-08.



impartial and partial impulse that Thierry, for instance, could speak of his historical sympathy as a “plebeian sympathy” — as both “an irresistible attraction” and a compassionate “duty of filial piety” for the races, peoples, and classes that had been either forgotten or erased in the annals of the rulers.<sup>37</sup> The “plebeian sympathy” of the historian was destined to qualify itself, quite naturally, as sympathy for the oppressed against the oppressors. There was a redemptive tendency within romantic historicism that never gave way to the eulogy of heroes or the great men of universal history, never revered the great powers.<sup>38</sup>

This tendency was to be particularly problematic in the United States, a new nation that was the outcome of a popular assertion of freedom as political independence (a “new plebeian democracy,” as national historian George Bancroft put it),<sup>39</sup> as well as the fruit of a modern and complex process of settlement and colonization that had inevitably caused new racial antipathies and new victims. What was extolled as “the common asylum” of oppressed humanity — a “country in which meet together all human races [...] and where men entertain for their fellow-men,” as Thierry maintained, “none but sentiments of fraternity and affection”<sup>40</sup> — had in fact been established on an occupied soil, no matter how “low”<sup>41</sup> the

<sup>37</sup> Augustin Thierry, “Autobiographical Preface: History of My Historical Works and Theories” (1834), *The Historical Essays* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1845), p. xviii.

<sup>38</sup> I am alluding to Ranke’s “The Great Powers” (1833), *The Theory and Practice of History*, *cit.*, pp. 65-101, and Thomas Carlyle’s *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1841), two classic texts that may be taken as largely representative of the dominant view of history in the first half of the nineteenth century.

<sup>39</sup> George Bancroft, *History of the United States*, 10 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1834-74), vol. IV, p. 13.

<sup>40</sup> Thierry, “On the Antipathy of Race which Divides the French Nation” (1820), *The Historical Essays*, *cit.*, p. 90.

<sup>41</sup> Bancroft, *History*, *cit.*, vol. II, p. 452.

immigrating race was or was made to appear by the romantic keepers of the national genealogy. That immigration was in fact an invasion, a modern conquest in its own right that had established inimical distinctions between conquerors and conquered, “civilizers” and “civilizees” (as Melville was to put it a few years later, denouncing, in a larger context, what he starkly called the “philosophy [of] the winner”),<sup>42</sup> thus turning the new subdued races into privileged candidates for the historian’s cheapest forms of sentimentality — a sigh and a tear. Sadly musing upon many a historical “picture” of “the unequal contest” between the dominant and subjugated races, Bancroft called for that purest kind of “compassion that is honorable to humanity.” “The weak,” states the heir of the victors, “demand sympathy.” “If a melancholy interest attaches to the fall of a hero, who is overpowered by superior force, shall we not drop a tear at the fate of nations, whose defeat foreboded the exile, if it did not indeed shadow forth the decline and ultimate extinction, of a race?”<sup>43</sup> The historicist “compassion” of the national chronicler here sounds just as a residual form of fellow-feeling for “the weak” and the defeated on a conquered soil — an expression of doom irrevocably pronounced upon the vanishing races.

### *Lowly Humanity*

This residual form of fellow-feeling, tinged with historical sadness about “the ruins of empires and the graves of nations,”<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Melville, “The South Seas” (1858), *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces*, *cit.*, p. 420.

<sup>43</sup> Bancroft, *History*, *cit.*, vol. III, p. 236.

<sup>44</sup> Bancroft, “The Necessity, the Reality, and the Promise of the Progress of the Human Race” (1854), *Literary and Historical Miscellanies*, *cit.*, p. 510.

thrived on that sentimental “reverence for Humanity” that, for decades, the Romantic Revolution had allegedly taught all its writers between history and literature. “[T]he same movement which effected the elevation of what was called the lowest class in the state,” says Emerson in “The American Scholar,” “assumed in literature a very marked and as benign an aspect.” “The literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life,” he continues, “are the topics of the time.”<sup>45</sup> “Our age,” proclaims Bancroft in his eulogy of “the people” and “common life,” “has seen a revolution in works of imagination”:

The poet has sought his theme in common life. Never is the genius of Scott more pathetic, than when, as in *The Antiquary*, he delineates the sorrows of a poor fisherman, or as in *The Heart of Mid Lothian*, he takes his heroine from a cottage. And even Wordsworth, the purest and most original poet of the day, in spite of the inveterate character of his political predilections, has thrown the light of genius on the walks of commonest life; he finds a lesson in every grave of the village churchyard; he discloses the boundless treasures of feeling in the peasant, the laborer and the artisan; the strolling peddler becomes, through his genius, a teacher of the sublimest morality; and the solitary wagoner, the lonely shepherd, even the feeble mother of an idiot boy, furnishes lessons in the reverence for Humanity (emphasis added).<sup>46</sup>

This was the “reverence” for that “secret spirit of humanity” that, as Wordsworth maintained, could never be erased — a

<sup>45</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar” (1837), *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: The Library of America, 1983), p. 68.

<sup>46</sup> Bancroft, “The Office of the People,” *cit.*, pp. 411-12.

“spirit” haunting the “ruined walls” of life and history, emerging from “the remains” of unfinished projects and formative efforts, surviving even amid the “oblivious tendencies [o]f nature” and its “silent overgrowings.”<sup>47</sup> And it is exactly this respect that Bancroft invokes in his democratic and historicist project of Jacksonian America, rhetorically committed to give dignity to all the members of the human race, especially the humblest and the commonest ones, who were to be reclaimed from obscurity and oblivion and brought back to their literary and historical life, past and present, through the redemptive impulse of romantic consciousness.

Melville’s use and abuse of the sympathetic outlook in the works of his middle period must be understood against the background of this national and international context — at the intersection of sentimentality and historicism. His focus on little men and abandoned women was therefore functional. It was part of an authorial design whose purpose was to depart from the “ontological heroics”<sup>48</sup> of Titanic Ahab and Pierre as well as to move beyond the considerate attention or philanthropic reverence that romantic consciousness bestowed, in Bancroft’s sentimental and historicist terms again, on “lowly humanity.” “It is hard for the pride of cultivated philosophy,” he states, “to put its ear to the ground, and listen reverently to the voice of lowly humanity.”<sup>49</sup> Over against such rhetoric, after his ambivalent tenure at “Young America in Literature” (and “in Politics,” we may add),<sup>50</sup> Melville re-wrote the annals of

<sup>47</sup> Wordsworth, “The Ruined Cottage,” *cit.*, ll. 486-506; “Michael: A Pastoral Poem” (1800), *Selected Poems and Prefaces*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), l. 480.

<sup>48</sup> Melville, “To Nathaniel Hawthorne, 29 June 1851,” *Correspondence*, *cit.*, p. 196.

<sup>49</sup> Bancroft, “The Office of the People,” *cit.*, p. 425.

<sup>50</sup> Melville, *Pierre*, *cit.*, p. 244; see the whole Book XVII of the novel, titled “Young America in Literature.”

compassion by investing the miseries of his downtrodden with the problematics of history. He addressed the misfortunes of the "forlornest of mankind"<sup>31</sup> whose lives had produced no effects and left no traces; forsaken figures doomed to impermanence or marked by unrelievable sorrows; forgotten heroes whose deeds had remained unrecorded in the annals of the nation, flickering for a moment on the historical stage and then disappearing into a life of obscurity. By so doing, he re-oriented the question of history itself against the course of its own romantic historicist development, whether that development had been dictated by pietas and cultural relativism on one side, or urged by historical vengeance and aversive political praxis on the other.

The author of *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre* thus turned to hopeless figures and nameless characters to portray them as problematic objects of knowledge or all-too-obvious examples of suffering — lonely and isolated human beings who command attention and elicit deep emotional responses. On the one hand, as problematic objects of cognition, these unfathomable characters ultimately resist and frustrate the beholders' cognitive and/or conative approaches grounded in feeling. On the other, as all-too-obvious and all-too-human sufferers demanding pity (whether willingly or not), they deflate the equation of feelings and unmask the ambiguous limits of the sentimental incapacity to act. Thus through the failure or the ambivalences of emotional identification and psychological participation, Melville questioned, to begin with, the primary understanding of individual forms of life. Since such a mode of understanding ("the understanding of other persons and their expressions of life," to recall Dilthey's phrase) lies at the heart of historical knowledge, then it is not

<sup>31</sup> Melville, "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" (1853), *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces*, cit., p. 30.

too much to say that the cognitive problems that Melville dramatized through the condition of his wretched ones put at stake nothing less than the epistemological foundations of historical consciousness, and, consequently, the ethics of historical action at the moment of praxis. In other instances he rescued his downtrodden from the paradoxes of the cognitive processes. But as he took care to define their social context in some detail, he ruthlessly transformed them from potential representatives of the human family at large (that "common humanity" that the lawyer-narrator movingly though unavailingly invokes in "Bartleby")<sup>32</sup> into the vanquished of specific historical situations — the American poor, anonymous factory workers, the servants or the casualties of the new market-place economy, the subdued peoples of the continent (the enslaved races as well as the conquered and vanishing ones) in front of whom the sentimental strategies of benevolence and redemption become even more suspect. As he moved on from the short stories to his longer tale "Benito Cereno" and his two novels, *Israel Potter* and *The Confidence-Man*, Melville, in fact, came also to question the larger patterns of national and universal history based on evolution and process, origins and telos. He shook the foundations of the revolutionary fathers and the monuments that presided over their rituals of continuity. He probed the moral structure of the American ideals of "equality" and "unity of the race" (in Bancroft's rhetoric again)<sup>33</sup> to unmask their ideological assumptions and bring to light the divisive issues they were supposed to neutralize. He clouded the prospects toward which the unfulfilled prophecies of a country he

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 28.

<sup>33</sup> Bancroft, "The Office of the People," cit., p. 413; "The Progress of the Human Race," cit., p. 508.

himself had once envisioned as “the advance-guard” of the world were still oriented by dubious expectations that, after all, “[s]omething further may follow” of the American “Masquerade.”<sup>54</sup>

### *Abandoned women*

In the wake of the projected “story of Agatha,” a tale about a deserted woman that he sketched in his so-called “Agatha Letters” to Nathaniel Hawthorne but that apparently never saw the light of day,<sup>55</sup> Melville started his new career as an anonymous contributor to the literary magazines of the time. In “Bartleby the Scrivener,” he may be said to have created the first (un)sentimental character of his new, lowly universe of defeated figures, availing himself of themes, scenes, and methods usually employed in sentimental representation. “Poverty” and “solitude,” “ruins” and “hopelessness,” “unrelieved calamities” and “death” — all of them shaped the strategies of feeling he exploited to dramatize the confrontation between witness and victim (the lawyer-narrator and the copyist) and set up, through the breakdown of the ethics of sympathy, his critique of historical consciousness. The lawyer’s ultimate reduction of sympathy to pure emotion — re-enacted through narration and writing (his “little history”) — takes place at the end of an extended and even redundant process of understanding (“What do you mean?” is one of the attorney’s

<sup>54</sup> Melville, *White-Jacket; or, The World in a Man-of-War* (1850), eds. Hayford, Parker, and Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern U. P. and The Newberry Library, 1970), p. 151; *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857), eds. Hayford, Parker, and Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern U. P. and The Newberry Library, 1984), p. 251.

<sup>55</sup> Melville, *Correspondence*, *cit.*, pp. 231-42, 621-25.

refrains) as well as of several ineffectual attempts at human action (“What had one best do?” is another). While the climax of the story exposes, once and for all, the ideological stance of the master, the process as a whole involves and calls into question the master’s affective responses as well as his cognitive and conative ends. As we are allowed to follow the lawyer’s renewed efforts to come closer to his elusive clerk and grasp his anomalous conduct — his professional concerns as an employer, as well as his apparently tolerant strategies of postponement and disinterested reconcilements — we can see, at first, an earnest spectator go through several instrumental endeavors. As he then feels the necessity to go beyond his utilitarian approach (“He is useful to me”) and understand more intimately the problematic human being he confronts, the lawyer relies on his emotional faculties sympathetically to penetrate into the scrivener’s inner life, first reaching some form of communion or contact (“fraternal melancholy,” “bond of a common humanity,” “sincerest pity”), then realizing his limitations and finally recoiling (“it was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach”). He also unsuccessfully tries to reconstruct a biographical and a chronological context of sorts (“his history,” “his native place,” his “home”) to make sense of him and help him, then ultimately retrieving sympathy, as pure compassion for a lost brother of wasted humanity (“Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!”), to cope once more unsuccessfully with the problem of his haunting servant.<sup>56</sup>

In most of the magazine pieces that followed in its wake, Melville capitalized on the same strategies he employed in his “Story of Wall Street” so as to continue his critique of the notion of sympathy, draining fellow-feeling of its sentimental, epistemological and pro-social power. Some of his most striking stories are those that focus on figures of deserted or

<sup>56</sup> Melville, “Bartleby,” *cit.*, pp. 13-45.

exploited women. As worthy descendants of abandoned Agatha (waiting for her vanished husband in a “lighthouse,” between the land and the sea, remote “from any settled place”), Melville’s miserable wives and lonely girls are all similarly and symbolically located in liminal spaces — a “sequestered” and “lone island” in “an archipelago of aridities” (Hunilla); a “wretched shanty” in “a very lonely part of the country” (Mrs. Merrymusk) or a “two-acre patch” at the margins of a rich squire’s land (Martha); a frozen “hamlet” “in a very out-of-the-way corner” (the “blank-looking girls” in Tartarus) or a “small abode [...] in a pass between two worlds, participant of neither” (Marianna).<sup>57</sup> These marginal locations bespeak the women’s correspondent conditions of physical disability and spiritual alienation, psychological confusion and existential indeterminacy.

The representation of these heroines is usually complementary to the concomitant portrayal of disinterested beholders and compassionate chroniclers, all male and first-person narrators, often travellers on a local or a larger scale. Their eyes meet situations of sorrow and poverty, their voices recount tales of decline and death. But Melville no longer involves these men — in spite of their genuine and generous feelings — in problematic or complex cognitive processes. Hunilla’s “anxiety and pain,” Martha’s “grief” and the white maids’ “unrelated misery,” Mrs. Merrymusk’s “doleful life” and Marianna’s “wakeful weariness” are all common forms of suffering that are not shrouded in mysteries.<sup>58</sup> Unlike Bartleby’s,

<sup>57</sup> Melville, *Correspondence*, *cit.*, p. 236; “The Encantadas,” “Cock-A-Doodle-Doo! Or, The Crowing of the Noble Cock Beneventano” (1853), “Poor Man’s Pudding,” “The Tartarus of Maids,” “The Piazza,” *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces*, *cit.*, pp. 151, 142, 281, 289, 334, 8.

<sup>58</sup> Melville, “The Encantadas,” *cit.*, p. 155; “Poor Man’s Pudding,” *cit.*, p. 295; “The Tartarus of Maids,” *cit.*, p. 327; “Cock-A-Doodle-Doo!,” *cit.*, p. 286; “The Piazza,” *cit.*, p. 12.

the source of these characters’ affliction is obvious. Whether of itself overflowing or blank, shrunken in wasted bodies or hardened by the frost of cosmic insensibility (“the frost which falleth from the sky”), their psyche is accessible to the understanding of the male spectators, or at least, however vicariously, to their imaginative self-projection, even when, as in the more problematic case of the Chola widow on Norfolk Isle, the “lone, shipwrecked soul” of the Indian woman is resistant to open itself up to scrutiny or subject itself to the influence of external interactions (“She but showed us her soul’s lid, and the strange ciphers thereon engraved,” muses the sailor-narrator; “all within, with pride’s timidity, was withheld”).<sup>59</sup> Melville’s beholders/narrators feel deeply for these destitute sisters of lowly humanity and, whether in “tears” or “filled” with “emotion,” “wrapped in [...] meditations” or “lost in thought,”<sup>60</sup> they are all apparently in a position to grasp the plight of their feminine counterparts. However, though it usually culminates in a moment of both profound absorption and cognitive insight, their fellow-feeling is either smothered and soon abandoned or just kept to a state of pure, private resonance, as if its open, sentimental expression or the pro-social action it was supposed to incite were already thought of as inadequate, ineffectual, or false. Starkly, some of Melville’s witnesses and chroniclers, after feeling and understanding “the wretchedness of the unfortunate,”<sup>61</sup> are deliberately reluctant to act. The extension of sentiment and the subsequent (and often obvious) cognitive fulfillment open no prospects for relief in practical reality.

The disconnection of the I from the Thou that the lawyer in “Bartleby” had startlingly discovered along the tortuous

<sup>59</sup> Melville, “The Encantadas,” *cit.*, pp. 162, 157, 155.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 155; “The Tartarus of Maids,” *cit.*, pp. 332, 334, 335; “Cock-A-Doodle-Doo!,” *cit.*, p. 285.

<sup>61</sup> Melville, “Poor Man’s Pudding,” *cit.*, p. 296.

course of his cognitive quest comes to be repeatedly dramatized by Melville as a plain matter of fact in his subsequent tales of "ailing" wives and "pallid" virgins.<sup>62</sup> The parting of souls usually brings to a climax the moving encounters which these tales dramatize. They all end with the narrators leaving the objects of their sympathy and compassionate understanding alone. "When a companion's heart of itself overflows" — muses the narrator of "Poor Man's Pudding," as "pale and chill" Martha mourns the premature loss of her children and discloses all her "dark grief" to him in ruthless contrast with her added "paleness of a mother to be" — "the best one can do is to do nothing." So he abandons the woman, conforming himself to the typically passive role of the witness in sentimental representation — both observer and listener, whose intense emotional and mental involvement "honor[s] humanity" but does nothing (can do nothing) towards immediate assistance or future redress. "I could stay no longer to hear of sorrows for which the sincerest sympathies could give no adequate relief," the man tells us; "I bade the dame good-bye; shook her cold hand; looked my last into her blue, resigned eye, and went out into the wet."<sup>63</sup>

As the narrator of "Poor Man's Pudding" honors humanity, so Hunilla's rescuers show such a "silent reverence of respect" for the widow as was never received by "any wife of the most famous admiral." Similarly, the traveller in "The Tartarus of Maids" is so deeply moved by the white enslaved factory workers in the paper-mill that "some pained homage to their pale virginity [makes him] involuntarily bow," while his cheeks, as in a momentary identification with "the consumptive pallors of [their] blank, raggy life," turn "whitish" too before

<sup>62</sup> Melville, "Cock-A-Doodle-Do!," *cit.*, p. 284; "The Tartarus of Maids," *cit.*, p. 334.

<sup>63</sup> Melville, "Poor Man's Pudding," *cit.*, pp. 295, 294, 296.

he leaves the "sunken place" for good. And even when compassion in the face of suffering turns into an openly perverse, clamorous song of unlikely joy (a "glorious and rejoicing crow," as for the Merrymusks in "Cock-A-Doodle-Do!"), Melville's beholder is inevitably called to witness death, bury "the sick ones" and "the invalids," and plant "the stone" on their (definitely unsentimental) grave near the (still more unsentimental) "railroad track," here a sorry symbol of Antebellum American progress meant "to fly over, and not to settle upon" that "part of the world" that in "a divided empire" naturally belongs to the destitute.<sup>64</sup> All trained in feeling, as "with a brother's love," viewing and /or re-viewing those women's sufferings in barren places and miserable dwellings, Melville's beholders — we may say along with Wordsworth — all submit to their functional "impotence of grief." And this "impotence," as such, namely as a lack of power and therefore *inaction* caused by "the sincerest sympathies" in the face of suffering, is what Melville denounces in its ethical shortcomings (the suspension of the capacity to act that allegedly heightens that cultivation of moral sentiments that is honorable to humanity) as well as in its larger, romantic and democratic claims to literary redemption or historical resurrection and glorification of the downtrodden. Thus Melville's creation of a spiritual affinity between female victims and male spectators becomes only a contrived strategy — a touching and temporary experience that works as a prelude to an abrupt suspension of emotional correspondence and linguistic interaction. As such, it breaks off from the circuit of identification and communion, resemblance and analogy, dialogic exchange and communi-

<sup>64</sup> Melville, "Poor Man's Pudding," *cit.*, p. 294; "The Encantadas," *cit.*, p. 159; "The Tartarus of Maids," *cit.*, pp. 334, 330, 335; "Cock-A-Doodle-Do!," *cit.*, pp. 286, 284, 285, 288, 282, 268.

cation, and comes out in passivity and separation, extenuating reflections and self-justifications, silence and resigned withdrawals. In these cases, the sentimental "extension of feeling" eventuates not so much in a "restitution of humanity"<sup>65</sup> as in its further abandonment and deprivation — a denial of kinship and reciprocity between fellow-beings in general and between genders (and classes and races) in particular, on the larger backdrop of a dominant 'American' vision of "social sensibilities," "political principles," and trans-continental "distinction[s]" harshly at odds with what Melville calls "grind-stone experience."<sup>66</sup>

If the dangers for these wretched ones may be those "of being forgot by every body" (Smith), left with "no memorial" (Wordsworth), or lost among "the ruins of formative efforts, that were never crowned with success" (Bancroft), then the moral philosopher, the sentimental writer, and the epic historian may be said to have fashioned restitutive strategies of "remembrance," "invocations," and "consolation" to keep alive our memory of them and cherish their sufferings and sacrifices either through the cultivation of emotion (whether recollected in tranquillity or not) or through the "development" of "the moral powers" that always characterizes the "upward course" of humanity.<sup>67</sup> "Here, too, is our solace for the indisputable fact, that humanity, in its upward course," states Bancroft, "passes through the shadows of death, and over the relics of decay." "Nothing is lost," he continues. "Humanity moves on, attended by its glorious company of martyrs."<sup>68</sup> For Melville, instead, the real danger for the "unfortunate and the

<sup>65</sup> I am here using Fisher's terminology again, *Hard Facts*, *cit.*, p. 118.

<sup>66</sup> Melville, "Poor Man's Pudding," *cit.*, p. 296.

<sup>67</sup> Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, *cit.*, p. 13; Wordsworth, "The Ruined Cottage," *cit.*, ll. 67-79; Bancroft, "The Progress of the Human Race," *cit.*, pp. 510, 511; "The Office of the People," *cit.*, pp. 422, 428.

<sup>68</sup> Bancroft, "The Progress of the Human Race," *cit.*, pp. 510, 511.

injured" of mankind is exactly that of being exhumed from the tombs of oblivion and non-existence just to be anonymously celebrated as lost brothers and sisters of common humanity for the cultivation of sentiments, reincorporated within the irresistible "progress of the race," or assembled in a ghostly procession of "martyrs" allegedly mobilized by the keepers of historical progress to accompany the forward march of humanity. And this danger is clear every time they come to be included in narratives that, at bottom, are not their own — little stories as well as larger tales such as the lawyer's "little history" about the strangest scrivener he ever saw, the sailor's "little story" of "vanquished" humanity on the Galapagos, "many as real a story" promised by the narrator-voyager at the end of "The Piazza," that is to say, at the beginning of *The Piazza Tales*, or even a "little narrative" like that of Israel Potter, "rescued by the merest chance from the rag-pickers" and presented as a pathetic "tribute" to the private of Bunker Hill and the whole nation.<sup>69</sup> Therefore they need protection and must be sheltered from the inadequacy or the complicity of sympathy as well as from the misleading claims of cultural relativism, cognitive impartiality, or narrative objectivity. Melville's way to safeguard his humble characters is to leave them all as they are through what may be called a *strategy of authorial abandonment*. And this strategy is never more manifest and, as it were, *doubly* critical than in these tales of abandoned women subjected to further desertion — miserable wives and hopeless girls, all of them resigned and unredeemably relegated to their ultimate destiny of pain, loneliness, and oblivion.

<sup>69</sup> Melville, "Bartleby," *cit.*, p. 14; "The Encantadas," *cit.*, pp. 151, 157; "The Piazza," *cit.*, p. 12; *Israel Potter*, *cit.*, pp. vii-viii.

### *The Lonely Girl*

If "sad Agatha" is the first woman to emerge from Melville's mind as a possible "heroine" in her own right, then "the pale-cheeked girl" of "The Piazza," Marianna, is the last and most abstract and literary one to step into his short fiction of the 1850s as a female protagonist. While "the forsaken wife" may thus be viewed as the founder of Melville's lowly feminine world, the solitary "mountain-girl" may be said to crown the whole genealogy of downtrodden women.<sup>70</sup> As Scott is never "more pathetic," according to Bancroft, "than when [...] he takes his heroine from a cottage," or Wordsworth never more moving than when he has his "teacher of the sublimest morality"<sup>71</sup> tell us a "tale of silent suffering" about Margaret and her ruined cottage, so is Melville never more critical of the romantic tradition (on a literary as well as on a larger historical level) than when he re-writes one more unsentimental story of *authorial abandonment* about this abandoned orphan girl in her "grayish cottage" (p. 8) on Mount Greylock, in Berkshire, Massachusetts. Like Hunilla, Martha, and all her unfortunate companions of Melville's short works of the 1850s, Marianna plays the role of the typical heroine in sentimental narrative. And for her too, as for all her forlorn sisters, the separation of souls (and therefore the impossibility of any redemptive spiritual communion) marks the turning point of the moving encounter with her male visitor. For the Berkshire maid, though, this parting turns out to be all the more ironic and paradoxical as her meeting with the man is not determined by "a narrow chance" (Hunilla), a more or less occasional sally

<sup>70</sup> Melville, *Correspondence*, *cit.*, p. 623; "The Piazza," *cit.*, p. 6. Further references to the story, in this final section of the essay, will be included parenthetically in the text.

<sup>71</sup> Bancroft, "The Office of the People," *cit.*, pp. 411-12.

into the country (Mrs. Merrymusk, Martha), or some "business" or errand of sorts (the white girls in Tartarus),<sup>72</sup> but is deliberately envisioned and elaborately set up by the narrator as a literary goal, the imaginative destination of what may be viewed as a visual passion first and a creative action later. The encounter between the man and Marianna on Mount Greylock is in fact teleologically thought of as a terminal point of a complex aesthetic experience that takes place through a two-stage dramatic sequence following upon the foundational act *par excellence* — the building of the piazza.

Intertextuality (rich to the point of mannerism in this piece) may help us shed light on the pre-condition of the narrator's aesthetic experience, namely the construction of the porch to his old farmhouse. Here, in particular, intertextuality leads us back to Emerson's poem "The Problem" (a poem, originally titled "The Priest," about religious and literary vocation), where the foundational act of building is presented through "The hand that rounded Peter's dome," namely the "hand" of Michelangelo. As "Himself from God he could not free," Emerson states, conflating artistic creation and divine inspiration, "He builded better than he knew." Bancroft re-wrote Emerson's lines in his commemoration of the death of Andrew Jackson to celebrate a fundamental political act such as the constitution of Tennessee: "Themselves from God they could not free; / They builded better than they knew."<sup>73</sup> "Whoever built the house," echoes Melville's narrator at the beginning of the story, "he builded better than he knew" (p. 1). Still the house has no piazza — a "deficiency," to his eyes,

<sup>72</sup> Melville, "The Encantadas," *cit.*, p. 158; "The Tartarus of Maids," *cit.*, p. 324.

<sup>73</sup> Emerson, "The Problem" (1840), *Collected Poems and Translations*, eds. Harold Bloom and Paul Kane (New York: The Library of America, 1994), ll. 19-24; Bancroft, "Commemoration of Andrew Jackson" (1845), *Literary and Historical Miscellanies*, *cit.*, pp. 449-50.



that cannot be ignored. Not to have a porch, "for a house, so situated in such a country," the narrator remarks, is in fact "as much of an omission as if a picture-gallery should have no bench," or a cathedral no "pew." Though on a smaller scale, the foundational act must be reiterated and brought to completion: "A piazza must be had." In fact, the building of the piazza comes to be correspondently viewed as a task of both artistic and religious fulfillment: "beauty is like piety," the narrator tells us, "you cannot run and read it; tranquillity and constancy, with, now-a-days, an easy chair, are needed." Thus from the new porch of his old farmhouse — once its construction has been accomplished — the man can turn into a pious devotee of "the country round about." His initial, detached experience of aesthetic fruition sees him in the static and comfortable role ("tranquillity and constancy, with [...] an easy chair, are needed") of a refined and appreciative beholder of Nature's beauty. The second experience, instead, is a more demanding creative and cognitive quest — what he calls his "inland voyage to fairy-land," a "true voyage," he tells us, "but, take it all in all, interesting as if invented." This active and definitely less tranquil involvement in Nature's beauty sees him in the subsequent dynamic role of a knight/voyager searching for an imaginary "queen of fairies," the contemplation of whom may be able to cure his "weariness" and regenerate him (pp. 1, 4, 6).

The first aesthetic experience as a worshipper of Nature begins to narrow down as the narrator focuses on "some uncertain object" his eye seems to have caught from the piazza "in a sort of purpled breast-pocket, high up in a hopper-like hollow, or sunken angle, among the northwestern mountains." As the object in question is "visible" only "under certain witching conditions of light and shadow," it takes the beholder "a year or more" to realize, in "a wizard afternoon in autumn," the presence of "such a spot" and determine its position. "One spot of radiance," he tells us, "where all else was shade." And

it is upon this spot that his creative imagination thrives: "Fairies there, thought I; some haunted ring where fairies dance" (pp. 4, 5). As in "the following May," after "a gentle shower," the same spot happens to be marked by "the rainbow's end," his imagination keeps fervently working in the same direction: "Fairies there, thought I." This aesthetic vision, though, is counterbalanced by what may be taken as the viewpoint of common sense — the common sense of humble people, apparently deflating his high and transfiguring rhetoric. "But," the narrator adds, "a work-a-day neighbour said, no doubt it was but some old barn — an abandoned one." This divergence of opinion, however, reveals not so much a clash between the mind's world (the narrator's) and common life (the worker's), imagination and reality, as one between two literary modes in their own right, the allegory of fairy land on one side, and the sentimentality of ruins on the other. Expectedly, as for the construction of his piazza, the narrator thinks he knows better than his neighbours. And though "[a] few days later" he seems to come down from the peaks of his visions, he settles not so much on a prosaic "barn, much less an abandoned one," as on a more poetic, almost magical, cottage: "it must be a cottage; perhaps long vacant and dismantled," he concedes, "but this very spring magically fitted up and glazed" (p. 5). And one noon, as he reiterates his poetic view upon "a broader gleam" from the mountains, he, at bottom, still keeps phantasizing about fairy land and romance, imagining, for his cottage, "a roof newly shingled" — one that, to him, makes "pretty sure the occupancy of that far cot in fairy land." Then again in September, during his convalescence after an illness that had kept him to his chamber for some time, one more gleam from the mountain is just like an irresistible call to adventure summoning him forth to the world of action:

I saw the golden mountain-window, dazzling like a deep-sea dolphin. Fairies there, thought I, once more;

the queen of fairies at her fairy-window; at any rate, some glad mountain-girl; it will do me good, it will cure this weariness, to look on her. No more; I'll launch my yawl — ho, cheerly, heart! and push away for fairy-land — for rainbow's end, in fairy-land (pp. 5, 6).

As he had earlier entertained the possibility that the “haunted ring” might just be a “cottage” (though “in fairy land”), so now, even as he is about to turn from a distant beholder into an involved participant, he does not conceal from himself the eventuality that “the queen of fairies” might “at any rate” turn out to be only a “glad mountain-girl.” However, what is expected as a consequence, in either case, is a curative and revitalizing effect upon his health.

Thus a “free voyager as an autumn leaf,” one early dawn the narrator sallies westward, sailing through a “languid region,” to “the fairy mountain's base” and a “pasture.” Then he keeps journeying “on” through a “winter wood road,” “beneath swaying fir-boughs,” and then “on,” and “on,” and “still on, and up, and out into a hanging orchard” (“Fairy land not yet, thought I”), to “a craggy pass,” through a “zigzag road [...] among the cliffs,” through a “rent” where a “foot-track” winds up “to a little, low-storied, grayish cottage”:

The foot-track, so dainty narrow, just like a sheep-track, led through long ferns that lodged. Fairy land at last, thought I; Una and her lamb dwell here. Truly, a small abode — mere palanquin, set down on the summit, in a pass between two worlds, participant of neither (pp. 6, 7, 8).

As the traveller reaches his destination, fairy land turns into a marginal domestic setting, a decaying mountain house surrounded by wild and vagrant nature. “Nature, and but nature, and house and all.” Ritually, revelation occurs on the limen:

Pausing at the threshold, or rather where the threshold once had been, I saw, through the open door-way, a lonely girl, sewing at a lonely window. A pale-cheeked girl, and fly-specked window, with wasps about the mended upper panes (p. 8).

As silence wraps the epiphanic encounter (she “silently resumed her own [stool] [...] now, for a space, I, too, was mute”), the narrator tries to come to terms with his delusion: “This, then, is the fairy-mountain house,” he broods, “and here, the fairy queen sitting at her fairy window” (p. 9).

The disappointment of Melville's visitor is not one that throws a bucket of cold reality in the face of a fervent imagination, but one that does substitute — as intimated earlier, and as earlier however reluctantly and transcendently contemplated by the narrator himself — one literary expectation for another. Melville just replaces the enchanted universe of romance and fairy land with the sentimental, small world of one more abandoned woman in one more ruined cottage. Both of them are expectedly (and romantically) literary, though the latter seems utterly unsuitable to the narrator, who (as a former “tropic sea-going” voyager) could even go as far as envisioning lone Marianna, for illusion's sake, as “some Tahiti girl, secreted for a sacrifice.”<sup>74</sup> In fact, as he discovers that Marianna is no “glad mountain-girl” either, his disappointment grows as visibly as his compassion for the hardships and sufferings of the young woman grows silently. With tears in her eyes Marianna tells her touching story, summarized by the narrator's male voice — a story of loss and loneliness (“Long had they been orphans,” she and her

<sup>74</sup> For a different view of Melville's play between expectation and disappointment, see Bruno Monfort's insightful essay “Melville's ‘The Piazza’: Architecture into Vanishing Form,” *Literature d'America*, 91 (2002), pp. 107-11 and ff.

younger brother, only seventeen, “and now, sole inhabitants of the sole house upon the mountain”), as well as one of partings and ruins (her brother “left his bench [...] for his bed [...] for still deeper rest,” while she is left completely alone in the “old house”). The narrator, again, is mute. “Silent I stood by the fairy window,” he says, “while these things were being told” (pp. 8, 9).

The sentimental setting is here at its most conventional, as much as the emotional intensity between the characters is at its most sentimental — an “old” and “rotting” cottage; the overgrowings of nature all around it that typically testify to the almost unsustainable enduring of human presences and traces; a woman alone in a between-world surrounded by the death shadows of the past and the “lifeless shadows” of the present, in a “stillness” where “strange things” and “strange fancies” conflate and become one another (pp. 10, 11). The girl, as both victim and witness of painful separations and abandonment, decline and ruin, is now the lone survivor of a shrunken, residual life. Only “fractionally alive,” as all survivors in sentimental narrative,<sup>75</sup> Marianna is immobilized in a stagnant world of deprivation and negation, while at the same time paradoxically caught in the whirl of “dull woman’s work” and an ever-spinning mental anguish (“knowing nothing, hearing nothing [...] never reading, seldom speaking, yet ever wakeful [...] sitting, sitting, restless sitting [...] Thinking, thinking”). The narrator realizes that, understandably, she would like to break away from such a miserable life. Her desire is to travel to that “far-off, soft, azure world” — the one she views and dreams about from her mountain window (a “fairy window” indeed), the world the narrator himself comes from — and look at the happy person

<sup>75</sup> This is Fisher’s definition of the survivors, as “ruins,” in sentimental narrative, *Hard Facts*, *cit.*, p. 120.

who lives down there. So he realizes that she too, like himself, is unhappy and foolishly hopeful, she too, like himself, is misleadingly looking for an enchanted counterpart in fairy land, a “King Charming,” a “happy being” who may do her good and cure *her* “wakeful weariness” (pp. 9, 11, 12). So there arises the rare possibility of a mutual and sympathetic understanding between man and woman on the grounds of a mirror-like existential and imaginative correspondence of sentiments and desires as well as on a moment of frank, dialogic exchange and transforming revelation through the power of language. But the “two [gender] poles,” so to speak, just like the “two [hop-vines] poles” in Marianna’s sentimental “garden patch,” are not destined to bring their shoots to a “clasp” or a fulfillment of sorts:

Through the fairy window, she pointed [...] to a small garden patch near by [...] where, side by side, some feet apart, nipped and puny, two hop-vines climbed two poles, and, gaining their tip-ends, would have then joined over in an upward clasp, but the baffled shoots, groping awhile in empty air, trailed back whence they sprung (p. 12).

This is what may be called a ruthless surrogate of sentimental denial. As Marianna proves neither fairy queen nor glad mountain girl, so the knight-voyager (supposedly “the happy being” who lives in the far off world down there) proves no healer, no King Charming. So he can neither relieve the girl nor fulfill her most innocent wishes:

“Oh, if I could but once get to yonder house, and but look upon whoever the happy being is that lives there! A foolish thought: why do I think it? Is it that I live so lonesome and know nothing?” (p. 12).

The narrator is called to play the role of the witness in sentimental representation. He first feels compassion for her

fellow-mortal, and then freezes his moral sentiment into inaction. So he breaks the spell of analogy and reflection, at once concealing his negative epiphany behind the screen of a pretended lack of cognition and legitimizing his silence through a forced suspension of linguistic communication:

“I, too, know nothing; and, therefore, cannot answer; but, for your sake, Marianna, well could wish that I were that happy one of the happy house you dream you see; for then you would behold him now, and, as you say, this weariness might leave you” (p. 12).

Here the man discontinues his linguistic interaction with Marianna and, like all the other beholders of Melville's short fiction, he too abandons the girl and does nothing (can do nothing) for her. Marianna is allowed no revelation of sorts, no forward movement or progress, no romantic excursion or escape. Left, once again, completely alone in her cottage (like Wordsworth's Margaret, “[l]ast human tenant of [those] ruined walls”),<sup>76</sup> she is neither undeceived from her dreams and “foolish thought[s]” (namely her literary innocence), nor delivered from her solitude and destitution. She is not even given a narrative closure of her own. “Enough. Launching my yawl no more for fairy-land,” states the narrator after his last exchange with her, abruptly returning to the narrative present, “I stick to the piazza” (p. 12). On the one hand, Melville dramatizes such a nihilistic deadlock (at once a linguistic, a cognitive, and a conative one — as the man says he knows nothing, answers nothing, and does nothing) to unmask it as a male strategy that is meant to deny the girl any possibility of independent knowledge or liberating experience — however useful or useless may be the happiness she would like to pursue or the loss of illusions she would inevitably suffer. On

the other hand, though, he also capitalizes on that patriarchal strategy of containment to safeguard the lonely girl from an altogether suspect (and no less paternalistic) redemption, whether that may be aimed at a happy ending of active gender liberation or of passive domestic fulfillment (a self-reliant journey, a conventional wedding) or aimed at a larger ethical and historical retrieval of the maid, a secluded and forgotten victim of the race of woman, in need of an enormous restitution of life and respect, to be successfully reintegrated and re-socialized into the larger family of common humanity.

Over against the similarity of human nature — characterized by the same problem of existence, the same bonds of life, the same exposures to the condition of mortality — the sentimental denial that Melville imposes on his lowly and lonely girl devitalizes the process of cognition and conation based on self-understanding and (through an allegedly shared lived experience) on the understanding of other persons and their expressions of life. As such, it questions the claims of romantic (literary and historical) consciousness to attain fulfillment in the revelation of personality and therefore in biographical and historical knowledge and praxis at large. Thus Marianna, left on her own, and therefore sheltered, enters and crowns Melville's small community of wretched women and lonesome girls — all of them heroines beyond the reach of any practical attempt at material succor and spiritual alleviation, all of them outside the compass of any larger historical retrieval and deliverance through discursive glorification or counter-traditional versions of hero-worship.

<sup>76</sup> Wordsworth, “The Ruined Cottage,” *cit.*, l. 492.